

# **Transitioning to school during Covid-19: The lived experiences and realities of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.**

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# Contents

Contents .....	2
Acknowledgements .....	9
Abstract .....	11
List of Tables .....	12
List of Figures.....	12
List of Abbreviations .....	13
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>1.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>1.2 Significance of Study.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Study .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>1.4 Connection to the study .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>1.5 Research Questions .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>1.6 Outlining the unfolding story .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>2.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>2.2 Terminology .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>2.3 Prevalence and context of SEND in Early Years .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>2.4 Situating the Study .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<i>2.4.1 Transitions to School Literature .....</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>2.4.2 Transitions for Children with SEND .....</i>	<i>31</i>
<b>2.5 Policy Priorities, Systemic and Structural Influences .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<i>2.5.1 Historical and Legislative Context for SEND in England.....</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>2.5.2 Conceptual Models of Disability.....</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>2.5.3 Early Years Frameworks.....</i>	<i>40</i>
<i>2.5.4 Transition to School Policy.....</i>	<i>42</i>
<i>2.5.5 Covid-19 Policy: ‘Recovery Curriculum’ .....</i>	<i>43</i>
<b>2.6 Understanding Transition: From Developmental Processes to Lived Experiences.....</b>	<b>47</b>
<i>2.6.1 Relational Ecology of Transition .....</i>	<i>48</i>

2.6.2 Mesosystemic Relationships.....	53
2.6.3 Emotional and Relational Elements of Transition .....	61
2.6.4 Multi-Agency Support .....	64
2.6.5 Covid-19 Transition Disruptions.....	67
<b>2.7 Voices, Dispositions and Agency of Children with SEND in their Transition to School .....</b>	<b>70</b>
2.7.1 'Voices' of Children with SEND.....	70
2.7.2 Children's Dispositions .....	75
2.7.2.1 Play.....	79
2.7.2.2 Social Connections and Friendships.....	84
2.7.2.3 Learning and routines .....	90
2.7.2.4 Emotional Impact of Transition .....	93
<b>2.8 Conclusion: My study .....</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING, METHODOLOGY AND METHOD .....</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>3.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>3.2 Positionality.....</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>3.3 Research Paradigm.....</b>	<b>103</b>
3.3.1 Ontologies and Epistemologies .....	103
<b>3.4 Children's Rights .....</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>3.5 Guiding principles and assumptions .....</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>3.6 Early Ecological Systems Theory.....</b>	<b>108</b>
3.6.1 Micro-, Meso-, Exo-, Macro- and Chronosystems.....	110
<b>3.7 Proximal Processes of the Bioecological Model of Human Development .....</b>	<b>112</b>
3.7.1 Process.....	114
3.7.2 Person .....	116
3.7.3 Context.....	117
3.7.4 Time.....	117
<b>3.8 Research Design .....</b>	<b>118</b>
3.8.1 Research Questions .....	118

3.8.2 Case study methodology .....	119
<b>3.9 Pilot Study .....</b>	<b>120</b>
<b>3.10 Participants .....</b>	<b>121</b>
3.10.1 Participant demographics .....	125
3.10.2 School Context.....	127
3.10.3 Practitioners.....	129
3.10.4 Parents/ Caregivers.....	130
3.10.5 Children with SEND.....	131
<b>3.11 Data Generation Methods.....</b>	<b>133</b>
3.11.1 Online Qualitative Surveys.....	134
3.11.2 Semi-structured Interviews with Practitioners/ Parents/ Caregivers.....	134
3.11.3 Creative Conversations with Children with SEND.....	136
<b>3.12 Working with Data.....</b>	<b>139</b>
3.12.1 Thematic Analysis Approach .....	139
3.12.2 Becoming Familiar with the Data .....	141
3.12.3 Generating initial codes .....	141
3.12.4 Searching for themes and sub-themes.....	142
3.12.5 Reviewing and Defining the themes .....	142
3.12.6 Producing the Report.....	143
<b>3.13 Research Integrity.....</b>	<b>143</b>
3.13.1 Ethical considerations for all participants.....	143
3.13.1.1 Participants' Autonomy .....	144
3.13.1.2 Gatekeeper Permission .....	144
3.13.1.3 Risks of the Study.....	145
3.13.2 Ethical research involving children with SEND .....	145
3.13.3 Beneficence of the research .....	147
3.13.4 Inclusivity.....	148
3.13.5 Reflexivity .....	148
3.13.6 Credibility, authenticity and meaningfulness of the Research.....	149

3.13.7 <i>Identifying and reducing risks</i> .....	153
3.13.8 <i>Researcher responsibility</i> .....	153
3.13.9 <i>Power Dynamics</i> .....	153
<b>3.14 Consent</b> .....	<b>154</b>
3.14.1 <i>Child Consent and Assent</i> .....	155
<b>3.15 Generation and Storage of Data</b> .....	<b>157</b>
<b>3.16 Dissemination of Findings</b> .....	<b>158</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: CASE STUDY FINDINGS</b> .....	<b>159</b>
<b>4.1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>159</b>
<b>4.2 Case Study One: Lola</b> .....	<b>161</b>
4.2.1 <i>Ethnographic Information</i> .....	161
4.2.2 <i>Lola's perspective</i> .....	163
4.2.3 <i>Lola's Mum's perspective</i> .....	170
4.2.4 <i>Lola's Practitioners' Perspectives</i> .....	175
4.2.5 <i>Summary</i> .....	183
<b>4.3 Case Study Two: Amna</b> .....	<b>185</b>
4.3.1 <i>Ethnographic Information</i> .....	185
4.3.2 <i>Amna's Perspective</i> .....	187
4.3.3 <i>Amna's Mum's Perspective</i> .....	193
4.3.4 <i>Amna's Practitioner Perspective</i> .....	201
4.3.5 <i>Summary</i> .....	209
<b>4.4 Case Study Three: Chloe</b> .....	<b>211</b>
4.4.1 <i>Ethnographic Information</i> .....	211
4.4.2 <i>Chloe's Perspective</i> .....	213
4.4.3 <i>Chloe's Mum's Perspective</i> .....	218
4.4.5 <i>Summary</i> .....	225
<b>4.5 Case Study Four: Kobe</b> .....	<b>226</b>
4.5.1 <i>Ethnographic Information</i> .....	226
4.5.2 <i>Kobe's Perspective</i> .....	228

4.5.3 Kobe's Dads' Perspective.....	232
4.5.4 Chloe and Kobe's Practitioner's Perspective .....	238
4.5.5 Summary .....	250
<b>4.6 Case Study Five: Basim .....</b>	<b>252</b>
4.6.1 Ethnographic Information.....	252
4.6.2 Basim's Perspective .....	254
4.6.3 Basim's Mum's Perspective.....	257
4.6.4 Basim's Practitioner Perspective .....	258
4.6.5 Summary .....	264
<b>CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>265</b>
<b>5.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>265</b>
<b>5.2 Research Question 1 .....</b>	<b>266</b>
5.2.1 <i>We are Active Agents of our own transitions</i> .....	267
5.2.1.1 Constructing learning identities during crisis.....	267
5.2.1.2 Negotiating social connections and belonging.....	273
5.2.1.3 Agency and connection through play.....	281
5.2.1.4 Agentic Dispositions.....	287
5.3.1 <i>Beyond the tip of the Iceberg: The hidden emotions of transition in a pandemic</i> .....	292
5.3.1.1 Expressing uncertainty and vulnerability.....	292
5.4.1 <i>Research Question 1: Conclusion</i> .....	299
<b>5.5 Research Question 2 .....</b>	<b>301</b>
5.5.1 <i>Relational anchors in unsettling circumstances</i> .....	301
5.5.1.1 Positives for Parents/ Caregivers and Practitioners.....	302
5.5.1.2 Challenges for Parents/ Caregivers and Practitioners .....	304
5.5.2 <i>Covid pressures: Navigating systemic and structural instability</i> .....	307
5.5.2.1 <i>Home-school entanglements</i> .....	307
5.5.2.3 <i>Systemic silence: the absence of professional support</i> .....	311
5.5.2.3 <i>Digital spaces, disrupted boundaries</i> .....	313
5.5.3 <i>Research Question 2: Conclusion</i> .....	316

<b>CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS .....</b>	<b>319</b>
<b>6.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>319</b>
<b>6.2 Voices of Children with SEND .....</b>	<b>319</b>
6.2.1 <i>Pedagogical Practice</i> .....	321
6.2.2 <i>Policy</i> .....	327
6.2.3 <i>Research</i> .....	327
<b>6.3 Social and Emotional Priorities .....</b>	<b>328</b>
6.3.1 <i>Pedagogical Practice</i> .....	328
6.3.2 <i>Policy</i> .....	333
6.3.3 <i>Research</i> .....	333
<b>6.4 Support within Mesosystems .....</b>	<b>334</b>
6.4.1 <i>Pedagogical Practice</i> .....	334
6.4.2 <i>Policy</i> .....	335
6.4.3 <i>Research</i> .....	336
<b>6.5 Reflections on the Research Design .....</b>	<b>336</b>
6.5.1 <i>Bioecological Systems Theory</i> .....	336
6.5.2 <i>Children’s Rights Lens</i> .....	338
6.5.3 <i>Reflections on my Positionality and Reflexivity</i> .....	338
<b>6.6 Research Approach .....</b>	<b>340</b>
<b>6.7 Limitations of the study .....</b>	<b>342</b>
<b>6.8 Contribution to Knowledge .....</b>	<b>344</b>
<b>6.9 Impact of my study and COVID-19 on children with SEND .....</b>	<b>345</b>
<b>6.10 Conclusions and Final Remarks .....</b>	<b>347</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>350</b>
<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>395</b>
<b>1: Ethical Approval .....</b>	<b>395</b>
<b>2: Permission of Access Letter .....</b>	<b>397</b>
<b>3: Vetting Letter for Schools .....</b>	<b>399</b>
<b>4: Parent/ Caregiver Participation Information Sheet .....</b>	<b>400</b>

<b>5 : Parent/ Caregiver Consent Form.....</b>	<b>402</b>
<b>6: Practitioner Participation Information Sheet.....</b>	<b>403</b>
<b>7: Practitioner Consent Form.....</b>	<b>405</b>
<b>8: Children’s Participation Information Sheet and Consent Form.....</b>	<b>406</b>
<b>9: Online Survey Example – Parents/ Caregivers .....</b>	<b>407</b>
<b>10: Online Survey Example – Practitioners .....</b>	<b>420</b>
<b>11: Semi-structured Interview Schedule – Practitioners .....</b>	<b>429</b>
<b>12: Semi-structured Interview Schedule – Parents/ Caregivers .....</b>	<b>430</b>
<b>13: Creative Conversation Schedule – Children .....</b>	<b>431</b>

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## **Abstract**

Transitions to school are recognised within current early childhood as significant development milestones for all children. Yet often, they are framed within systemic and structural processes and expectations, shaped and dominated by school-readiness agendas, adult perspectives and post-Covid-19 recovery priorities. The voices and lived experiences of children with special educational needs and disabilities [SEND] remain significantly under-represented in current transition to school research, despite commitments of participation and inclusion. This study aimed to address this gap, and through an interpretivist paradigm, explored how five children aged seven and eight with diverse SEND profiles in schools within Birmingham Local Authority experienced and understood their transition to school during the Covid-19 pandemic. The perspectives of their parents/ caregivers and practitioners were also included as part of the study. Drawing on bioecological (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; 2006), rights-based (Lundy, 2007), and relational perspectives, the study used a qualitative design which involved creative conversations with children with SEND, through drawing, play and photography to elicit meaningful dialogue (Clark and Moss, 2011). Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

Findings demonstrated children with SEND actively shaped and developed their own routine, play, learning and structure within their transition to school, and recognised their own strengths and dispositions. Yet they also faced challenges around social connections, emotional affects of a worldwide pandemic, and the risk of being misunderstood by the adults in supporting their transition to school. This study offers an original contribution to knowledge by foregrounding the perspectives of children with SEND within transition to school research. It claims that children with SEND are agentic participants and co-constructors in shaping their transition to school experiences during Covid-19. As such, it recommends a more relational, child-led approach and understanding of transition, recognising the strengths, dispositions and experiences of children with SEND. The study proposes implications for inclusive pedagogical practice in the transition to school, the co-construction of transition to school policy and practice, and the importance of including children with SEND in future decision-making matters that impact their lives.

## List of Tables

Table 1	Growth in Birmingham EHCPs 2018-2023	Page 27
Table 2	Projected rise in EHCPs 2024 – 2030	Page 27
Table 3	Pilot Study Findings	Page 121
Table 4	Inclusion Criteria	Page 123
Table 5	Overview of settings, participants, and methods of data generation	Page 126
Table 6	Description of school settings	Page 128
Table 7	Practitioner Participant Information	Page 129
Table 8	Parent/ caregiver Participant Information	Page 130
Table 9	Child Participant Information	Page 132

## List of Figures

Figure 1	Ecological Systems Theory	Page 110
Figure 2	Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time concept of the Bioecological Systems Theory	Page 114

## List of Abbreviations

BERA	British Education Research Association
BST	Bioecological Systems Theory
CA	Conversation Analysis
DfE	Department for Education
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DoH	Department of Health
ECE	Early Childhood Educators
EET	Early Education Transitions
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
ESL	English as a Second Language
EST	Ecological Systems Theory
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
LA	Local Authority
LO	Local Offer
MMDT	Multiple and Multi-Dimensional Transitions
NASENCO	National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
QCC	Quality Care Commission
RQs	Research Questions
SENCo	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SEND CoP	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SEN Support	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Support

UK	United Kingdom
UNCRC	United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
WHO	World Health Organisation

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## **1.1 Introduction**

*“It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories” (Haraway, 2016:12).*

This quote by Haraway (2016) is an emotional yet eloquent depiction of the purpose of my research, what the study is about, and why it matters. Because without exploring the stories of children, in this case children with special educational needs and disabilities [SEND] transitioning to primary school in England, at such a distinctive and poignant time in history, we would fail to shape our understanding of their stories. Without taking a reflexive stance within the research, it would be almost impossible to shape our understanding of world phenomena, the thoughts and feelings that sculpt each experience, and the power of individual narratives or stories in shaping our perceptions and interpretations of realities in our world.

Special care and attention were given to this research from the very beginning, to do it justice. To do justice for the children with SEND who experienced a turbulent and unstable start to their school life, as well as the families, practitioners, and educational settings who supported children during this unpredictable time, often changing their working environment and practices to adhere to strict governmental guidelines of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This thesis represents a qualitative study that explored the lived experiences of children with SEND in their transition to school, during the coronavirus [Covid-19] pandemic, within the West Midlands region of England, United Kingdom [UK]. The study took place in both mainstream and specialist school settings located within Birmingham Local Authority [LA] between February 2022 - 2026, with data generation commencing between June 2023 and September 2024. Within this chapter, I establish a justification and context for the study, subsequently locating my study within the field of transitions to primary school for children with SEND, during the worldwide, Covid-19 pandemic. I comprise a set of research aims and questions and conclude the chapter with an outline of the remaining thesis chapters.

## **1.2 Significance of Study**

*“...we have questioned why over fifty years of transitions research seems not to have changed practices in any final and satisfactory way, but rather reminds us that transitions are part of the life trajectory and as such research in this field will continue for as long as humans continue to change, dare to dream and strive to understand each crossroad along the way”* (Dunlop et al., 2024: 470).

The transition to school is recognised as a significant and important process for all children and can be even more challenging for children with SEND, particularly in times of crisis, such as a worldwide pandemic. The inclusion and rights of children with SEND are increasingly recognised in current literature (Ainscow et al., 2006; Glazzard, 2013; Lundy, 2007; Norwich, 2014), international frameworks and UK policy. Yet, despite such recognition of the importance of transition to school for children, and the commitment to allow children to have a voice and be heard, the lived experiences and realities for children with SEND regarding their transition to school during a worldwide pandemic remain undiscovered in current research.

This thesis explored the lived experiences of transition to school for children with SEND during the Covid-19 pandemic, drawing on the Bioecological Systems Theory [BST] (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; 2006), as well as being guided by children’s rights-based perspective of Professor Laura Lundy (2007), Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC] (1989) and Article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [UNCRPD] (2006). These lenses advocate for children to have a right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them in their immediate and wider environments.

Through a qualitative study involving creative conversations with children with SEND, influenced by the ‘Mosaic Approach’ of Clark and Moss (2011), and initial data gathering surveys and semi-structured interviews with practitioners and parents/caregivers, I explored how children with SEND navigated, understood and experienced their transition to school during a worldwide pandemic. The research seeks to contribute to both scholarly research and pedagogical understandings of transitions to school for children with SEND.

### **1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Study**

The study aimed to explore the lived experiences and realities of children with diverse types of SEND in their transition to primary school in England, during the worldwide, Covid-19 pandemic.

For this study, the term Special Educational Needs and Disabilities is used to describe the special educational needs and/ or disabilities of a child in the UK, developed through both the Children and Families Act (Department for Education [DfE], 2014) and the Equality Act (2010). As outlined in the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice [SEND CoP] (DfE & Department of Health [DoH], 2015):

*‘A child of compulsory school age or a young person has a learning difficulty or disability if he or she: has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or has a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions’ (page 16).*

This definition and how it has shaped the study has been discussed in more detail in section 2.4.2 ‘Transitions for Children with SEND’ (page 30).

Through exploring this phenomenon, it allowed children with SEND, their families and schools to reflect on their transition to school experiences, considering what was important to children with SEND, explore challenges faced during an unprecedented time in their education landscape, and provide the right support for children with SEND should another worldwide pandemic happen again. Rather than providing an assessment or objective verification of transition activities, measure the success of transition, or strive to create universally applicable factors related to transition to school experiences (Thomas, 2017), this study aimed to develop knowledge and understandings from local and lived experiences of children with SEND, and the support systems around them. It did not intend to generalise the data by suggesting these are the experiences of all children within England or the UK – here the focus is on the experiences of a group of children with SEND starting school within different school settings within a West Midlands region.

To explore the experiences of children with SEND within mainstream and specialist school settings, and gain a deep, nuanced and rich understanding of their experiences of their transition to primary school at this time, the research needed to consider the characteristics and contexts of children's personal and social lives, experiences during Covid-19 school closures, and how this shaped their transition experiences of starting primary education during this time. This reflects the systems and contexts within which the child lives and navigates (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979; 1986; 1993).

Given the nuanced and contextual aims and objectives within this study, the term 'transition for children with SEND' considers the child with SEND at the centre of the transition process, which focusses significantly on their views, lived experiences, strengths and learning dispositions. It also incorporates the transition to school as a journey over time, which is co-constructed with parents/ caregivers, practitioners, peers, and the wider community in which the child inhabits. For this study, transition to school has been viewed through relational understandings between the child and adults and peers within their microsystems, within and across environments and contexts of space and time, such as Covid-19. The development of this definition has been discussed further in Chapter 2 (page 22).

The overall purpose of this study firmly echoes values and principles within an interpretivist paradigm, gaining an understanding of a specific phenomenon and asking questions such as what understanding the people included in the study have about the world, and furthermore, how can we grasp these understandings (Thomas, 2017).

To capture the individual 'voices' and lived experiences of children with SEND, their families and practitioners in the best way possible, the theoretical framework, research methodology, and research methods for this study were chosen in a careful way, paying particular attention to ethical considerations of research with children with SEND (Bertram et al., 2025).

#### ***1.4 Connection to the study***

To offer context as to how this study has shaped and developed organically over time, it is essential that I reflect on who I am and why this study was important to me.

My own worldview stems from previous experience in different professional and personal roles; a mainstream primary school practitioner, special educational needs practitioner, a special educational need coordinator [SENCo], and a mum to a child experiencing transition to 'big school'. These positions have not only shaped my journey and career as a teacher and now a researcher, but also my values and beliefs.

This includes my passionate belief that every child has the right to a voice and should be able to make decisions that are important to them. This mirrors rights within wider policy such as the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015), the Equality Act (2010), Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) and Article 7 and the UNCRPD (2006). These rights place a duty on professionals within schools to make 'every reasonable endeavour' to support the views of children, allowing us to understand how different people see, feel or think about the world, seeking to grasp diverse perspectives (Hammersley, 2012).

Additionally, I have experienced many different types of 'transitions' in both a professional capacity and within my personal life, that cannot be ignored when drawing on transitions to new experiences. Throughout the early part of my teaching career, with limited experience, knowledge and training in SEND, I felt ill-equipped to support children with SEND. Through continuous reflection and a desire to develop my own and others' inclusive teaching practices, I took on the role of the SENCo and completed a National post-graduate diploma award for SENCos. This training was the start of a career in teaching children with SEND and wanting to ensure that all children had the best start to their school life.

Several years later, I went through two other emotional and personal transitions. The first one was becoming a mum during Covid-19. Many opportunities for making 'mum-friends' and the opportunities to experience baby classes was fully inhibited. Additionally, I experienced many similar challenges to the participants in my study, such as emotional hurdles and a lack of support from outside agencies.

Secondly, during this rollercoaster of a transition to motherhood amidst a worldwide pandemic, I had to navigate a breast cancer diagnosis merely five weeks after my daughter had been born. This was the most life-changing transition that shaped the next few years of my life, as I navigated the turmoil of these 'events'.

These life-changing transitions were the beginning of this thesis. I wanted to have a purpose for the research, linking it to my professional and personal experiences, and began questioning how children with SEND, a marginalised group who usually face difficulties in a day-to-day basis, navigated their transition to primary school at such an unprecedented time within their lives. Equally, I could not avoid my own subjective experiences of Covid-19. These experiences, just like the participants in the study, have shaped my thinking and feeling. Therefore, my reflexive and subjective knowledge is a prominent thread throughout the research, which supports the meaning-making of the participants data. A full discussion of my positionality and reflexivity within this study can be found in section 3.2 'Positionality' (page 99).

### ***1.5 Research Questions***

To explore the aims of the research, the thesis has been guided and organised by the following research questions (RQs):

**RQ1:** How did children with SEND in Birmingham experience their transition to school during the Covid-19 pandemic?

**RQ2:** How did the parents/ caregivers and practitioners interpret the transition to primary school experiences for their child with SEND during the Covid-19 pandemic?

**RQ3:** What recommendations for pedagogical practice, policy and future research can be established for supporting children with SEND in their transition to school during times of crises on a local and global platform?

### ***1.6 Outlining the unfolding story***

This chapter has outlined the study rationale; research aims and research questions that have guided the thesis, the purpose and importance of the research, and my perspectives and interests around the transition to school for children with SEND during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The subsequent chapters are arranged as follows:

Chapter 2 - Literature Review: The literature review contextualised and mapped current early childhood, education and SEND policy frameworks, literature and empirical studies that have influenced and shaped the transition to school experiences of children with SEND in the UK. This included an ecological

conceptualisation, such as macrosystemic policy frameworks that have influenced and shaped transition to school experiences for children with SEND; mesosystemic influences of parents/ caregivers and practitioners in the transition to school for children with SEND; and microsystemic research with children with SEND in their transition to school.

Chapter 3 - Theoretical Underpinning, Methodology and Method: This chapter draws on the theoretical underpinning of the study, including the Bioecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998; 2006), a child's rights perspective through the UNCRC (1989), UNCRPD (2006) and Lundy's model of participation (2007). Justification for how these theoretical frameworks are woven together and used in collaboration were explored. Chapter 3 also identified the study methodology and research methods used to generate data, and the data analysis tool used to make meaning from the data.

Chapter 4 - Case Study Findings: The findings chapter highlighted the findings from five case studies, anchored by creative conversations with children with SEND, as well as the findings from parents/ caregivers and practitioners' data.

Chapter 5 - Discussion: This chapter provided a full discussion of the findings in relation to wider research and literature within its field, as well as answering RQ1 and RQ2, specifically related to the children's views and lived experiences, and the parent/ caregiver and practitioners' interpretations of their transitions to school.

Chapter 6 - Recommendations and Conclusion: This chapter concluded the study findings and supported RQ3, giving recommendations for further pedagogical practice, policy and research in the transition to school for children with SEND, including during future worldwide pandemics.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### ***2.1 Introduction***

The previous chapter introduced the study, along with the aims and research questions. This chapter sets the context for this study by highlighting a justification for the terminology used throughout the thesis, the prevalence of SEND within an English early years and primary school context and finally exploring literature around transition to school for children with SEND, including policy frameworks and empirical studies.

The literature review is structured with intention to mirror the ecological framework of Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) Bioecological Systems Theory, which underpins this study. The structure starts with viewing transitions to school for children with SEND through systemic and structural influences, and adult-dominated literature in the field, before moving inwards, towards the children's own voices and lived experiences. Organising the literature review in this way allowed me to peel back the ecological layers akin to the BST framework (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), to reveal a clear gap within the research field; the voices and lived experiences of children with SEND in their transition to school, during a worldwide pandemic.

The literature review starts with wide exosystemic and macrosystemic influences of UK policy and frameworks, which have historically shaped the way transition to school is understood and carried out in practice within English school settings for children with SEND. This includes influences such as the Plowden Report (1967), the Warnock Report (1978), Children and Families Act (DfE, 2014) the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015), and Early Years curriculums (DfE, 2025). How adults interpret, design and support transitions for children with SEND through wider policy dominate and shape the current literature in the field of transitions to school for children, often focussing on school readiness agendas, mesosystemic relationships, systemic support (discussed later in section 2.6, page 47). Here, the literature review also explored chronosystemic changes and influences of Covid-19, such as Covid-19 policies and the recovery and catch-up curriculums that shaped children's transition to school experiences at this unprecedented time.

To understand the lived experiences of children with SEND in their transition to school during Covid-19 in a UK context, it was essential to first recognise these wider influences and contexts which influence and shape children's transition to school experiences.

Moving gradually inwards, the literature review then focusses on the influences of mesosystems of adults around the child, notably relationships of parents/ caregivers and practitioners, in the transition to school experience for children with SEND. The literature here dominates transition to school research and studies for children with SEND, where adults around them often make sense of their transition experiences through reflecting on their own relationships with one another and outside agency support.

Finally, the literature review moves to the microsystem, the centre of the child's ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and this includes the voices and experiences of the child at the centre of their transition to school. Within the literature review, this was where the gap was revealed, and for children with SEND, these voices are often missing in current literature and research studies. Due to this paucity of research, the literature review explored wider studies that included all children's experiences of transition to school, as well as literature of children with SEND in their general educational experiences. This provided a background against which the experiences of children with SEND in their transition to school can be considered and problematised.

From section 2.7.1 'Voices of Children with SEND', the study then purposely centres the voices and lived experiences of children with SEND in their transition to school, as demonstrated in the subsequent 'Findings', 'Discussion' and 'Recommendations and Conclusion' chapters.

The structure of the literature review reveals the dominant adult-driven and policy landscape of transitions to school experiences for children with SEND in English school settings. Through reframing children with SEND at the centre of their transition to school experiences, rather than viewed as passive recipients in systems and structures of transition to school, my study demonstrates that the views of children with SEND can challenge and reframe the way we consider their transition to school experiences, especially during a worldwide pandemic.

## **2.2 Terminology**

This section highlights the different ways in which terminology is used when referring to children with additional needs within current literature, UK policy and English school settings. The terminology used to describe children with SEND is contested and evolving within disability and inclusion studies and the debates in the field extend beyond the scope of this study. However, it is important to consider the terminologies used throughout my thesis, offering respect to my participants.

The term 'children with SEND' was introduced in the Warnock Report (1978) and is still currently used within English school settings, as set out within the Children and Families Act (DfE, 2014) and within the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015). Within the UK and English school settings, the term 'SEND' and 'children with SEND' is used to describe children diagnosed with different types of special educational need or disability within educational settings, identified through different categories. This includes a diverse range of disability and special educational needs of children as highlighted in the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015), for example: specific learning difficulties [SPLD]; moderate learning difficulties [MLD]; severe learning difficulties [SLD]; profound and multiple learning difficulties [PMLD]; social, emotional and mental health needs [SEMH]; speech, language and communication needs [SLCN]; hearing impairments [HI]; visual impairments [VI]; multi-sensory impairments [MSI]; physical disability [PD]; autism spectrum disorder [ASD]. Additionally, children may be categorised within schools as needing support but no specialist assessment [NSA] of type of need.

However, there is currently a dilemma of terminology which continues to be contested in the field of disability and inclusion studies, often between wanting and needing to recognise the responsibility schools and governments have in providing the appropriate resources and support to meet children's needs, and the attempts to avoid the stigmatisation of children's differences through labels, categories and a deficit-framing (Norwich, 2023). Here, Norwich (2023) is suggesting that any terminology used for children with additional needs often creates problems, and he argues that there is no neutral or perfect solution.

As Norwich (2023) identifies, the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) continues to use terms like 'disorder', 'difficulty' or 'impairment' inter-changeably, which often labels

children through a medical model lens, locating the problem within the child themselves, and often without focussing on their strengths and influences of their learning environment. Other researchers including Nah and Lim (2025) and Taboas et al. (2023) also draw our attention to other areas of dilemma around terminology to describe children with special educational needs and disabilities, specifically around the use of identity-first language and person-first language. Dunn and Andrews (2015) highlight how identity-first language, for example 'autistic person' has been advocated within diverse and autistic communities as a way of challenging traditional deficit-based narratives of special educational needs and disabilities, through a social model of disability lens, rather than a medical model that often uses person-first language, for example 'person with autism' or 'children with SEND'.

By using identity-first language, Norwich (2023) argues the child's disability is part of their identity, a recognised tension in disability studies literature, where using terms like 'people with disabilities' (person-first), rather than 'disabled people' (identity-first) is often undesirable, as it suggests their disability is an add-on to the person, rather than a part of their identity, leaning towards a medical model framing.

Nevertheless, there continues to be differences in the way terminology is used within different paradigms of disability studies. From an interactionist stance of Shakespeare (2017) or the World Health Organisation's [WHO] biopsychosocial model of disability, they use more functional descriptive language such as 'disabled person' or 'person with additional needs', to highlight both the characteristics and identities of individuals, as well as environmental factors. Other paradigms, including a neurodiversity paradigm use terms like 'neurodiverse' or 'neurotypical' to describe autistic and non-autistic individuals.

Other researchers like Chen (2022), Nah and Lim (2025), Sinclair (2013) and Taboas et al. (2023) suggest using terms like 'autistic children', rather than 'children with autism' aligns with widely documented preferences within autistic communities. However, it has been acknowledged that other communities prefer to use person-first language and emphasise this is often down to personal preferences (Nah and Lim, 2025; Taboas et al., 2023).

As evidenced above, there is no correct terminology to use for different groups, communities and individuals, and often this can change depending on individual preferences.

Nevertheless, as a researcher working with children with special educational needs and disabilities, it is my ethical responsibility to be considerate and respectful of my participants. Where possible, I adopt identity-first language when relating to children within my study, for example autistic child. When discussing children's experiences collectively, I have also used the person-first phrase of 'children with special educational needs and disabilities' or 'children with SEND' (DfE & DoH, 2015) throughout my thesis. This approach aligns and respects terminology within community preferences, contexts and ethical practices of my study, as well as the significance and awareness of the term 'children with SEND' which is used in both English school settings, curriculum, and wider policy and legislation in the UK. Using this term, as well as identity-first language throughout my study will ensure that children's identities are considered as central, but also ensuring that practitioners and policymakers in English school settings and education spaces are familiar with the recommendations of support for children identified with a special educational need or disability in their transition to school during worldwide pandemics. This reinforces the impact of my study findings for children with SEND in both pedagogical and policy spaces.

### ***2.3 Prevalence and context of SEND in Early Years***

Prevalence data suggests there is a growing number of children being identified with SEND in the early years in the UK and Birmingham LA. Within English schools, there are approximately over 1.7 million children recognised as having SEND, which has increased by 5.6% (93,700 pupils) from 2024 (DfE, 2025) and this figure continues to increase year on year. Data from the DfE Statistics (2025) shows there are now 5.3% of all pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan [EHCP], and 14.2% of pupils receiving SEN Support across all English schools.

In comparison to national data, 4.1% of children have an EHCP in Birmingham LA, and 15.8% receive SEN Support. More specifically within Birmingham LA, 0.4% of children in the early years, and 4.3% of children in reception class have an EHCP,

and 3.2% of children in the early years and 5.5% of children in reception are receiving SEN Support (DfE, 2025).

It is important to note that these figures have increased since the beginning of this study, which suggests that each year, an increasing number of children are being diagnosed with SEND. This in turn means an increasing number of children with SEND entering the English school system. Additionally, the figures can misrepresent the reality of children with SEND, as often they either have no EHCP in place, or their needs have not been identified. The figures below demonstrate a significant increase in EHCPs issued to children within Birmingham LA following the Covid-19 pandemic:

The overall number of pupils aged 4-19 with an EHCP in Birmingham has grown by 1091 (13.1%) in the last three years:

SEN 2 (JAN)	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
4-19 EHCPs	8,187	8,305	8,330	8,934	8,984	9,421

**Table 1: Growth in Birmingham EHCPs 2018-2023**

*Table 1: Growth in Birmingham EHCPs 2018-2023 (Source: Birmingham SEND Sufficiency Strategy 2024-2030)*

Furthermore, Birmingham LA have predicted the rate of children being issued with an EHCP to continue to increase in the next several years:

We are currently projecting EHCPs to increase at the rate shown in the table and graph below:

JAN	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
4-19 EHCPs	9997	10401	10695	10914	11109	11342	11567

**Table 3: Projected rise in EHCPs 2024-2030**

*Table 2: Projected rise in EHCPs 2024-2030 (Source: Birmingham SEND Sufficiency Strategy 2024 – 2030)*

In addition to the DfE Statistics (2025a) figures and predictions made by Birmingham LA with regards to the prevalence of SEND, the number of children accessing Early Years Support within Birmingham LA has increased over the past five years, with 2,067 children being notified of the service during 2017/18 (Birmingham SEND Strategy 2019 - 2023). Early Years Support provides educational support and advice to schools and families of children identified by educational settings as needing developmental support (Birmingham Local Offer, 2022).

A report by the Care Quality Commission (CQC, Ofsted, 2021) found during their SEND inspection in Birmingham LA that transitions were poorly planned for children starting school. Additionally, the CQC reported school places were failing to be identified for children with SEND. The importance of planning for transitions for children with SEND is accentuated within the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) stating that 'SEN support should include planning and preparation for transition, before a child moved into another setting or school. This can also include a review of the SEN support being provided or the EHC plan' (p.88).

Furthermore, consultation feedback in a recent SEND Green Paper (DfE, 2022a) and SEND Alternative Provision Improvement Plan (DfE, 2023b) suggested there was late planning and decision-making for children with SEND, and poor support around transitions. This reveals that at present there are not high-quality transitions for children with SEND within English schools, and additionally, not enough support for them in their transition to school process.

The figures in table 1 and 2 above (page 27) highlight the increasing SEND levels amongst children aged four and five, who need support throughout their early years within Birmingham LA. It is well-documented that early identification and appropriate support and intervention concerning children with SEND are essential to their development, as well as the premise that starting school is a difficult time for any child, but especially those children who need additional support (Fontil et al., 2020; Marsh et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2019).

## **2.4 Situating the Study**

### **2.4.1 Transitions to School Literature**

Transitions to primary school are recognised within current literature as an important and significant milestone for children, often shaped by the interplay of institutional practice, policy and broad systemic factors, as well as individual and relational factors (Dockett and Perry, 2013). These have been discussed in detail later within the literature review.

Even though the transition to school may not be the first transition a child encounters in their early life (since they may experience transitions such as leaving their main caregiver, weaning, attending nursery or child-minders, to name just a few), the transition into primary school education in the UK into Reception class is deemed a significant change in a child's early life and has substantial implications for their learning and development (Peters, 2010). Not only will children experience change in their physical environment, but also change in their social context, as well as different philosophical approaches to teaching and learning across different contexts (Fabian, 2002).

Due to this significant importance in a child's early life, there is now a greater emphasis and awareness of children's transitions to school than ever before within the early years educational practice and research (Dunlop, 2014). During this momentous time in a child's development, children often experience unusual or different school environments, new and different rules, expectations, and varying demands on their behaviour and social skills (Dockett and Perry, 2007; La Paro et al., 2003; Ramey and Ramey, 2010). Furthermore, transition to school experiences usually predict or impact school achievement for children, a child's well-being, and socio-emotional outcomes over a long-term period (Fabian and Dunlop, 2007; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Developed [OECD], 2017; Peters 2010).

A significant amount of research has explored the transitions to primary school for all children; Boyle et al. (2018) carried out an integrative review of literature on the transitions to school for children, and key themes included: school readiness (Dockett and Perry, 2013); relationships and collaboration between stakeholders (Aspelin et al., 2020; Griebel and Niesel, 2009; Wickett, 2017; Wilder and Lillvist,

2021), communication and collaboration with families (McIntyre et al., 2006), and teaching pedagogies, transition activities and adaptations (Andersson, 2020; Beukelman and Mirenda, 2013).

To search for relevant literature of transitions to school for children with SEND during Covid-19, I initially used a thematic strategy to look for literature closely related to the study aims and research questions. For example, I used a range of different educational databases, including British Education Index, ERIC, EBSCO, and Psych Info, as well as other sources including websites and policy documents to initially explore the field. As highlighted above in the literature structure (page 22), it was essential to include a range of literature that explored transitions to school for children with SEND. This included transition to school policies, parent/ caregiver and practitioner interpretations of transition to school experiences for children with SEND, literature around the impact of Covid-19 for children with SEND, and the voices and experiences of children with SEND themselves.

Even though I started with the search terms and sources to explore the landscape of transitions to school for children with SEND, the literature search was carried out through an iterative approach, returning to the literature continuously throughout the study. This supported my study's interpretivist methodology and my own engagement with the literature, as my study developed over time. Carrying out the literature search in this way ensured I, as the researcher, constructed understanding through on-going and responsive engagement with my study. For example, as my thinking and understanding developed, and my research questions were further refined, I explored different theoretical frameworks, including the BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), the UNCRC (1989), Shakespeare (2017) and Carr's (1998a; 1998b; 1998c; 1999; 2001) work on learning dispositions, and Milton's (2012) double empathy problem, which often required different literature to make meaning and understanding of my study findings. This was the same for exploring trauma-informed research (Bateman and Danby, 2013; Bietto and Castello, 2013; Brown, 2012;) with children in response to worldwide pandemics.

Where there was a paucity of current empirical research for children with SEND, studies that contain all children's views were included, or the views of children with SEND in general, not specifically related to their transition to school. This allowed for

exploration of current literature and studies that related specifically to the research aims and highlight gaps within the literature. This has been discussed in detail below.

#### **2.4.2 Transitions for Children with SEND**

As already highlighted in Chapter 1 (page 15), the term Special Educational Needs and Disabilities is used to describe the special educational needs and/ or disabilities of a child in the UK, who has a learning difficulty or disability which is often a significantly greater difficulty in learning than their peers, or one which prevents them from making use of facilities provided for others of the same age (SEND CoP, DfE & DoH, 2015). Here, the term SEND represents a diverse range of SEND (as highlighted on page 24), classified under four broad areas of need. This includes communication and interaction needs, cognition and learning needs, social, emotional, and mental health needs [SEMH], and sensory and/or physical needs. Within schools in England, children identified with SEND are placed onto the SEND register and are monitored closely by teachers and SENCo's supporting them in their learning and development. Some children with SEND may have also undergone statutory assessment processes (as outlined within Section 9 of the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) and are supported by an EHCP, which ensures a multi-agency approach to support the child. This includes support for both the child and their family from a variety of different agencies such as education, health, and care professionals.

For this study, the term SEND has been used congruently with the definition outlined in the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) and the Children and Families Act (DfE, 2014). When discussing the context and individual needs of the children throughout this study, they have been in line with the four areas of need as described within the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015).

Current literature and studies that focus predominantly on children with SEND in their transition to school is small yet suggests that transitions to school for children with SEND and their families are particularly significant and critical (Fontil et al., 2020; Marsh et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2019; McIntyre et al., 2006). The processes of transition to a new school setting can be complex and challenging for children with SEND, with a need for careful planning with children and families receiving individualised support specific to the child and families' individual needs (Connolly

and Gersch, 2016; Evans et al., 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2017; Sammons, 2013). From an ecological perspective, Janus et al. (2008) highlight that multiple changes in a child's ecological system at this time can be challenging for children with SEND.

Furthermore, it has been suggested that children with SEND, their families, practitioners and schools all need support and preparedness for a positive transition to school (McIntyre et al., 2010). It is understood that families and school communities play a significant role in the transition to school for children with SEND, which helps prepares the children for school (Griebel and Niesel, 2002).

This suggestion by Griebel and Niesel (2002) highlight that transition to school isn't just the individual responsibility of receiving schools in welcoming and supporting the transition to school for children with SEND, but also the responsibility of parents/ caregivers and pre-school environments. As highlighted in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) early work around ecologies of development, it is recognised that effective transition to school preparation involves multiple people within the child's ecosystems. This includes early years settings, such as pre-schools, private nurseries or child-minders, who are responsible for sharing information of the child's individual needs, experiences and strengths with school settings and preparing children for a change of environment and people within it. Furthermore, parents/ caregivers are responsible for supporting and preparing children at home with their transition to school, such as talking about their new setting and teachers, increasing their familiarity of their school setting, supporting their child's worries and concerns, and ensuring consistency between settings.

It is evident to see therefore, that all children will arrive at school with different and diverse preparation to school experiences, which requires relational and joined-up support between parents/ caregivers, nursery and school practitioners, and the child themselves. This information is vital to support children with SEND in their transition to school at their own starting point, rather than assuming a standardised, one-size-all approach. This was important during the Covid-19 pandemic, where a high proportion of children with SEND, due to their vulnerabilities and needing to isolate to stay well, stayed at home, and a joined-up and relational approach between children, parents/ caregivers and practitioners in pre-school and school settings was restricted

(Bakopoulou, 2022; Wythe, 2022). It is evident that relationships and a collaborative approach to transition is a vital supporting mechanism in both the preparing children with SEND for school, and during the transition to school itself.

The Bioecological Systems Theory (BST) by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998; 2006) emphasise this interrelated and collaborative influence of children's relationships and wider systemic factors and is one of the main theoretical frameworks that underpin this study. A full discussion of the theoretical underpinning will follow in Chapter 3 (page 99). Here, it provides a useful lens through which I have considered existing literature on transitions to school for children with SEND: chronosystemic influences of Covid-19; macrosystemic and structural influences such as policies that shape transition to school for children with SEND; mesosystemic influences including relationships with and between peers, parents, practitioners and professionals; and microsystemic literature related to children's experiences of transition to school, including those with SEND.

To situate transitions for children with SEND entering English school settings, it is important to contextualise the priorities of education policy in English schools, as well as the systemic and structural influences of transition to school for children with SEND. This will be discussed in section 2.5 next.

## ***2.5 Policy Priorities, Systemic and Structural Influences***

### **2.5.1 Historical and Legislative Context for SEND in England**

In English school settings, policies and systemic and structural priorities have shaped transition to school processes for children with SEND. The educational inclusion of children with SEND in the UK has come a long way since the early influence of both the Plowden Report 'Children and their Primary Schools' (1967) and the Warnock Report (1978).

Both these early reports influenced UK Government policies around SEND and inclusion of children in their education. The Plowden Report (1967) was one of the first reports to introduce early philosophies around the importance of individual differences of children. It identified the importance of accurate and early identification of children's needs, relationships between families and schools of children with

SEND, and recognised that children should attend school settings ‘wherever he has the best opportunities of developing his resources to the fullest extent’ (p.297).

In addition, the Warnock Report (1978) was another influential report which changed how children with SEND were included in their education. This involved a fundamental shift from children being classed as ‘handicap’, or with ‘impairments’, to the broader concept of special educational needs. It was this report that recognised the diversity of children’s needs and advocated for the inclusion of children with SEND to be included and educated within mainstream settings and introduced ‘statements of special educational needs’. Through introducing statements for children with SEND, and more recently EHCPs, this put onus on local authorities to identify and support children with SEND in mainstream settings. It also encouraged practitioners to recognise individual needs of children, differentiate learning and provide individualised support for children with SEND. The shifts in early ideologies of SEND established the principle that the needs of children should be considered in an individual, holistic way, but also through collaboration and multi-agency support.

Taken together, these reports established early foundations for a more inclusive education for children with SEND, emphasising a collaborative approach to supporting individual needs. However, their application within education policies and practice remained uneven, as highlighted in section 2.5.2 – 2.5.5 (pages 36-47).

Later policies that sought to apply the principles brought about in both the Plowden (1967) and Warnock Report (1978) in English education systems included both the Children and Families Act (DfE, 2014), and the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015). According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), these national policies, which function at the exosystem and macrosystem levels of the Ecological System Theory [EST], structurally embed and shape children’s experiences of education, including their transition to school.

The Children and Families Act (2014) set out a statutory legal framework for schools and local authorities’ accountability of children with SEND, which translated earlier aspirations of children’s rights, assessment of children’s needs and a focus on collaborative support. The Children and Families Act (DfE, 2014) included a duty to prepare, review and deliver what was set out within EHCPs for children with SEND, providing them with continuity across transitions throughout their life. Section 19 of

the Children and Families Act (2014) states that local authorities must have a statutory duty to regard the views, perspectives, wishes and feelings of children, and they should be central to decision-making processes. There is also an emphasis within the Children and Families Act (2014) around the importance of collaborative planning across education, health and care support for children with SEND, which often frames transition to school as planned, coordinated and joined-up processes for children with SEND. The Children and Families Act (2014) reinforced children's rights to assessment of need, support, inclusion and participation in educational mainstream settings, which embedded child-centred regulations.

Turning to the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015), this policy develops the statutory obligations set out in the Children and Families Act (2014), providing detailed guidance for how practitioners and local authorities should plan, assess and support children with SEND, particularly during key transitions in their life. For example, it focusses on preparing children for the transition to school, and states that transition to school 'should include careful planning and preparing for transition, before a child moved into another setting or school' (p.88). The SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) highlights a person-centred approach to SEND support for children, which centralises children's involvement in decision-making matters that affect them, including their transition to school. Whilst the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) emphasises early preparation, joined-up planning between settings, parents/ caregivers and children, and the importance of information-sharing within the transition to school process for children with SEND, the extent and quality of this guidance vary widely between local authorities and schools themselves. This is due to such decisions on the implementation of transition support for all children, including children with SEND, being devolved and deployed at a local level, and therefore invariably interpreted by local authorities and schools throughout England. This often creates disparities and inconsistencies in transition support for children with SEND; some children may experience supportive and well-planned transitions, and their voices are heard and listened to, whereas other children may experience minimal support or involvement in decision-making, lack of preparation and therefore, disrupted transition support.

Taken together, the Children and Families Act (2014) and the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) signify the current statutory framework through which schools and multi-agency services, such as health and care professionals, understand, recognise and respond to the individual needs of children with SEND. Whilst this legislative and policy discourse reflects a growing commitment to inclusion for children with SEND in English schools, as highlighted above, early debates of disability and inclusion remain. Discourse around inclusion and support for children with SEND has been shaped by differing models of disability, for example the social, medical and biopsychosocial models. Each has its significances for how children with SEND are understood, supported and experience their transition to school. The following section outlines each of these models of disability that underpin this inclusion and SEND policy approach in English school settings, complementing the conceptual framing of this study.

### **2.5.2 Conceptual Models of Disability**

A conceptual debate continues to underpin SEND and inclusion policy in English education systems, which is the dominance of two discourses, specifically the medical and social models of disability. Other newer models of disability and approaches, including the neurodiversity paradigm and the intersectionality model have also been considered as part of this discussion, yet represent a multifaceted and broad field of disability research, which extends beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, this section provides an engagement with key debates and frameworks relevant to my study's theoretical framework and research questions.

The medical model claims SEND is part of a physiological or psychological condition or difficulties which are intrinsic to the individual (Hornby, 2015). This model focusses on diagnosis of the child, which is seen as an impairment or deficit. Within the medical model discourse, it claims that disability is a physical product of biology and emphasises how an individual needs to change to fit into the society in which they inhabit. The medical model puts emphasis on interventions for children with SEND and often aligns with school readiness discourses in transition to school literature, suggesting children should meet a set of prescribed developmental norms or outcomes of the school environment. There is obvious criticism around the medical model of disability which focuses on deficits of children with SEND, as it

promotes or enhances discrimination of children, as well as creating oppression, exclusive environments, and an increased dependency or reliance for intervention and help (Reindal, 2008).

However, the social model of disability challenges the medical model deficit viewpoint. The social model claims a disability is extrinsic to the individual, whereby individuals may face many barriers and exclusions within the society and systems in which they live, which often means they will be excluded and unable to reach their full potential (Oliver, 2013). In terms of school for children with SEND, the social model of disability emphasises it is the challenges and barriers within the education and school system for children with SEND that create difficulties. For example, inaccessible school and classroom environments, rigid developmental curriculums and inflexible routines for children with SEND.

Often children's individual needs are met by adapting and changing the environment and system in which the child operates (Ainscow et al., 2016), with an aim of making it an inclusive environment for all. The social model viewpoint would suggest that a positive transition to school for children with SEND would depend on the context. For example, the school environment, support systems, routines, relationships and collaboration, and if the environment isn't supportive, this often creates difficulties for children with SEND. This model challenges the school readiness discourse as it highlights the importance of the context and adaptation of the environment in which a child transitions to school, rather than the adaptation of the child themselves.

An alternative viewpoint which sits between both the medical and social model of disability is the biopsychosocial model, adopted by the International Classification of Function [ICF] and the World Health Organisation, with an aim to bring together both models of disability together (Reindal, 2008). This model of disability claims disability is both individual to a person, and is medically diagnosed, but the social context in which the individual lives can inhibit their freedoms, often playing a major role in the creation or escalation of their disability. This echoes a sociomedical approach of Shakespeare (2017), who maintains a stance that social factors in which a person lives, added to their own individual medical impairments, can often create a complex model of disability. Shakespeare (2017) argues we should consider a holistic approach to disability, considering the individual person, their disability and

impairments specific to them, as well as any barriers they face or could face within their environment or society and how they live their everyday lives.

In terms of transition to school for children with SEND, this view suggests that transition to school is concerned with the interplay of both the individual characteristics of children with SEND, as well as a variety of environmental and structural affordances and barriers. For children with SEND, these different disability discourses have practical implications of how they experience their transition to school and how their individual needs are understood and supported in this process.

More recent developments in disability studies include both a neurodiversity paradigm, and an intersectionality viewpoint, which challenge and extend larger social and medical model disability frameworks highlighted above in various ways relevant to my research with children with SEND in their transitions to school.

The neurodiversity paradigm, originally created by Singer (1998) and developed further by Walker and Raymaker (2021), suggesting ‘neurodiversity is an axis of human diversity, like ethnic diversity or diversity of gender and sexual orientation, and is subject to the same sorts of social dynamics as those other forms of diversity – including the dynamics of social power inequalities, privilege, and oppression...’ (p6). What Walker and Raymaker (2021) are saying here is that neurodiversity is a natural part of diversity and variability amongst people that should be recognised, as there is no one form of ‘normal’ functioning.

Like Shakespeare’s (2017) thinking, the neurodiversity paradigm both reject deficit assumptions of an individual that needs ‘fixing’ but recognises differences in being human often depend on individual characteristics, as well as environmental and social contexts in which they live and learn. For example, rather than viewing autism and other neurological differences as disorders, deficits or conditions that require fixing, the neurodiversity paradigm considers different challenges and strengths of autistic individuals, often shaped by the environment and context in which they live and develop. This view was supported in the work of Dwyer et al. (2025), who suggest that viewing people through a neurodivergent model would claim that it is neither the person nor the environment that is inevitably always the sole cause of a person’s disability. This paradigm is consistent with the way the children with SEND are considered and regarded within my study, through a dispositional lens that

focuses on their diverse, individual strengths within their context, and individual characteristics they each bring or reach towards within their own transition to school experiences.

Another dimension of disability studies that adds to the wider discussions and debates of disability include an intersectionality paradigm (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality considers multiple aspects of children's identities, for example their race, gender, ethnicity, class and languages. These are like the demand characteristics of the BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; 2006). Within an intersectionality paradigm, the individual identities of children often overlap and interact, which in turn produces unique and different experiences of advantage or disadvantage within children's context. Crenshaw (1989) argues these experiences should be considered together, rather than through their disability alone. Whilst this study did not set out to explore an intersectionality analysis, the children's individual identities and their ecological contexts were considered within the ethnographic information of their case studies and considered implicitly throughout both the data analysis and through the demand characteristics of the BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), and learning dispositions of Carr (1999).

In line with the research paradigm, values, and ethics, this study will implement a biopsychosocial model of disability, consistent with the WHO model, to support a bioecological framing of transition to school (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Adopting both frameworks provide a holistic underpinning for understanding the complexities of transition for children with SEND and recognises that experiences in their transition to school develop from interactions between their own individual characteristics, and the context in which they transition to school. Using these views conceptualise children's experiences as emerging through dynamic interactions between individuals, including the strengths and dispositions of children with SEND, as well as relational and environmental influences in their transition to school, and systemic and structural challenges, for example disruptions of Covid-19. They both reject deficit-based views that place difficulty and challenges solely within the child themselves.

Whilst the biopsychosocial model of disability focuses on how the biological, psychological and social factors of children interconnect in the child's disability, the

BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) provides a structure for exploring how relationships, or proximal processes and wider systems shape the transition to school experiences over time for those children. Considered together, these frameworks enable a nuanced understanding of how the transition to school experiences of children with SEND are shaped by relational, structural and systemic provisions, including policy expectations, support and Covid-19 pandemic-related disruptions.

The models of disability continue to shape policy and pedagogical practice for children with SEND, often influencing or shaping how transition to school is understood, organised and coordinated in primary school settings. The following section explores early years frameworks, particularly the Early Years Foundation Stage [EYFS] curriculum (DfE, 2025) and non-statutory guidance, Development Matters (DfE, 2023a), to consider how these policies and guidance continue to shape transition to school for children with SEND in the early years.

### **2.5.3 Early Years Frameworks**

The EYFS (DfE, 2025) is the statutory framework within English schools that establishes the legal requirements for early education providers, including childminders and school-based providers, such as nursery, preschool and Reception class settings. Within this framework, it sets out the everyday practice expectations of early years providers, which emphasises a play-based, child-centred curriculum, concerned with the holistic development of all children. Within the EYFS (DfE, 2025), there is an emphasis on requirements around adults supporting transitions to school for children, through building positive relationships and partnerships, and the sharing of information to ensure continuity between settings.

Additionally, non-statutory guidance including Development Matters (DfE, 2023a) support practitioners in early years and Reception class settings to implement principles within the EYFS, especially around transitions to school for children. Development Matters (DfE, 2023a) guide practitioners' pedagogical practice within early years settings, to ensure children develop, focusing on learning, pedagogy and observations of children against developmental outcomes and learning trajectories. This includes children's development of communication, independence and emotional resilience. Development Matters (DfE, 2023a) also focus on

characteristics of effective learning for children, as well as their dispositions to learn. Furthermore, the guidance places emphasis on playing, exploring and active learning opportunities for children.

Whilst the EYFS (DfE, 2025) statutory framework and Development Matters (DfE, 2023a) guidance emphasise a child-centred, play-based approach with collaborative and relational support, early years guidance also includes developmental expectations and assessment requirements embedded within it. For example, there is an emphasis on children meeting early learning goals, undertaking a Reception Baseline Assessment, EYFS profiles, and notions of 'school readiness' expectations, such as establishing routine and structure for children in preparation for formal learning. Balancing differing commitments from curriculum guidance and statutory requirements often creates tension for practitioners in early years practice, such as considering children's dispositions and child-centred environments, with 'school-ready' and developmental notions of learning, assessment and outcome-drive agendas.

Here, it is evident that often, adults' views of transition to school in practice are shaped by policy structures such as early years frameworks, rather than by the lived experiences of children with SEND. This creates tension for parents/ caregivers and practitioners who promote systemic and structural influences through school settings and wider policy influences, which often reinforce school readiness-based agendas for children, rather than considering child-centred, relational practices and approaches. This has been reiterated in inclusion literature by Ainscow et al. (2006), Norwich (2014) and Glazzard (2013), who all emphasise the dichotomy between inclusion and curriculum agendas that highlight inclusion of children with SEND, and a political strategy within UK schools to drive standards, set targets and assessment and outcome-focussed teaching. Rix et al. (2013) emphasised this further, suggesting that an outcome-drive policy discourse often creates tension between focussing on outputs and support for vulnerable children. It is evident to see that adults' perceptions of transition to school experiences for children with SEND have been shaped by these policy and outcome-driven discourses, as discussed in section 2.6 (page 47). The next section explores how schools shape, develop and understand transition to school policies and processes for children with SEND.

### **2.5.4 Transition to School Policy**

Bakopoulou (2022) and Wythe (2022) argue there is a lack of existing government guidelines around effective transition to school practices, with no current statutory requirement for schools or educational settings to offer transition experiences for children in English school settings. This is surprising given that many government reports and policies emphasise the importance of transition into school. This means the transition to school support for children with SEND differs by local authority, often creating a postcode lottery affect for families and children with SEND.

Transition to school policy, as interpreted and implemented by schools themselves from national policy and guidance, often focusses on children being 'school ready'. For example, Bold Beginnings (Ofsted, 2017) sets examples of good and outstanding practice in primary schools, as well as good practice in school readiness (Ofsted, 2014). This mirrors a recent update from the Labour Government, under their 'Plan for Change' (2024) proposals (DfE, 2025b). Within this document, the government reiterate key milestones for children, with one target aiming for 75% of five-year-olds in England to be 'school ready' by 2028. The report implies children should be ready to learn and meet a good level of development in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP). According to the plan, this means assessing children's development across their language, personal, social and emotional development, as well as maths and literacy. Additionally, the plan suggests that to be 'school ready', children should have a 'growing independence', are able to 'build relationships and connections, physical development and healthy routines' (DfE, 2025b). The 'Plan for Change' (DfE, 2025b) report suggests that since the pandemic, more children have started school without basic development, and due to this, class teachers cannot focus on teaching, which impacts all children in the class.

This focus by the current government demonstrates the discourse around 'school readiness' as a developmental notion of transition to school. It places emphasis and responsibility on children to meet developmental outcomes and benchmarks, mirroring the medical model discourse of disability, as already discussed. Conceptual and empirical perspectives around 'school readiness' have been discussed further in section 2.6.1 (page 48) as well as how developmental policies have influenced adult priorities around the transition to school (see section 2.6.2 – 2.6.5, pages 52-70).

Even though early ideologies, legislation, frameworks and guidance highlighted above try to place child-centred, collaborative discourses as central to transition support, it is evident that developmental, assessment and 'school ready' philosophies like the Plan for Change (2025) agenda take precedent in current English school settings. This formalisation of expectations for children starting school, like being able to count, read or write their name, rather than adapting the school system to meet individual needs could impact children with SEND in their transition to school. This has been further exacerbated with structural pressures of 'recovery' curriculums from Covid-19, as highlighted in the next section.

### **2.5.5 Covid-19 Policy: 'Recovery Curriculum'**

The importance of transition to school for all children has been heightened with the impact of the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic. From March 2020, the UK and many other countries around the world went into a full lockdown. This meant strict rules and regulations established by the UK Conservative Government mandated for everyone to stay at home and forced all schools to close or shut down. The lockdowns lasted for many months, and happened several times throughout 2020-2021, which meant schools went through a very unstable period of closing and reopening every few months.

According to a European Commission Report by Van Laere et al. (2021) which explored 'the quality of early childhood education and care in a global crisis: first lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic', findings suggest the Covid-19 outbreak has had a profound impact on the lives of children and families throughout the world. The report states that in almost all countries across the world, it is children who are among the main victims of the Covid-19 pandemic, not only affected by socio-economic challenges of the crisis on their families but also affected by the public health measures taken to contain the spread of the virus. Within the report, researchers also discovered 'the rights and needs of children to education, play, contact with peers and the use of outdoor areas have not been sufficiently considered when determining policy measures during the pandemic and especially during lockdowns' (Van Laere et al., 2021: 69). The report went on to say that the detrimental effects of Covid-19 on young children's development and education have

been greatest among a range of people, including those who are disadvantaged or in vulnerable situations (Yoshikawa et al., 2020).

There were unprecedented interruptions to children in early years settings within the UK, and opportunities for physical transitions into primary schools for children starting in September 2020 were impeded. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2020) estimated 1.5 billion children throughout 190 countries were being home-schooled due to a rapid attempt to reduce the spread of the Covid-19 worldwide pandemic. Furthermore, only 7% of children in the UK aged between two-four years attended any early years' provision during this time, which increased to 17% when the lockdown ended in June (Pascal et al., 2020). Even though children do not have to access nursery before starting school within the UK education system, a high proportion of children do access private or school-based preschool nurseries or childminders, with 1.54 million registered places for children in 2022 (data from 2020 is unavailable) (DfE, 2021).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK Government regularly changed policy and guidelines for practitioners in school settings. For example, there was much ambiguity around school closures and re-openings, social distancing measures, mask-wearing and classroom modifications, in line with public health measures (Bakopoulou, 2022; Wythe, 2022). During this time, some children were deemed 'vulnerable' by the government and included children who were registered with a social worker, were looked after, or had an EHCP (DfE, 2022b). Those children who were deemed vulnerable were able to still attend school if they could, through smaller group provisions within school settings called 'bubbles'. Vulnerable children, including those with a recognised SEND, could attend the small group 'bubbles' at their school setting if parents/ caregivers wanted to use this provision. However, attending school was not mandatory, and many children with SEND remained at home for the lockdown period, with only 11% of those children considered in the vulnerable category attending school between March and May 2020 (National Audit Office, 2021). Additionally, the government failed to include those children with SEND who do not have a social worker or an EHCP (or those who may be going through the process of obtaining an EHCP), and therefore, a high proportion of children and

their families may have been excluded from vital support they needed at this unique and challenging time.

Several studies suggest Covid-19 school closures may have significant impacts on children for several years; the lost time for children in nursery settings and lack of engagement with other children and/ or family members could deprive them of vital developmental opportunities needed at the beginning of school (Andrew et al., 2020; Nelson et al., 2021). However, an Ofsted report (2020) claimed that not all children with SEND had negative experiences during lockdown; some benefited from smaller class sizes and support, whilst others found home and remote learning more enjoyable. This was a similar finding within the most recent Covid-19 Inquiry (Verian, 2025), as well as research by Ludgate et al. (2022) around home-school experiences of children with SEND during Covid-19.

Other studies suggested the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted established early years routines and transition processes in Reception class settings in English school settings (Nelson et al. 2021; Tracey et al., 2022). Around early 2021, the UK government announced a focus on a 'recovery' or 'catch-up' curriculum for all children. This was established to mitigate the lost learning at the time and included a focus on expanding existing programmes of small group and individual tutoring, including funding for language development and training for early years practitioners and teachers (Tracey et al., 2022). Schools and practitioners were directed to focus on teaching core subjects and suggested leaders were worried about the impact on phonics knowledge, verbal skills, reading and mathematical skills on younger children. Nelson et al. (2021) found that, due to external accountability and pressures, senior leaders within mainstream settings prioritised literacy and numeracy catch-up over the arts and humanities, and as such enrichment activities ended. Additionally, it was recognised that children were less prepared for the transition to school in 2019-2021, both academically and emotionally, with schools finding it difficult to secure specialist support for children's emotional and mental-health needs. This was due to a lack of funding, capacity and expertise.

The emotional and mental health of children with SEND was further acknowledged in an Ofsted (2021) report, where children and young people with SEND reported feeling lonely and isolated at this time, and highlighted difficulties such as developing

social connections due to missing out on the usual transition activities. This raises questions around the government 'catch-up' policy, which neglected the social and emotional dispositional learning of children at this time, especially for children with SEND. Through listening to the views and lived experiences of children themselves at this time would have ensured the right support in transitioning to school post a worldwide pandemic.

The emphasis on 'recovery' curriculums due to Covid-19 exacerbated the tension between developmental, outcome driven agendas and academic priorities, and child-centred, relational approaches to transition to school. For children with SEND, this was problematic. Principles central to the EYFS such as relational and emotional support and play-based curriculums were often deprioritised. This was due to the focus on catch-up and 'recovery' targets from government pressures. For children with SEND, these priorities intensified and exacerbated existing vulnerabilities; it reduced their opportunities for relational engagement, familiarisation with the new school environment, a collaborative approach between children, parents/ caregivers and practitioners, and their agency and voice in their own transition to school experiences. Covid-19 'recovery' policies demonstrate how systemic priorities at the time shaped and influenced adults' priorities at the time, which impacted the transition experiences for children with SEND.

Whilst policy frameworks discussed above emphasise inclusion and child-centred practices, they also frame transition to school through developmental benchmarks and outcomes, which shape how children's experiences are interpreted and supported in practice. Furthermore, it is evident that the policy frameworks construct transition to school for children with SEND primarily through systemic and structural pressures, expectations and priorities of adults around the child. This includes policymakers, school leaders, practitioners and parents/ caregivers. As a result, literature around the transition to school for children with SEND is dominated by adults' perceptions, understanding and experiences of transition to school for their children, with a paucity of research around the voices and lived experiences of children with SEND. To understand the transition to school experiences fully for children with SEND, and in line with the biopsychosocial model of disability, the BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), and children's rights framework (UNCRC, 1989),

the next sections will consider the perspectives of adults in supporting the transition to school (section 2.6), and the voices and experiences of children with SEND (section 2.7).

## ***2.6 Understanding Transition: From Developmental Processes to Lived Experiences***

As highlighted above, macro-level policies and systemic structures within English school settings related to the inclusion and transition to school for children with SEND continues to prioritise and drive a developmental discourse of transition to school. This has been seen in light of post-pandemic 'recovery' curriculums.

Current research in the field of transition to school and how it has been experienced by children with SEND, parents/ caregivers and practitioners offers a broader and more relational understanding. Parents/ caregivers and practitioners often experience transitions for their child through their own positions in multiple systems of their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This includes influences from across the home, early years settings, school environments, and wider systems such as health and care services involved with the child and family, and policy frameworks that shape provision for children with SEND.

Therefore, within current research around transition to school, it is evident that parent/ caregiver and practitioner experiences of transition to school for their children with SEND often dominate discussions, and reflect institutional responsibilities of transition within schools, including the coordination of transition to school and the expectations for their children.

Whilst policy discourse often prioritises outcome-driven and developmental agendas for transition to school, there has also been a plethora of empirical and contemporary research that emphasises transition to school as a relational, ecological, systemic experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, research demonstrates how transition to school has been shaped by the context of the educational settings the children enter, policies that shape the settings, relational interactions and support between key people, and lived experiences (Dockett et al., 2014; Peters, 2010). This relational ecology lens is particularly helpful for understanding how adults convey transition to school experiences for their children, as it shifts the discourse focus from individual readiness for children with SEND, to the role of interconnected

relationships, contextual school settings, and wider structural systems and influences that adults describe as shaping children's early school experiences.

### **2.6.1 Relational Ecology of Transition**

It is clear from current literature that understandings of educational transitions to school for children with SEND challenge a developmental, readiness-based belief, to more relational and ecological perspectives, that consider the lived experiences of those within the transition process. Definitions of transition to school highlight it as a multilayered process across different systems around the child and supported by relationships between key people.

Many of the definitions of educational transitions within the literature involve not only children themselves, but also families, practitioners and educators and the wider community within the transition process (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979; 1986; 1993; Dockett et al., 2014; Fabian and Dunlop, 2007). It is considered that such transitions are multiple and simultaneous, not only impacting the individual transitioning to a new environment, but also dynamics within their families (Jindal-Snape, 2016), their friends and peers (Rienties and Nolan, 2014), and others within their immediate and wider environment too, for example, practitioners, health and care professionals. This is echoed within the literature, where a high proportion of educational transition research is viewed through a social-ecological lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979; 1986; 1993; Jindal-Snape, 2016). Many studies that implement this perspective claim that a child's transition to primary school is connected to the ecosystems around them, which include their immediate and wider social environments, for example, family, friends, peers, practitioners, community, and wider governmental and systemic influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979; 1986; 1993; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006; Dockett and Perry, 2004; Dunlop, 2014; Jindal-Snape, 2016; Rienties and Nolan, 2014).

These relational characteristics within the transition to school for children with SEND have been reinforced by Dockett et al. (2014) and describe them as a range of processes that occur within a child's environment. Dockett et al. (2014) use a bridge metaphor to highlight transition as a two-way and reciprocal processes between the child, parents/ caregivers and practitioners, supporting one another in the child's transitional journey. The focus from Dockett et al. (2014) is on the development of

relationships, children's identities and understandings across contexts in the transition to school process. This is like that of Fabian and Dunlop (2002) who suggest transitions are significant events that involve changes in relationships of key people, identities, expectations in and across different contexts.

The idea of a process of transition as a synchronous journey for a child involves adaptations to different contexts and changes in their immediate and wider environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979; 1986; 1993). Children may also experience changes in interpersonal relationships within these different and new environments (Jindal-Snape, 2010; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979; 1986; 1993). Dunlop (2018) agrees with viewing transition as a synchronous journey, claiming transitions are ubiquitous, being ever-present from children's early lives, and continuous throughout their life journeys and experiences along the way.

Similarly, the definition of transition to school provided by UNICEF (2012) claims transition as 'children moving into and adjusting to new learning environments, families learning to work within a sociocultural system (i.e. education) and schools making provisions for admitting new children into the system' (p. 8). This mirrors a biopsychosocial model of disability, suggesting that both children and environments should adapt to support and meet the children's individual needs. Rogoff (2003) describes these changes in social and cultural processes as communal events which shape the development of a child. Rogoff (2003) suggested that children are active participants in their learning and development, with a focus on the processes of transitions. For example, how children may transition to school through aspects of learning such as social participation and developing relationships, as well as the individual child's involvements in an activity like transitions. This focus is less on change in the individual children and more in theirs and the community's influences in which they develop, suggesting the transition process is not in isolation and individual to only the child, but also influenced and shaped by others within the child's community.

Thus far, the ecological definitions of transition to school within current literature contest the notion of developmental, school-readiness agendas (as discussed above in section 2.5), especially for children with SEND (Brooks and Murray, 2016; Neaum, 2016; Wickett, 2017). Findings from recent studies show that placing emphasis on

children to be 'school-ready' can often have a negative impact on children and their families, adding further pressure to the transition to school experience (Brooks and Murrery, 2016; Lynch and Soni, 2021; Neaum, 2016; Peleman et al., 2019; Wickett, 2017).

At present, there is no nationally agreed definition for what 'school readiness' means for children with SEND starting school. Several examples within current literature include ensuring children are ready to leave their caregiver; they can communicate effectively; they can reach baseline assessments; and that they are independent learners with the ability to go to the toilet or feed themselves (DfE, 2025; Fane et al., 2016; Packer et al., 2021). Scott-Little et al. (2006) suggests school readiness as a 'multi-faceted construct', which comprises of skills and knowledge considered necessary for children to acquire to benefit from schooling, as well as a prescription of how and when children should be expected to demonstrate the skills and knowledge (McDowall-Clark, 2017).

What these studies that focus on developmental views of transition collectively reveal is a deeper issue which significantly increases the risk of children with SEND being left behind or excluded from their new school environment. Shakespeare (2017) would challenge the notion and definitions of transition above that focus on developmental and readiness agendas, claiming that universal definitions for transitions are based on normative assumptions that could marginalise and exclude children with SEND. It places emphasis significantly on the individual child and their abilities to meet a set of prescribed criteria, rather than considering their skills, strengths, dispositions, school and home context, quality of support and other wider structural and systemic challenges, such as outside agency support and inclusive school policies. For example, an autistic child may never use spoken language (in simple English or using signs as expected within the definition above) and may never meet some of the communication and language expectations of starting school but does not mean they lack an understanding or are unable to communicate. As Yu and Chen (2024) claim, often social communication encompasses communication beyond language, such as face, body, intonation, touch, silence and many other examples. For autistic children, having a broader understanding of the way the unique way they may communicate and interact is vital for practitioners and policy

makers creating an inclusive environment for starting school. This is the same for children with physical disabilities who also may never meet the physical development expectations in their transition to school but are competent and capable in other ways.

These views were also shared by McDowall-Clark (2017) and Ahtola et al. (2011), who emphasise the importance of the ecological systems and environment around the child when they start school, and suggest that 'readiness' should be the responsibility of the systems that support children's transitions to school. Rather than focus on the individual child meeting expected standards or outcomes, other factors such as family, school and the community in which a child lives and develops should interact to provide a more contextually appropriate assessment (Dockett and Perry, 2009). This is especially significant for children with SEND who may never meet ready-expectations and reinforced by the claim that 'children do not grow and develop in isolation- they are members of families and communities. These contexts have to be considered in any assessment of readiness for school' (Dockett and Perry, 2008: 274).

This conceptual shift in thinking around the transition to school as relational rather than developmental is particularly significant for children with SEND, whose transitions to school cannot be understood solely in terms of their developmental readiness and/ or their academic competence. Instead, their transition to school experiences are often navigated with relational interactions with parents/ caregivers, peers and practitioners, and frequently shaped by systemic and structural conditions within educational settings, such as inclusion policies and outside agency support. Downes et al. (2018) claim that if a transition is viewed only as a linear event in isolation, there is a likelihood that complex meanings, implications, and issues around the child could be missed during their transition. Children do not function in isolation from the systems around them, and it is the influence and changes of and within families, communities, and peers that shape their early learning and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979; 1986; 1993; Dockett and Perry, 2007; Dunlop, 2018; Fabian and Dunlop, 2007; Rogoff, 2003; Vogler et al., 2008).

Given the numerous definitions and ideas of transition from various perspectives within past and current literature, as well as considering the study methodology,

participants and ethical commitment, there is a duty to clarify what transition to school means specifically for this study. In line with the study aims and values of exploring the varying lived realities and experiences of transition to school for children with SEND, as well as believing children have the right to express their voices, it was vital that the children in this study were situated at the centre of the transition process. As this study is exploring the experience of children with SEND transitioning to school during Covid-19, the environmental landscape must also be considered, as changes to and within the environmental landscape and systems surrounding the child influenced their experiences and transitions to school. Therefore, for this study, the term 'transition for children with SEND' considers:

- The child with SEND at the centre of the transition process, which focusses significantly on their views, lived experiences, strengths and learning dispositions.
- A journey over time.
- Co-construction with parents/ caregivers, practitioners, peers, and the wider community in which the child inhabits.
- Relational understandings of transition to school.
- Within and across environments and contexts of space and time, such as Covid-19.

Positioning the child with SEND as central to their transition to school emphasises their lived experiences are shaped by not only their strengths, dispositions, emotions and meaning-making, but also the significance of relationships that surround, support and shape their experiences. Within a relational, ecological stance, the children's lived experiences develop through connections that are co-constructed with adults and peers across home, school and community (such as wider outside agency support) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This relational perspective is especially important for children with SEND, whose transition to school experiences are highly impacted by the quality of communication, collaboration, and continuity across and between mesosystems of support. Accordingly, relational connections between the child with SEND and others in their ecological systems become an essential aspect of the experiences of transition to school. To understand how these relational

connections shape the transition to school experiences for children with SEND, it is necessary to explore the role of mesosystemic relationships in the transition to school, from parents/ caregivers and practitioner perspectives. Children's voices and experiences will follow in section 2.7 (page 70).

### **2.6.2 Mesosystemic Relationships**

According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), adult perspectives on the transition to school experiences for children are shaped by what they call 'mesosystem' interactions. Mesosystemic interactions are relationships between home and school, and they play a vital part of shaping and influencing the transition to school process for children with SEND. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) emphasise the importance of these relationships in shaping and influencing children's learning, routines and support. As Dockett and Perry (2011) highlight, engagement, relationships and involvement of the family and school community is a key factor in ensuring children's successful engagement with their school in their transition. The emphasis on positive and supportive relationships is also reiterated within early legislation, early years frameworks and SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) as an overarching principle for supporting children with their transition to school, suggesting that a joined-up approach between home and school is vital for supporting children with SEND.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) confirm within the BST, that without trusted, reciprocal relationships, which they call proximal processes, within a child's context or environment, development will not happen, regardless of the child's own characteristics or their environment. Consequently, it is clear within current literature discussed below that the quality of these relationships between children with SEND, parents/ caregivers and practitioners often influence transition to school support, and how they collaborate, communicate and trust can act as an inhibitor or a facilitator towards the transition experiences to primary school for children with SEND.

Many studies in transition to school research highlight adult relationships as an important structural support mechanism for ensuring children with SEND have positive transitions to school. A study by Schürer et al. (2025) explored how twenty-five Danish and twelve Australian preschool children experienced the transition to primary school, through the bioecological framework of Bronfenbrenner and Morris

(1998; 2006). In their study, it was found that reciprocal, sustained interactions with and between adults in the transition to school process was central to shaping their child's positive transition to school outcome and experiences. Similarly, results from a study carried out by Visković and Višnjić-Jevtić (2020) with parents, early years and primary school teachers in Chile suggested that collaboration between one another was significantly important in the transition process for their child. Likewise, a study by Wilder and Lillvist (2021) explored parents' and teachers' meaning making of children's learning in transitions from preschool to school, for children aged five to seven years old with intellectual disability. Here, the researchers found that there was a common perception of trusting relationships between key people in the transition to school. Furthermore, collaboration between home and preschool/school was significant, and strategies including a book or diary was used between the settings, but also other creative more direct ways for collaboration were used. For example, text messaging and Facetime calls during the school day between support staff and parents during a direct learning activity. Findings from this study concluded there was a consensus between home and preschool/school were seen as very important but not always achieved.

Other studies, including Einarsdóttir et al. (2008) demonstrated collaboration between parents and practitioners through more formal channels of transition to school, that included specialists such as outside agencies and other health and care professionals. This collaborative process for children with SEND extended over a 12-month period prior to the children starting school, to ensure successful transitions for their children.

The importance and role of transition teams was also a key finding by Marsh et al. (2017), who found that communication between schools and families in the transition process for autistic children had a positive impact. Similarly, Martin et al. (2019) also identified factors like timely preparations with all stakeholders as an essential factor in preparing autistic students for transition to school.

What these studies collectively reveal is the dominance of adults' relationships, voices and structural support as a key component in the transition to school for children with SEND, yet very little input from the children themselves in what would help and support their transition to school. Nuske et al. (2019) demonstrates this

point further, where they found that the most effective strategies for supporting the transition to school experiences of autistic children included individualising transition supports, explaining the transition process to parents and promoting communication between schools and external agencies. The role of multi-agency support in the transition to school for children with SEND has been explored in section 2.6.4 (page 64), which also draws on the impact of Covid-19.

The studies above highlight the importance of collaboration between parents/ caregivers and practitioners in the transition to school for children with SEND, and includes sharing information regarding children's individualised needs, and coordinated planning between both home and school, in a variety of ways. Nevertheless, it is evident to see that structural support created and coordinated by adults for autistic children, and other types of SEND, often take precedent in the transition to school, neglecting the lived experiences and desires of children themselves. Consequently, this has implications not only for children with SEND and their transition to school, but the context and environment in which they transition.

As evident within literature below, systemic and structural supports in the transition to school process for children with SEND are often created and organised by adults and can often be fragile and unstable. Changes in communication patterns across or between educational settings usually hinder or support the creation of a trusting partnership and collaboration. According to Balduzzi et al. (2019), the establishment of 'reciprocal and trusty relationships between parents and teachers is considered to be crucial for the positive outcome of children's settling in into the new environment' (p. 14). Balduzzi et al. (2019) suggests this communication is often more formal, unidirectional, and transactional in nature when children start school, which is usually established and coordinated by the school, like the findings of the Einarsdóttir et al. (2008) study. This often gives parents limited opportunities to exchange informal information, views or seek advice from practitioners around their children's transition to school experience.

To create positive relationships and a collaborative approach between the key people in the transition to school for children with SEND, there needs to be a mutual level of trust and understanding between everyone (Balduzzi et al., 2019). This forms the basis for developing strong relationships and collaboration between children,

parents/ caregivers, practitioners and other professionals in the transition to school process, which in turn ensures the right information is shared between one another and the right support can be put in place for children.

Despite the rhetoric around the importance of collaboration and partnership in the transition to school, parents/ caregivers and practitioners often have different priorities around the support for their child. In the study by Visković and Višnjić-Jevtić (2020) of preschool children's experiences of starting school in Chile (as highlighted above), it was found that the purpose of collaboration for parents/ caregivers around their child's transition to school differed to that of the practitioners. Families of children transitioning to school were primarily concerned with emotional relationships and support within the educational setting they were transitioning into, whereas the practitioners and educational community were focussed on educational outcomes and the social development of children transitioning into their setting.

Other studies concluded that differing adult priorities often impact the parent/ caregiver-practitioner relationship from the outset, which results in failing to establish reciprocal and trusting relationships and collaboration in supporting their child's transition to school (Arndt et al., 2013; Correia and Marques-Pinto, 2016; Rothe et al., 2014; Wickett, 2017; Wilder and Lillvist, 2018).

Balduzzi et al. (2019) highlighted this case further, claiming challenges connected to establishing trusting relationships between parents and professionals were particularly significant and noticeable when children and families from vulnerable groups were involved. This finding was supported by studies including Wilder and Lillvist (2018) and Connelly and Gersch (2016). Both studies found that the voices of parents of children with intellectual disabilities and autism were often marginalised in the transition to school process, and the main purpose of communication for practitioners was to gain knowledge of the child's healthcare and disability needs. Within both studies, parents reflected on their role as having to 'shout' for the rights of their children and raised concerns about not being listened to regarding the needs, and strengths in some cases, of their child. Often, the active involvement of parents/ caregivers as advocates for their child's individual needs is required to ensure they get access to appropriate support in their transition to school (Fox et al., 2023). However, for parents/ caregivers, this can become particularly challenging and

detrimental on relationships with practitioners, due to feeling marginalised and isolated in the transition process for their child with SEND.

These feelings of isolation were found in the study by Wilder and Lillvist (2018), who found that knowledge about children's learning, communication and their everyday functioning was often missed, or gathered from other sources, such as preschool practitioners. This made parents/ caregivers of children with disabilities feel pushed out of the transition to school process. Similarly, Dockett et al. (2011), in their study with two organisations in New South Wales, Australia, responsible for delivering early childhood intervention programmes for families found that some practitioner comments made parents/ caregivers look and feel like they lacked knowledge about the education system and how best to support their child. However, in the same study, they also found that parental expertise around their child's individual needs was also recognised and welcomed by some schools, and this empowered parents/ caregivers and partnerships.

Knowing children and their individual needs is a vital part of the transition to school process for parents/ caregivers and practitioners, especially for children with SEND. This ensures schools and practitioners can make necessary reasonable adjustments within the school and classroom setting and put the right support in place for the child's individual needs, to ensure an inclusive school environment (DfE & DoH, 2015). From a parent/ caregiver perspective, knowledge of their child's needs and strengths should be considered as an essential part of the transition to school for children with SEND, including what is best to support their child in this process (Connelly and Gersch, 2016; Wilder and Lillvist, 2021).

In the study by Wilder and Lillvist (2021), it was concluded that parents trusted the professionalism of the practitioners and strived for working collaboratively to support their child starting school. In comparison, in a study by Connelly and Gersch (2016) researchers carried out semi-structured interviews with six parents of children transitioning to school with ASD in Ireland. In this study, it was found that this level of trust was not apparent between parents and practitioners and accordingly affected the relationships between parents and professionals in the transition to school process for their children with ASD.

Even though studies suggest that parents/ caregivers feel they have implicit knowledge on their child's needs and strengths (Connelly and Gersch, 2016), which, when shared with practitioners, supports children with SEND in their transition to school, some parents/ caregivers feel an increased demand on this knowledge and ability to support their child and their individual needs during their transition to school (Hutchinson et al., 2014). In some cases, this challenge often feels exacerbated due to varied perceptions from parent/ caregivers that the expertise and knowledge of preschool and school practitioners in supporting their children with disabilities in their transition to school is varied. Research highlights how some practitioners demonstrate capability and awareness in understanding and supporting different needs of children in their transition to school, whilst others show insufficient skills and lacking in confidence and knowledge of individual needs of children (Sulek et al., 2019; Wilder and Lillvist, 2021).

These findings around practitioner skills and knowledge in supporting children with SEND in their transition to school are also supported by Starr et al. (2016). All participants in their study, including parents, teachers and outside agency professionals all claimed teachers were lacking in knowledge and skills to support children with ASD in their transition to school. This impacted their confidence and interrupted the transition to school process from the very beginning for children with ASD.

Yildirim-Haciibrahimoğlu and Kargın (2017) concurred with this point that teachers had limited knowledge about individual educational needs of children before and during the transition to school, due to limited time, lack of knowledge about the child and their needs, insufficient training in SEND and inadequate support. A study by Curle et al. (2017) also highlighted a lack of skills from practitioners when supporting children with disabilities in their transition to school, however, they also found that practitioners commented that parents/ caregivers also lacked skills to support their children in this transition process.

From the literature and studies exemplified above, it is evident to see differing priorities of parents/ caregivers and practitioners in the transition to school experience for children with SEND are intensified by positions of authority and expertise. Often, parent/ caregivers' knowledge of their child's individual needs can

be marginalised in favour of professional expertise. The studies included above highlight the importance and fragility of the collaborative process between home and school for children with SEND, and often parents/ caregivers' contributions and collaboration in their transition to school were sometimes undervalued. This undermines parental/ caregiver trust in the support for their children's transitions and can be left feeling nonessential to decision-making processes in their transition to school.

Emerging post-pandemic research highlights how relational strains were amplified by Covid-19 (Bakopoulou, 2022; Ofsted, 2020; Wythe, 2022). Limited access to school settings, reduced opportunities for interaction, and heightened institutional pressures and restrictions destabilised mesosystemic connections that typically supported transition to school experiences for children with SEND.

An Ofsted Report (2021) suggested that since the disruptions of Covid-19, neither the relationships between key people, nor the SEND system in English schools that supports children with SEND in their transition to school, are robust enough. This strain on mesosystemic relationships between key people supporting the transition for children with SEND can be seen in two recent studies. According to professionals in recent studies by Bakopoulou (2022) and Wythe (2022), the relationships between parents/ caregivers and practitioners, and children with SEND and practitioners has been significantly impacted by challenges associated with Covid-19.

Bakopoulou (2022) recently carried out a study to explore the views of professionals from early years settings, primary schools and children's centres around the transition practices for children with SEND, and how these were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. According to participants in the study, relationship-building between children with SEND, families and professionals was significantly impacted at the time of Covid-19, due to a reduction and disappearance of face-to-face communication. In the study, Bakopoulou (2022) reported early years professionals conveyed their concerns around a lack of communication with children and families, especially for recording the children's development and progress, and that 'bubbles' (see definition of bubbles on page 44) challenged face-to-face communication with parents/ caregivers and children. Concerns were also raised regarding the lack of contact with parents/ caregivers, especially around restricted opportunities to

explain, inform, reassure and encourage parental engagement and involvement in their child's transition to school. The professionals noted that due to a reduction and disappearance in face-to-face communication, the children with SEND lacked familiarity with practitioners and peers. Practitioners also recalled their attempts to develop relationships with children through online learning platforms and using strategies such as video tours of the school, welcome video messages and introducing staff, as well as class teachers holding singing and reading sessions with children.

Similarly, a study by Wythe (2022) explored practitioners' views on the implications of the Covid-19 restrictions on the transition from early years to Key Stage 1 (KS1) for children with SEND. Here, Wythe (2022) noted the challenges posed by practitioners in collaborating with parents in the transition process and found that practitioners placed importance on pre-transitional collaboration with parents. This allowed them to learn about the needs of children, as well as gain knowledge on children's interests and abilities. Practitioners in the Wythe (2022) study used tools such as Tapestry (an online learning journal used in early years and school settings) to communicate with parents/ caregivers, particularly due to the restrictions around face-to-face communication.

Findings from both Bakopoulou (2022) and Wythe's (2022) studies suggest that even though online platforms were used to support children's transitions to school to develop relationships with children and families, it cannot be assumed that all children accessed online platforms in positive ways to collaborate and develop strong relationships, with potential for excluding some children with SEND. This was a similar finding in the Ludgate et al. (2022) study and has been explored further in section 2.6.5 (page 69).

What these studies above demonstrate is the success of transition to school for children with SEND is often conceptualised through the quality of relationships between the parents/ caregivers and practitioners of the school setting. This emphasises that from an adults' perspective, communication, reciprocity and collaboration are significant support mechanisms in the transition to school for children with SEND, yet also highlights the fragility of these relationships, and divergences in transition to school priorities. Whilst practitioners' priorities tend to be

concerned with children's preparedness and routines, educational progress, classroom adjustments, and multi-agency coordination (which stem from policy and systemic pressures), parents/ caregivers are more concerned about whether their child feels emotionally supported and their specific needs are understood. This demonstrates that even within adult perspectives, relationships within the transition to school are recognised and understood in different ways. These differences associated with emotional and relational aspects of transition to school for children with SEND were intensified during Covid-19 and therefore require consideration. The following section considers adults' perceptions around the emotional and relational support in the transition to school for their children with SEND.

### **2.6.3 Emotional and Relational Elements of Transition**

Studies consistently demonstrate that parents/ caregivers of children with SEND often worry most about whether their child will feel emotionally safe, develop friendships with their peers and be socially included in their transition to school (Connelly and Gersch, 2016; Wilder and Lillvist, 2021). For some parents/ caregivers of children with SEND, concerns around social exclusion by peers is heightened (Wilder and Lillvist, 2021). This leads to some parents/ caregivers being cautious or secretive about their child's individual needs, due to fears of them being excluded from social interactions and friendships with their peers (Connelly and Gersch, 2016). In the study by Connelly and Gersch (2016), parents discussed their fears of their child being socially excluded in their transition to school due to the stigma associated with their autistic needs. This resulted in parents being secretive about their child's diagnosis, for fear of them not developing social connections in their new school environment.

The social and emotional concerns of parents/ caregivers in their child's transition to school has been heightened since the Covid-19 pandemic. In an Ofsted (2020) Covid-19 briefing with early years providers, parents/ caregivers and practitioners were significantly more concerned with the child's social and emotional development, and the impact of Covid-19, rather than academic learning. This is like the findings of Visković and Višnjić-Jevtić (2020), who found parents/ caregivers are concerned with the social and emotional impact of transition for their children then they were regarding their academic development, such as language and communication skills.

Despite practitioners in primary school often prioritising structural and systemic transitions for children (as discussed in 2.6.2 mesosystemic relationships), their response to children's needs and their transition to school during the pandemic was mixed. A study by Bakopoulou (2022) explored the experiences of transition to school for children, including those with SEND, through an adult's perspective. Through a mixed methods study, Bakopoulou (2022) considered the perspectives from professionals such as early years leaders, and head teachers, who expressed a sense of relief about the fact that children's emotional wellbeing did not seem affected or as affected as they feared it might have done following a national lockdown. However, they reiterated that access to 'bubbles' provided some support, routine and structure for some children with SEND in their transition to school at this time, with some participants reporting that smaller groups enabled practitioners to support children in a smoother transition to school.

However, in the study by Wythe (2022), who explored the implications of the Covid-19 restrictions on the transition from early years to Key Stage 1 (KS1) for children with SEND, practitioners identified significant social and emotional challenges of children, linked to the pandemic. This included children's reluctance to take risks in their new environment, hesitancy in exploring new situations, and challenges around following new rules and routines within the classroom and school environment. According to the adults' included in the study, these challenges resulted in children depending extensively on additional intervention to support their social and emotional skills.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate practitioner perspectives around transition to school for children with SEND vary depending on the context, professional confidence and local support structures in their school environment in response to Covid-19 and raises questions around what this experience was like for children with SEND themselves.

As highlighted above, the return to school after Covid-19 intensified the social and emotional tensions for some children with SEND starting school, yet national recovery priorities and policies focussed on the up-skilling of children due to the decrease in children's formal learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Nicholls et al. (2020) carried out a YouGov study with 528 early years and primary school

professionals, and findings suggested 43% of children entering school were not 'school-ready'. Professionals in this study commented on the children's inability to acquire skills such as being able to listen, develop basic numeracy skills and hold a pencil during the time before starting school. This study, and other similar studies in the field, such as Nelson et al. (2021) suggested that due to external accountability and pressures, senior leaders within mainstream settings prioritised literacy and numeracy catch-up over the arts and humanities, including social and emotional support. Nelson et al. (2021) also found that children were less prepared for the transition to school in 2019-2021, both academically and emotionally, with schools finding it difficult to secure specialist support for children's emotional and mental-health needs, due to a lack of funding, capacity and expertise in trauma-informed support.

Similarly, a study on 'School Starters' by Bowyer-Crane et al. (2021) highlighted concerns around children's personal, social and emotional skills, as well as deficits in communication and language development. Professionals reported children needed more support when entering school in the Autumn Term 2020 than previous pre-pandemic cohorts, with over two-thirds of the professionals raising concerns about disruptions to children's education, such as attainment, closing the gap and learning regression with the EYFS. The practitioners noted one of their main concerns was the children's personal, social, emotional development, and 'ensuring that they are happy and settled in school and are able to discuss their emotions, why they are feeling that way, and ways to help them to feel better.' (p.65). Within the same paragraph, was the focus on literacy and phonics catch-up and recovery post Covid-19. Similarly, according to a Covid-19 briefing to school's report (Ofsted, 2020) nearly all primary school leaders said that they were prioritising reading and mathematics in a post-pandemic recovery curriculum. Furthermore, there was a strong emphasis on phonics using catch-up programmes and interventions such as afternoon repetition of content that had been taught in phonics sessions in the morning for pupils who needed this.

Consequently, the variation in social and emotional priorities of parents/ caregivers and practitioners is significantly evident in post-Covid-19 recovery literature. It highlights the variations in social and emotional priorities for supporting children with

SEND in their transition to school with wider systemic pressures and how this relates to children's experiences in their microsystems. This could suggest that for children with SEND, they also may have experienced challenges in social and emotional support when starting school at this time, signifying the importance of asking them about their own lived experiences. It could also be concluded from the studies above that for parents/ caregivers, social and emotional priorities are essential when supporting children with SEND in their transition to school. Yet for wider school systems, there is an academic priority for children to do or become part of an outcome-driven agenda, and considered together, these studies raise significant systemic and structural inconsistencies and priorities in the transition process for children with SEND

For children with SEND, whose transitions to school are shaped by consistent, relational support, the structural and systemic pressures in their transition to school during Covid-19 created further risks of their social and emotional needs being deprioritised for 'recovery' and 'catch-up' curriculums. Significant elements of transition to school for children with SEND, such as emotional security and stable connections and relationships, were therefore disproportionately addressed at this time. The focus on the emotional and social support for children post-pandemic should be central and focus to any 'recovery' curriculum, rather than viewing it as an intervention or add-on. By focussing on the emotional and social needs of children with SEND, it ensures their learning is supported in a holistic way, as framed by early legislation and policies. Here, the emotional and relational concerns of parents/ caregivers and practitioners correspond with wider structural issues of support for children with SEND. This considers the role of multi-agency involvement, and the consistency of support available for children with SEND in their transition to school at the time. The next section explores how disruptions to multi-agency involvement further shaped adults' understandings of their children's experiences in the transition to school during Covid-19.

#### **2.6.4 Multi-Agency Support**

The SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015), as well as the Children and Families Act (DfE, 2014) reiterate the importance of multi-agency collaboration in supporting children with SEND in their transition to school, through joined up working with parents/

caregivers, practitioners and other multi-agency specialists. These include professionals such as speech and language therapists, occupational health, physiotherapists, educational psychologists and other education, health and care service providers that may be involved with the child. They support assessment of children's needs, as well as supporting schools in understanding and providing support for children's specific needs.

Fontil et al. (2020) emphasises the 'invaluable importance of collaborative practices' within the transition to school experiences for autistic children and children with other developmental disabilities. Studies such as Starr et al. (2016) and Fontil and Petrakos (2015) claim collaborative transition support with multi-agencies is important for children with different SEND, and should include things like support for diagnosis, multidisciplinary transition meetings, the exchange of information between stakeholders, support groups and regular communication.

However, whilst these studies highlight what effective multi-agency transition support could look like, the findings around the Covid-19 pandemic made clear how inconsistent, fragile and uneven these systems were in practice. Covid-19 pandemic restrictions further exposed and magnified systemic and structural inconsistencies in transition support for children with SEND. Specific concerns have been reported within current literature around the educational impact of COVID-19 on children and young people with SEND (Crane et al., 2021), including a lack of access to specialist support and resources. In a report by the CQC (2021), Ofsted Inspectors explored the perspectives of forty-four parents/ caregivers of children with SEND to explore their views on the pandemic on their children's support. The findings in this report highlighted the cumulative effects of disruption on children's health, learning and development of children with SEND, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Families indicated negative experiences of children and families at this time, due to a lack of outside agency support and service involvement for their child, long waiting times for children's diagnosis assessments, and a restricted education. Concerns raised by parents/ caregivers highlighted children's feelings of loneliness and isolation, an impact on the children's physical and mental health, as well as missing out on education and being further behind their peers. This was a similar finding by Bakopoulou (2022), where the lack of access to specialist intervention support from

external agencies was reported as the biggest challenge, and this led to children missing out on early intervention and diagnosis, and a lack of 'preparation and readiness to start school' (p.11).

Likewise, a study by Skipp et al. (2021) explored the experiences of special education providers (schools and colleges) and parents of children who usually attend these settings during the first national lockdown from March – August 2020. Findings from this study related to access to health and care services as part of children's EHCP's suggested that these services were severely impacted for children with SEND. Parents in this study highlighted that appointments were missed with mental health professionals, physiotherapists and educational psychologists, as well as failing to receive specialist equipment for their child's needs, and a loss of therapy for their children.

This was a similar situation for practitioners, where studies have reported that due to limited access to external professionals for supporting children with SEND, this led to a regression of children's skills, abilities, and increased their social isolation and mental health needs for both children and parents at the time (Skipp et al., 2021). This suggests that practitioners were relying on the support and knowledge of multi-agency professionals in meeting the needs of children with SEND.

These findings collectively point to further significant systemic and structural inconsistencies and fragmented support in the transition process for children with SEND. However, whilst relational and collaborative practices can support these pressures (as highlighted in section 2.6.2 on mesosystemic relationships), such evidence exposes gaps in support for children with SEND, who remain exposed to wider systemic restrictions in their transition to school. This fragility became visible during the Covid-19 pandemic, when restrictions disrupted the usual transition to school activities that parents/ caregivers, practitioners and schools often depend on (as discussed next in section 2.6.5).

It is evident that adults' perspectives continue to direct the structure of transition to school for children with SEND during this time, with limited attention given to the lived experiences or dispositions of children with SEND that they utilised to navigate these challenges.

### **2.6.5 Covid-19 Transition Disruptions**

The Covid-19 pandemic created numerous disruptions to traditional transition to school practices. In a typical transition to school for children with SEND, schools often carry out a series of planned, school-led activities to support children in their transition to school. This commonly includes activities such as several moving up days, school and classroom visits, meeting the teacher, and opportunities for parents/ caregivers and practitioners to engage and share information about the competencies and skills of the child, over a period of time before the child starts school (Einarsdóttir, 2007). For children with SEND, this may be sharing their individual needs, a diagnosis or their EHCP, which could offer a more individualised transition support. In a study by Wilder and Lillvist (2021), they found in their study with parents/ caregivers and practitioners that routines were an important aspect of transition to school as an organising concept or principle, and both teachers and parents perceived that children often learnt best in more structured activities that were planned, organised and consistent in their transition to school.

Corsaro and Molinari (2008) call these types of activities 'priming events' and describe them as 'collective routine activities' (p. 252), that are used to familiarise and engage children and families in experiences they may likely have in their future school setting. Corsaro and Molinari (2008) suggest that the experiences children have of such priming events could influence their experiences and expectations of the transition to school. However, it could be argued that even though these activities within transition to school processes symbolise a relational bridge (like the Dockett et al. (2014) bridge metaphor) for children with SEND, their parents/ caregivers and practitioners to share information and co-construct a sense of being 'ready for school'. Yet, it is evident to see such activities are developed and coordinated by schools and practitioners, with little input from children's lived experiences themselves. These typical transition activities often fail to meet the needs of children with SEND, such as their sensory, social, emotional or communication needs in their transition to school. It reinforces the point made throughout the literature regarding adult-based assumptions of what they think children need to do or be, often reflecting developmental and school-readiness based discourses. Einarsdóttir (2007) suggests that during transition to school activities, children's advice and viewpoint about starting school should be considered. This would ensure children with SEND

can shape their own transition to school experiences and highlight what is important to them in their transition to school related to their own needs or the school environment, rather than adapt to an adult-construct.

During Covid-19, typical transition to school activities were stopped, adapted, or moved online, driven by a policy-focus ensuring children continued to learn, despite practitioners feeling unprepared to teach and support children through online remote learning (Ofsted, 2020), with confusing, restricted rules and guidance determining the educational provision for all children (Klimek-Tulwin and Tulwin, 2020; Viner et al., 2020).

However, the move to online learning did not come without challenges for children with SEND (Ludgate et al., 2022; Masonbrink and Hurley, 2020). According to a policy briefing carried out by the United Nations (2020) on understanding the impact of Covid-19 on the education of persons with disabilities, it was highlighted that learners with disabilities are least likely to benefit from distance learning solutions brought in by educational settings. This was due to several reasons, including digital poverty in areas, poor internet connections, as well as a lack of tailored support for the individual needs, communication styles and educational abilities of children with disabilities. Additionally, it was suggested in this policy briefing that teachers did not have the digital skills required to support these learners at this time. Masonbrink and Hurley (2020) raised doubts over parents of children with SEND having the resources to support their children's education and support throughout home learning.

These challenges were familiar within the literature, including studies by both Canning and Robinson (2021) and Skipp et al. (2021), who explored the role of home-learning for children with SEND. In the Canning and Robinson (2021) study, it was found that home, often perceived as a safe space for children with SEND, was being invaded by external expectations from wider systems around the child. Similarly, in the Skipp et al. (2021) study with professionals and parents/ caregivers of children with SEND, they found that families faced difficulties with home-schooling their children due to work commitments and supporting their children. Furthermore, they also found that due to the children's individualised needs, they were excluded from online learning spaces as it failed to meet their specific needs.

The study by Ludgate et al. (2022) offered a broader perspective and insight into challenges for children with SEND at the time by exploring parents' experiences of homeschooling children with SEND during Covid-19. Some parents/ caregivers included in this study suggested online platforms offered several benefits for their children with SEND, such as flexible learning, increased creativity and 'playfulness', and children being at home established closer connections in the family home between family members. Ludgate et al., (2022) suggested that using 'playfulness' as a way to discover, create and care for the 'moment at hand' during these periods of uncertainty and increased anxiety for children with SEND and their families at this time was a supportive tool.

However, within the same study it was found that for other families of children with SEND, online learning which has been 'frequently purported as the 'future of accessible learning', was an 'inaccessible mode of learning for some children with SEND, and/or their parents' (Ludgate et al., 2022: 73). For many children with SEND, this online learning approach further highlighted a discrepancy between the support they required in their transition to school, and the provision they were offered. For example, the Canning and Robinson (2021) and Ludgate et al. (2022) findings suggest that online learning blurred normative borders, for example home and school, teacher and parent. This is especially significant for children with a diagnosis of autism, where routine, boundaries and structure may be vital support mechanisms (Fox et al., 2023). Online learning platforms were designed around adult-assumptions within government spaces, about what learning and engagement should look like for children at the time (Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulations [Ofqual] 2021), rather than considering how children with SEND meaningfully engage, communicate or feel safe during periods of disruption and trauma.

Practitioners implementing online learning also found the guidelines and policies related to Covid-19 and transition to school ambiguous, confusing and often absent for special school settings (Bakopoulou, 2022; Crane et al., 2021; Wythe, 2022). As already highlighted previously, Wythe (2022) explored the implications of Covid-19 restrictions on children with SEND transitioning from reception to Key Stage 1. The professionals claimed they did not receive any consistent or systematic educational

guidance regarding transitions during the pandemic to support children with SEND, highlighting significant differences in transitional support practices for these children. Similarly, as already emphasised, the Bakopoulou (2022) study explored key stakeholders' perspectives around starting school for children with SEND and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Like Wythe (2022), this study found that there were shortcomings around governmental guidance on how to support early years transitions, with a lack of clarity and constant changes in guidance.

Consequently, these studies above suggest that the pandemic-related disruptions, such as a move to using exclusive, online learning tools, further demonstrate how transition to school for children with SEND was further influenced and shaped by adult priorities, due to wider systemic governmental pressures. This included things like schools and practitioners prioritising curriculum continuity, notions of learning and progress, and later, catch-up and 'recovery' curriculums, rather than find out what was important through the voices and lived experiences of children with SEND themselves. This has implications for ensuring the support for children with SEND in their transition to school is effective and individualised for the children themselves. Furthermore, these studies above highlight a persistent inconsistency around the inclusion of the voices and perspectives of children with SEND regarding their transition to school, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, and remain fundamentally lacking from current literature. Understanding how children felt and experienced their transition to school during this time is crucial to understand what is important to them in their transition to school and how they can be supported within future transitions. The next section explores the small body of literature that focusses on the experiences of transition to school from children with SEND.

## ***2.7 Voices, Dispositions and Agency of Children with SEND in their Transition to School***

### **2.7.1 'Voices' of Children with SEND**

As already highlighted in the literature review above, transition to school literature and research is dominated by adults' perspectives, and it is evident that policymakers, practitioners and parent/ caregivers fundamentally influence how transition to school is recognised, understood, organised and measured for children with SEND. In contrast, studies that centre the 'voices' and lived experiences of

children with SEND in their transition to school during Covid-19, are underrepresented within current literature.

Given the paucity of research foregrounding the perspectives of children with SEND in their transition to school, the following section selectively draws on empirical studies on the transition to school for children more broadly, to illuminate how children conceptualise their transition to school. This includes a focus on relationships, play, routine and emotional security. These studies are not expected to be transferable for children with SEND; however, they provide a background against which the experiences of children with SEND can be considered and problematised.

The literature below provides an opposing claim to the developmental, systemic and structurally shaped adult perspectives of transition to school (as highlighted in the literature above) and emphasise the importance of the voices and lived experiences of children in shaping their experiences.

Listening carefully to the voices of children with SEND has been deemed an effective tool to inform inclusive education practice (Dimitrellou and Male, 2020), and ensuring their participation is at the centre of decision-making processes, children with SEND can feel empowered and valued in their society (Beresford, 2019).

Central to understanding transition to school from a child-centred perspective is the notion of 'voice' and mirrors Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) and Lundy's model of participation (2007). Lundy's (2007) work on conceptualising Article 12 and claiming 'voice' is not enough suggests often, educational research and pedagogical practice pay lip-service to asking children what is important to them, and often this is 'minimalist, tokenistic opportunities to participate and engage with adults' (Lundy, 2007: 929). Furthermore, their involvement in matters that affect them is often dependent on the cooperation and commitment of adults around them, who may or may not be interested in complying with Article 12.

Even though Lundy (2007) claims there is now greater awareness for respecting the views of children in both practice and as a legally binding obligation, she claims that there is often a misunderstanding by adults around what voice means for children and often related in practice to 'pupil voice' or 'voice of the child'. Lundy (2007) claims that due to these misunderstandings around the construction of Article 12 and

legal obligations that come with it, the meaning and impact of voice is somewhat lost. What Lundy (2007) is suggesting here is that often, educational research or practice may portray willingness of including children's voices, for example through school councils, but when it comes to putting what they say into practice, often causes controversy, costs money or challenges dominant thinking and discourse, especially within educational settings (Lundy, 2007: 931).

Due to these challenges around obtaining and implementing what are important to children in their education, Lundy (2007) proposed a model of participation, which conceptualises Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989). Here, Lundy created a model to capture a 'full and true extent of the UK's legal obligations to children in terms of educational decision making' (p.932). Within this model, there are four separate factors related to ensuring the voice of the child is fully respected: Space, Voice, Audience and Influence.

'Space' refers to the opportunities and meaningful engagement children are given to express their view, often by inviting and encouraging their input into matters that affect them, rather than being recipients of views if they so happen to offer them; 'Voice' refers the facilitation of children being able to freely express their views on matters that are important to them; 'Audience' proposes that the children's views should be listened to; and 'Influence' suggests their views must be acted upon, as appropriate, to influence policies and practices in which they experience.

Adopting this approach to include the 'voices' of children with SEND aligns with a social constructivist position within the research, recognising that meaning-making is often co-constructed between children themselves, as well as peers and adults in the systems they operate and develop, through relational and contextual experiences. Framing children's voices in this way is consistent with Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989), emphasising their rights express their views in matters that affect and impact them.

Despite the significance and importance of considering children's 'voices' in line with their rights, there is often criticism within disability studies, that often frame the voice of children within a speaking, verbal capacity of ableist and neurotypical children, which has the potential to create an exclusionary practice and environment for children with SEND (Davis et al, 2008; Stafford, 2017). Stafford (2017) reiterated that

often, the use of speech is an ableist assumption about children's capacity to have a say about matters that impact their lives, and often children with complex communication needs [CCN] are left out or researched by-proxy as they are regarded as 'non-verbal', and therefore, assumed they cannot communicate (Davis et al., 2008).

These assumptions often emerge from researchers and society not understanding that all children have communication; it is just expressed in a variety of different ways (Stafford, 2017). This tension was highlighted by Chen (2022), who reiterated that using different forms of communication is particularly important for non-speaking autistic children, who may have unique ways of communicating. Chen (2024) suggests there is often a 'double empathy problem' (a term coined by Milton, 2012) between non-speaking autistic individuals in daily interactions with speaking others. Here, Chen (2024) is referring to a mutual misalignment in social dispositions and lack of understanding between individuals, rather than a deficit in autistic individuals' ability to communicate. This misunderstanding was reiterated by Savarese (2022), a non-speaking person who used a variety of ways to communicate with family, peers and friends through photographs, written words and alternative augmentative communication [AAC] tools, within a speech and verbal communicative dominant world. Savarese (2022) suggested that humans can be 'multimodal communicators', if they have access to the right tools. Similarly, Yu and Chen (2024) explored communication beyond the use of verbal language, usually observed in autistic children. Their findings suggest that facial expressions, body language, intonation, touch, distance, timing, silences, formalities, as well as extending beyond literal meanings of language, such as small talk and implied meanings are a vital part of communication.

For this study, children's 'voices' will be heard through multimodal forms of communication that are part of their everyday communication tools. This includes any form of communication that children adopt in their everyday lives. Adopting a multimodal approach to communication ensures children's 'voices' are included in research, and this has been an important consideration within early child development literature, demonstrating children as active agents in shaping their own experiences, rather than adapting to adult norms (Corsaro, 2005).

When children's 'voices' are included in research, their focus is often different to the adults' views and desires. Corsaro (1992; 2003; 2005) created the term '*interpretive reproduction*' when considering children's socialisation and participation in society, linked to theories of human development and psychology (Corsaro, 1992; 2003; 2005; Corsaro and Molinari, 2005). Corsaro (1992; 2003; 2005) aimed to capture children's creativity within their participation in society through suggesting that children develop and participate in unique peer cultures, usually through creatively abstracting information from the adult world around them and using it to address their own interests. Rather than simply following and adapting to adult norms, society and culture, Corsaro (2005) suggests that children often resist, reinterpret and create their own peer cultures and cultural production within their own environments, as active agents, usually through things like play, friendships, routines and shared experiences. However, it isn't until the voices of children with SEND are included within research that these cultures are understood within their transition to school experiences.

Other work that has paid respect to children's rights, voices and experiences of their transitions to school has been that of Dockett and Perry (2002; 2003; 2005a; 2007; 2014), who have carried out extensive work with children and their experiences of transitions to school in Australia and Scandinavian countries. Dockett and Perry (2007) and Broström (2015) have focussed on children's perspectives in transition to school processes, recognising that children themselves should be consulted on what is important to them in their transition to school. Others such as Einarsdóttir (2003; 2007; 2011) have carried out research with children in Nordic settings, through using creative methods of communication. Furthermore, the work of Peters (2000; 2003; 2010) and her focus on the individual child, their community and context in which the child develops has influenced work around transitions and thinking in this area to date. This commitment of working with children and young people, listening to their transition to school experiences to understand and influence their understandings as 'contributing members of society, experts on their own lives, and holding opinions that should be heard and considered' (Dockett et al., 2019: 27), and this work must be highly commended.

The children's rights movement, alongside the status of research within early childhood studies with children has ensured the role of children as human beings as prominent positions within their society has been recognised and revised (Alanen, 2011; Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt, 2013). As Dockett et al. (2019) reiterate 'these ideas conceptualise children as relational beings and embrace concepts such as children's active participation, and their competence to exercise their rights and agency' (2019: 27). This aligns with Corsaro's (2005) idea of children as active agents and interpretive reproduction. Furthermore, considering the views and experiences of children's transition to school within a worldwide pandemic is essential, as Pascal and Bertram (2021) highlight 'listening to, and capturing, the experiences and perspectives of young children on the pandemic are congruent with our sense of an inclusive, democratic society which values solidarity and the right to be heard, yet too often the voices of young children are excluded from consideration' (p.21).

In the studies that centre the voices and lived experiences of children, with and without SEND, they often focus on how they feel during this transition to school, what they understand and expect from school, and relational importances, such as friendships with their peers (Dockett et al., 2019; Pascal and Bertram, 2021; Peters, 2010). This contrasts with the developmental and readiness notion highlighted above. These insights of children's experiences of transition resonate with literature on children's learning dispositions, particularly the work of Carr (1998a; 1998b; 1998c; 1999; 2001). Carr proposed that children's learning is shaped by children's own dispositions they bring to an environment, for example their curiosity, perseverance, belonging, trust, playfulness and courage. Listening to the experiences of children's dispositions to learning in their transition to school moves away from policy-driven developmental and readiness agendas, to understanding the transition to school through children's lived experiences.

### **2.7.2 Children's Dispositions**

To understand how children with SEND experience their transition to school, it is essential to consider not only wider systemic and structural support, as discussed in 2.5-2.6 above, but also the individual dispositions children bring with them into their new school environments. This moves the literature beyond the school readiness or

developmental-based interpretations of transition to school for children with SEND and focusses on children's individual strengths and characteristics.

Children's learning dispositions have been defined in many ways within the field of psychology, sociology and education, and often termed as habits, traits, attitudes, tendencies and learning styles (Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Katz, 1993), associated with both children and adults' learning behaviours. Within education, Katz (1993) defined dispositions as 'relatively enduring habits of mind or characteristic ways of responding to experience across types of situations' (Katz, 1993: 16), and included important examples for young children, such as curiosity, creativity, persistence, cooperation and responsibility.

Dweck and Leggett (1988) identified a link between children's behaviour in response to tasks and activities, called their learning approach, as well as their beliefs about themselves as individual learners, called motivational goals. From a social theoretical perspective, Bourdieu offered the phrase 'habitus' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), which was defined not directly as 'habits' as Katz (1993) and Dweck and Leggett (1988) above, but as a 'tendency for an individual to behave in a certain way in response to experiences, including educational experiences' (Brooker, 2011: 84). Bourdieu referred to a 'system of dispositions towards learning', developed by the child in their early years, at home, school and through the life course, often derived from their social context of the family and community around them. For example, habitus would be acquired and socially created from their position in society, social status and capacity to achieve. These views of learning dispositions acknowledge the importance of children's love of learning and active engagement with learning moment such as perseverance, which allows them to be active participants in their environment (Hayes et al., 2017).

Building on this view, the work of Carr (1998a; 1998b; 1998c; 1999; 2001) has been highly influential in discourses around children's dispositions in their learning.

Importantly, their work on learning dispositions suggests they are something that all children have and should be understood as relational and context-dependent, which often become observable through children's interactions with people, spaces and routines. This was reiterated within later work of Claxton and Carr (2004), who highlighted learning dispositions such as curiosity, resilience, imagination and

reciprocity are not acquired by the child themselves, but develop as a response from the child in an environment in which they engage in 'more or less frequently, or skilfully, or appropriately' (Claxton and Carr, 2004: 2). Here, Claxton and Carr (2004) suggest the importance of the context a child is in, as well as their engagement and relational interaction with their peers, practitioners, routines, materials and opportunities they may encounter.

To consider the context that Carr (1999) and Claxton and Carr (2004) refer to above, this is the school environment and social context in which a child develops learning dispositions and agentic qualities. Claxton and Carr (2004) created four types of learning environment for children: 'prohibiting', which is a learning environment that is dangerous or impossible for children to express a learning response; 'affording', where there are opportunities for children to develop a variety of learning responses, but little value is given or placed on them; 'inviting' environments, which offers and values particular learning responses from children; and 'potentiating', which is an environment that mutually co-constructs opportunities for developing robust learning responses from the children. For children with SEND, the alignment between their learning dispositions and the context of the school environment can be influential in shaping their transition to school experiences, as depending on the type of environment they enter, it could determine how their dispositions are recognised, fostered, and utilised in their new environment.

Central to Carr's (1998a) work is the view that learning dispositions of children are not confined to specific settings, but can cross over from one setting into another, influencing how children may engage across different contexts, including their transition to school. For example, children could take a range of learning dispositions acquired at one context, for example, home, nursery, childminders, preschool settings etc. and apply them in a different context, like school. This provides a sense of continuity of learning in the transition from an early year setting into a school setting, where curriculums align and support children's dispositions (Hartley et al., 2012). Peters (2000) supports Carr's work, suggesting that by focussing on children's learning dispositions, practitioners and parents/ caregivers could facilitate children's transition to school, allowing them to start school with their own set of tools for learning, providing a sense of continuity in their learning.

Carr's (1999) conceptualisation of learning dispositions has influenced the early years curriculum in New Zealand 'Te Whāriki', where the outcomes of the curriculum were replaced with dispositions, such as 'belonging, well-being, communication, exploration and contribution'. This shifted the curriculum from a prescriptive outcome-driven and ableist focus to a more empowering, holistic and ecological approach to children's learning and development for all children. This international example demonstrates how learning dispositions of all children can be established within an inclusive early years' curriculum framework. However, even though statutory frameworks in English schools, such as the EYFS (DfE & DoH, 2025) and Development Matters (DfE, 2023a) confirm the importance of children's dispositions in early years education, they often overlook these as central to a child's transition to school, in practice, and instead, place a greater focus on developmental milestones and outcomes. Consequently, this has implications for children with SEND in their transition to school whose dispositions may not align with school readiness agendas or developmental outcomes, increasing their risk of their dispositions towards learning and engagement being overlooked, ignored or misunderstood by adults in their transition to school. Recognising and responding to learning dispositions of children with SEND in their transition to school experiences shifts transition to school literature beyond narrow perceptions of what children with SEND should do and be (based on individual abilities and 'school readiness' goals and adult-directed agendas), towards considering what strengths and characteristics they already bring with them into the school setting. This understanding is particularly relevant when considering the transition to school for children with SEND, whose dispositions may be communicated in diverse and non-normative ways that their neurotypical peers may present, yet nonetheless remain essential to their engagement and experiences in new educational settings.

Considered collectively, the literature above places learning dispositions for all children as relational, context-dependent characteristics that are not fixed or abstract traits that children may acquire during their transition to school (Carr, 1999). From a bioecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), like Carr's work, children's learning dispositions are recognised within and between children's immediate interactions and environments, with proximal processes being shaped by relationships with their peers, adults and the school setting itself. To reiterate, whilst

it is evident that all children have their own individual dispositions, identifying and recognising these in English school settings is often shaped by developmental and readiness agendas, as highlighted in section 2.5 above. This has implications for children with SEND, whose dispositions may be expressed in different and diverse ways, and highlights the importance of considering how children's dispositions are enacted within their transition to school. There are several contexts where children's learning dispositions often become visible, including through their play, relationships and routines, which often providing children with opportunities to explore, interact and establish a sense of belonging to new and unfamiliar environments (Carr, 1999; Claxton and Carr, 2004). The next section will consider empirical studies and literature of children's transitions to school within these different contexts.

### 2.7.2.1 Play

The role of play is a central part of early childhood (Vygotsky, 1967) and underpins the play-based EYFS curriculum within UK early years settings, including Reception classes (DfE, 2025). Vygotsky (1978) determines play for preschool children as entering 'an imaginary, illusory world in which the unrealizable desires can be realized, and this world is what we call play' (p.93). Lester and Russell (2010) reinforce the agentic nature of play, as well as the social and emotional benefits of play for children through

*'...creating a world in which, for that moment, children are in control and can seek out uncertainty in order to triumph over it – or, if not, no matter, it is only a game...it is primarily behaviour for its own sake, for the pleasure and joy of being able to do it. Yet play is more than mere indulgence; it is essential to children's health and wellbeing'* (Lester and Russell, 2010: x).

As highlighted in the definition above, play provides a lens through which children navigate, explore and make sense of their environment, allowing them to navigate new friendships and social connections. From a child-centred perspective, play is often central to how children communicate and express their voice, emotions, needs, develop relational links and preferences (Carr, 2001; Dockett and Perry, 2014). This is significant for children with SEND who may communicate and express their dispositions in different ways.

Through their play, children often acquire or present dispositions in their new environment, such as trust, playfulness, exploration, courage and curiosity (Claxton and Carr, 2004). From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), play-based interactions signify 'proximal processes' in children's microsystems, that support reciprocal and complex interactions between children and other people, as well as objects and/ or symbols in their immediate external environment. Through these proximal processes and interactions in children's immediate environment, it fosters opportunities to shape and develop dispositions, as described by Carr (1999).

Proximal processes and learning dispositions developed through children's play are evident in studies that explore the lived experiences of children in their transition to school, as highlighted below.

A study by Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir (2019) worked with ten children aged five and six years old from Iceland. The children were asked about their perspectives on transition to school activities. Findings demonstrated how children reflected on the importance of friendships in their transition to school, but also on the value and importance of play. Children in this study were mostly interested in the outside area, including the stream and playground, and paid particular attention to playing in the outdoors. Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir (2019) suggested these child-directed play opportunities allowed children to feel secure to their new school environment, as well as having opportunities to learn and take risks in the outdoors. Similar findings were highlighted in a study by Dockett and Perry (2005a), who explored Australian children's experiences of starting school. In this study, children placed significant importance on the outdoor environment but also drew connections to the play equipment and play spaces within the classroom environment.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate several dispositions that both Carr (1999) and Claxton and Carr (2004) highlight in their work, including children demonstrating their courage and curiosity to explore their new school environment, especially outdoor areas beyond the classroom spaces; the importance of playfulness in their transition into school to create a sense of trust and belonging to the environment; the resilience and perseverance to take risks in a safe environment; and reciprocity to interact with others through creating social connections in their learning environment.

Other studies have also explored how children used play to create a sense of belonging. Pascal and Bertram (2021) explored how children used play to make sense of the Covid-19 pandemic, connect with peers and adjust to school rules and routines, when opportunities and space were restricted due to Covid-19 public health measures. Through Froebelian storytelling (which includes drama, art and music), Pascal and Bertram (2021) carried out a study with fifty-eight preschool children aged between two and four years old, and twenty-two early years practitioners. The study focused on practitioners listening to and capturing their experiences on the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the main narratives of adults directing the storytelling was the children's importance of play in making sense of Covid-19. Children were observed exploring Covid-19 experiences in their play, trying to make sense of the pandemic and their lived realities. For example, practitioners observed children playing solitary and group games associated with 'death', mask-wearing play, 'no touching' games, as well as preferring to play in outdoor spaces. This study demonstrates that not only was play a priority for children in their return to nursery settings post pandemic but also demonstrated children as active agents in their educational settings, making sense of a worldwide pandemic through play, understandings and resilience. This study was carried out in a nursery setting, yet the findings demonstrate that even in post-Covid environments, play can remain central to children's connections, belonging and learning. This poses questions and exposes gaps in the literature, for example whether children with SEND, their parents/ caregivers and practitioners considered play as an important tool in their transition to school experiences.

Whilst the literature above highlights the importance of play during the transition to school and offers a valuable insight into the role of play in supporting children's transition to school experiences, it largely reflects neurotypical developmental trajectories and experiences. This offers limited insight into how children with SEND experience, acquire and present dispositions through their play during periods of change, and although empirical studies exploring the role of play during the transition to school for children with SEND remain scarce, a broader body of SEND-specific research offers valuable insights into how play is experienced, valued and considered by children with SEND.

Several studies have explored the role of play for children with SEND, including Heah et al. (2007), Kangas et al. (2012), Burke (2012), Prellwitz and Skar (2007), Lundqvist et al. (2019) and Wolfberg et al. (2015). Within these studies, it was found that children with different SEND profiles participated in activities they found fun, feeling success in their play (Heah et al., 2007), and noted the importances of play, such as interacting with others (Heah et al., 2007; Prellwitz and Skar, 2007), being independent and expressing preferences through their play choices (Heah et al., 2007; Kangas et al., 2012). In the study by Kangas et al. (2012), the researchers observed the role of play in 45 autistic children in Finland. The findings suggested that the autistic children expressed a variety of different types of play as an important tool within their environment, including playing in isolation, group play and imitation of adults in their environment.

Similarly, the study by Lundqvist et al. (2019) explored how children experience life in educational settings in Sweden, with fifty-six children, including twenty-nine children with different SEND profiles. In this study, it was found that children expressed their joy through creative and playful activities, like using their imagination in role-play, doing artistic activities and constructing, but often found it difficult to sit still, wait and be passive in their environment. This example of early school experiences suggests that children with SEND enjoyed the freedoms of agency, playing and being creative, valuing their movement, agency and interaction over expected classroom norms and rules of the environment.

Research by Wolfberg et al. (2015) reiterated the importance of adults in supporting the play of autistic children and suggests how peer play experiences are significant for development, socialisation and cultural participation of children, but often, developmental and sociocultural factors place autistic children at risk of being excluded from these essential experiences. Wolfberg et al. (2015) suggest that without explicit guidance, they may be neglected by peers and thus deprived of opportunities and development potentials, but through integrated play group models, that facilitate, guide and promote the social skills, communication, reciprocity and relationships with peers, particularly with ASD, children can use play to develop their potential.

Even though these studies were not explicitly related to children's transition to school experiences, they indicate that play also offers opportunities for children with SEND to develop a range of dispositions in their educational context, such as fostering enjoyment, a sense of belonging, providing a sense of success, curiosity, exploration, social encouragement and engagement and autonomy and agency. Through Carr's (1999) framework, these experiences can be understood as expressions of curiosity, confidence, belonging and perseverance of children with SEND.

The studies related to play and transition above demonstrate that children identify and place a significant importance on play when they start school to develop connections, a sense of belonging, trust and curiosity. In the studies related to the transition to school play functioned as a key proximal process in children's microsystems, that supported children's learning dispositions and transitions to school (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Yet schools (in contrast to the nursery setting study of Pascal and Bertram, 2021) as already highlighted above, operate within systemic and structural pressures and expectations, for example school readiness and 'catch-up' curriculums post Covid-19 demonstrate a de-prioritisation of play, where play for all children, including those with SEND, was deprioritised for literacy and numeracy catch-up programmes (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2021; Tracey et al., 2022). Broström (2013) emphasises this point claiming, 'preschool prioritises play and deemphasises the active teacher role in supporting children's learning', whereas 'the opposite is so in school, as children are expected to participate in teacher-initiated activities that hold school-orientated content, such as reading, writing and math' (p.39). Ensuring practitioners and parents/ caregivers are supporting and ensuring play is prioritised over curriculum-driven agendas and attainment is challenging, especially within an outcome driven environment (Whitebread et al., 2012; Atkinson et al., 2017).

Whilst play is often positioned within early years policy and practice as a pedagogical tool for children, especially for children with SEND where it is typically valued by adults as an area for intervention and diagnosis, and often opportunities for free play neglected (Murdock et al., 2013; Murdock and Hobbs, 2011; UNCRC, 2013). Literature that engages with children's perspectives above suggest its significance

lies more strongly as a relational function for all children, including children with SEND. Through play, children are able to explore social situations, negotiate roles, and develop engagement and relationships with peers and environments in ways that support a sense and feelings of belonging. However, most studies focus on children without SEND, and there is limited literature exploring the transition to school experiences of children with SEND, and the role of play within that context. This highlights a gap in understanding the relational dimensions of play for children with SEND and the diverse ways in which they engage with play during early school transitions. Beyond play, children's perspectives highlight the importance of social connections and relationships in supporting their sense of belonging and familiarity to a new environment and context during their transition to school.

#### 2.7.2.2 Social Connections and Friendships

As the studies above suggest (and the section on mesosystemic relationships, section 2.6.2, page 53) transitions to school for children are situated in social communities, where relationships and social connections with peers and practitioners play a key and important role.

Although there is limited research that explores the social connections of children with SEND during their transition to school, studies that explore children's views in their transition to school offer understandings into how social connections shape and support children's early transitions to school, and how this may look or be experienced differently by children with SEND, especially autistic individuals. Other studies that include the experiences and views of children with SEND and the role of friendships and social connections in general have also been included to provide context and understanding.

Supportive relationships help ease the pressures of transition to school for children who feel anxious or insecure (Grieshaber, 2009). Fox et al. (2023) reiterates the supportive and protective factors of friendships and social connections, where they play a key role in supporting the transition to school for children with SEND. Early work by Ladd (1990) suggests that children who develop friendships when they start school help them to communicate and play with their peers immediately, which in turn helps establish positive school perceptions. Similarly, according to Brendgen and Poulin (2018), friendships have been found to play a key protective role as

children navigate their social worlds, both as a social support and a protective factor against bullying.

Across numerous studies in the literature on transitions to school, children consistently situated friendships and social connections and interactions with their peers as essential to feelings of belonging, settled, safe, and capable in their new school environment (Büker and Hóke, 2019; Dockett et al., 2019; Stanek, 2013). This highlights the importance of peer-friendships in early school experiences (O'Rourke et al. 2017).

In a project by Dockett et al. (2019) called 'listening to children's advice about starting school and school age care', the children highlighted the importance of having friends in their transition to school, and by knowing someone, it allowed them to engage and develop a sense of belonging within their new school environment. Likewise, a study by Stanek (2013), who explored communities of practice for children moving from kindergarten to school in Denmark, reported similar views on children's importance of friendships, and children reported that tasks felt much bigger and more challenging without friends. Similarly, a study by Büker and Hóke (2019) that explored children's transitions from kindergarten to primary school in Germany found that children needed and wanted friendships and social connections to feel safe and happy in their school environment. This highlights the supportive factor of friendships in the transition to school that Fox et al. (2023) and Grieshaber (2009) both indicate.

An earlier study by Dockett and Perry (2002) exploring perceptions of readiness for school from children, parents and teachers in Australia, children mentioned the importance of making friends and reiterated that school was a place to be with friends. This highlights the disposition and importance of belonging to their new school environment through feeling connected to others, as well as communication through navigating social interactions (Carr, 1999). Children in this study reported that they often felt unhappy at school if they had no friends or no one would play with them and had worries about not knowing anyone or not knowing their names, which often made the children feel scared and anxious in their new school environment. This finding was supported in a study by Sandberg et al. (2017) who worked with children in Sweden to gather their perspectives on their learning environment in first

grade (the equivalent of Reception class within a UK context). In this study, Sandberg et al. (2017) found that very few children could name or refer to children who they like to play with, demonstrating feelings of disconnection and loneliness from their school environment.

Collectively, studies such as Búker and Hóke (2019), Dockett et al. (2019) Stanek (2013) and Dockett and Perry (2002), suggest social connections and friendships are an essential component in their transition to school, which allows them to develop a sense of belonging and connection, rather than something that is secondary to their learning and transition to school experiences.

There is little research that explores social connections and friendships within the transition to school process for children with SEND. Yet some research explores friendships for children with SEND in general in their school setting and often focus on their impairments or perceived differences as the barrier to forming early social connections and friendships (Guralnick et al., 2007; Engle et al., 2011; Rowley et al., 2012). This was also suggested in the Fox et al. (2023) study, where it was suggested that it is not uncommon for autistic children to have different ideas about friendships, such as fewer friends, or different perceptions of what friendships mean compared to their non-autistic peers.

Consequently, focussing on the difficulties that children with SEND have when forming social connections places the onus on the individual children themselves (like the medical model of disability), neglecting consideration for the complexities and tensions that usually underpin relationships (Konstantoni, 2012). Parry (2012) suggests instead that the role of the child with SEND themselves should be considered, as 'active decision takers and choice makers' (p.1), when exploring and developing friendships, as this may not be fully recognised in educational settings. Furthermore, the context in which friendships and relationships develop are influential, and often, the dynamics of this culture impact on children's interactions with each other (Parry, 2012).

In the study by Parry (2012), two children identified with different SEND profiles were included in a research project exploring the role of friendships in a nursery setting. Findings from observations and interactions with the children found that their relationships with other children involved a range of dimensions, from

connectedness to shared humour, intimacy and agency within their setting. These interactions were often unpredictable, from specific activities to more spontaneous play. Parry (2012) found that the children often made social connections through facilitation and scaffolding by the nursery staff, rather than being directed to make social connections, but the children always had room to employ their own agency further.

The study by Lundqvist et al. (2019) explored how children experience life in educational settings in Sweden, with fifty-six children, including twenty-nine children with different SEND profiles. One of the main findings within the children's data in this study highlighted the importance of social connections and friendships, which developed their sense of belonging to the environment, as well the sense of enjoyment and pleasure of having friendships. Additionally, it was found that some children with SEND found developing friendships difficult, which impacted their sense of belonging to their school environment.

The importance of the context and support within that context was a similar finding by Peters (2003), who explored children's experiences of friendship during the transition to school in New Zealand. Even though this study did not focus specifically on children with SEND, it found that a 'child's ability to make friends when starting school is not simply an individual characteristic of the child themselves' (p.50). Early work by Pollard and Filer (1999) suggest that children should be framed and shaped by the context that they are in and supported by adults around them to make social connections and friendships. This view supports both an ecological view and an inclusive and child's rights perspective of social connections (Article 15, UNCRC, 1989). Like Dockett et al. (2019), here, the early work of Peters (2003), Pollard and Fuller (1999) and Parry (2012) are suggesting that the development of friendships is significant yet should not be left solely to the individual to make connections with peers, and instead, should be supported, facilitated and scaffolded by adults in their environment. In this study, Peters (2003) drew attention to parent/ caregiver strategies, such as knowing the names of children from preschool entering the same school, so parents/ caregivers could facilitate friendships outside of school. In-school strategies included play resources, using older children as buddies and social strategies for example social stories related to friendships. Dockett et al. (2019)

reiterate this point that where continuity does not exist in the transition to school, children may require support from their teachers or practitioners in their new setting and environment, as suggested by Parry (2012). This reinforces Rogoff's (2003) ideas that social processes are constructed and reconstructed jointly with others, and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) ideas of proximal processes as reciprocal and complex interactions between children and other people, objects, and symbols in their immediate external environment.

Returning to the point made above regarding deficit assumptions of friendships and social connections for children with SEND, Yu and Chen's (2024) work reinforce the idea around differences in understanding social communication and language development, especially for autistic children, rather than taking a deficit attitude to understanding. In their work, Yu and Chen (2024) suggest that autistic children may not lack the desire for such dyadic interactions and social connections with their peers and others around them, which is often the narrative for autistic children. Often, autistic children are viewed through a deficit approach to autism communication (Kapp, 2019), suggesting that social communication difficulties are usually attributed to an individual impairment, rather than a breakdown in social communications that are relational, for example, not solely due to one person in a communication exchange.

This claim was supported by the work of Edey et al. (2016) and Sasson et al. (2017), who suggested that breakdowns often happen between autistic and non-autistic individuals in a bi-directional way, as both individuals have difficulty in inferring each other's perspectives, feelings and communication. As already highlighted, Milton (2012) coined this bi-directional challenge as a 'double empathy problem', due to the convergence of different experiences, understandings and communication styles between individuals. Therefore, autistic children may be seen as not wanting to make friendships or social connections when in fact, they may do but need further support from their practitioners and more knowledgeable others in their context and new classroom environment, or ensure the environment, context and peers recognise their dispositions to social communication in a different way. The work of Chen et al. (2020) reiterates this point within educational settings and contexts, where social interactions and connections may be possible for many children, yet for

autistic children it may not be as readily accessible as they may communicate differently to their neurotypical peers. Chen et al. (2020) suggest that due to the dominance of existing social practices of verbal modalities of communication being used within classroom interactions, this compromises the social interactions and connections of autistic children. Therefore, opportunities for children with SEND to develop friendships, peer interactions and social connections are often determined by practices within educational settings.

Despite this, very little is known about Covid-19 practices that shaped social connections and friendships for children with SEND, when bubble systems and mask-wearing was the norm, and distancing rules reduced opportunities for interactions and connections.

In the study by Bakopoulou (2022) it was recognised by practitioners and senior leaders that Covid-19 impacted the social development of children with SEND. Here, practitioners talked about the inability for children with SEND to socialise with their peers. Bakopoulou (2002) highlighted that this impact was an exacerbation of already existing inequalities for children with SEND around social connections, and children would benefit from adjusted curriculums to support these areas of development and early learning. This finding suggests the problem lies with the child themselves, rather than the context of the school environment. However, here, the voices of children with SEND themselves would have provided a clearer and accurate representation of social connections and friendships at the time.

Taken together, the studies above including emphasise the significance of friendships and social connections in children's transitions to school. Studies by Parry (2012) and Konstantoni (2012) emphasise how children with SEND expressed connectedness, shared humour, intimacy and agency within their setting through different ways. This includes using different forms of communication to establish social connections (Yu and Chen, 2024). The studies place an emphasis on the importance of the context of children's environments, and the role social connections and friendships has within that context, as well as the need for adult support in developing social skills and connections in their transition to school. The importance of social connections and friendships that children drew upon in all these studies supported children's dispositions such as belonging, trust, courage and

communication in their school environment. Through dispositional learning, the social connections and friendships gave children courage, confidence and curiosity to participate in their everyday classroom learning environments and routines.

Although these studies do not focus on the experiences of children with SEND in their transition to school, their findings could suggest that supportive friendships and social connections are likely to be important for children with SEND but may need adults to facilitate and support these new relationships and different ways that children communicate their desires for social connections and friendships. The paucity of research in this area highlights a significant gap in understanding the importance and role of social connections and friendships for children with SEND in their transition to school experiences during a worldwide pandemic. The next section draws on children's dispositions around the importance of learning and routine in their transition to school.

### 2.7.2.3 Learning and routines

Within current literature around the transitions to school and children's views, it can be concluded that most children often view their transition to school as a space where they are going to learn (Dockett and Perry, 2004; Eide and Winger, 2005; Einarsdóttir, 2010; Sandberg et al., 2014). This view by children has been discussed in early literature around children's views on starting school and in many different contexts around the world. For example, Eide and Winger (2005) carried out an early study that included six-year-old children from a school in Norway. The children included in the study were asked about what they thought they might do when they start school, and many of them said they would read, write and do arithmetic. This was a similar finding in a study by Broström (2002) where children in a Danish school had expectations of school that included learning to write, read and do mathematics.

The concept of children referring to learning in their transition to school has also been explored in later studies. A study by Einarsdóttir (2010) used creative methods to gather the views of 20 six- and seven- year-old children in a primary school in Iceland, exploring their experiences of the first year of school. One of the main findings from this study was that the children saw learning to read and carry out

specific lessons such as mathematics was one of the main functions of primary school, with the role of the teacher being to teach them these subjects.

Some studies suggest that having routine and structure within a school environment often provides children with a feeling of security and attachment, which then enables them to feel safe and make friends (Dockett and Perry, 2004; Peters, 2010; Sandberg et al., 2014). These studies reflect the dispositions of trust and belonging that Carr (1999) highlights. Wood (2019) explored inclusive education for autistic children and highlighted that routines, and other important aspects of an environment, such as classroom layout, curriculum and teaching styles, offer a much deeper significance for autistic children, as it provides support for emotional and sensory regulation. Considering Carr's (1999) dispositions, it may also provide autistic children with a sense of belonging and trust in a new environment.

Learning and daily routines in the transition to school in English school settings are often policy-driven through adult-directed curriculums, failing to recognise children as agentic within their new school environments. This can be seen in a recent study by Wilder and Lillvist (2021), who explored teachers' and parents' meaning making of children's learning in transition from preschool to school for children with intellectual disability in Sweden. Both the parents and practitioners within this study suggested that routines as an organising principle were an important aspect of the transition to school for their children. Furthermore, they suggested that through structured activities that were planned, organised and consistent by adults in their new environment, their children with intellectual disability often learned best.

This deficit-narrative around the importance of adult-created routines for children with SEND in their transition to school is abundant within literature. For example, studies including Macdonald et al., (2018) and Zimmerman et al., (2017) suggest that if children with SEND are prepared for changes prior to, during and after transitions, such as through prescribed routines and structures, by the adults around them, this will avoid children's increased anxiety and behavioural and emotional responses to such disruption in their environments. However, the views of children with SEND in regard to the importance they place on learning and routine remain underexplored in current research.

Giving children agency to express their meaning of learning and routine has been seen in a recent study by Santos and Martins de Sousa (2021). Here they explored children's perspectives on educational transitions at a school in Portugal. One of their main findings from the children's voices, which included sixteen preschool and thirty-five primary school children, was their wishes around wanting to learn to read, write, do homework, doing work and having specific lessons. This finding suggests that by giving children the opportunity to express their thoughts and meaning-making around matters that are important to them, the narrative of 'learning' could change (from that of an adult-directed nature). It could be suggested here that children enjoy the structure and routine that learning brings them, fostering a sense of belonging to their new environment.

The views above in the studies by Macdonald et al. (2018) and Zimmerman et al. (2017) demonstrate that failing to explore the views of children could be detrimental to their transition experiences, especially for children with SEND within the context of a worldwide pandemic. Firstly, through failing to realise children with SEND as agentic in creating their own routines and learning opportunities that are important and relatable to them, rather than driven by adults. Secondly, recognising and giving space for children with SEND to safely and securely respond to their transition to school within a Covid-19 pandemic, both emotionally and behaviourally.

Such agentic and strengths-based views can be seen within other school-based curriculums across the world. For example, in Tāhūrangi, the New Zealand School Curriculum (2007-2023), there is an emphasis on 'notice, recognise and respond' systems within early years school settings. The incentive encourages practitioners in school settings to give agency to children in shaping their own identities and learning opportunities in their setting. Using this with children with SEND in English school settings could support their agentic views, voices and provide them with the right support in their transition to school. This includes the social and emotional support for children with SEND post-Covid-19, as already discussed was deprioritised for a 'recovery' curriculum in English school settings. The emotional impact of the transition to school for children with SEND has been discussed in the next section.

#### 2.7.2.4 Emotional Impact of Transition

A large proportion of the literature around the emotional impact on the transitions to school for children with SEND is often framed within an adults' perspective, as discussed above in section 2.6.3 (page 61). There were no studies that included the emotional impact of transitions for children with SEND through their own voices within current literature, and therefore, I have included literature and studies that include all children's experiences.

The transition to school can have a varying demand on the social, emotional and mental health needs of children with SEND, putting them at risk of difficult transitions to school (Evans et al. 2010; McIntyre et al., 2006; Sammons, 2013).

A study by Ackesjö (2013), who carried out research on separation and adjustment factors in the transition to school through the eyes of children starting school in Sweden. Here, Ackesjö (2013) suggests that as children moved between preschool and school, they faced different demands and social contexts, and leaving their safety zone of their preschool (or place they were before). Children reported feelings of concern leaving familiar settings and people, including friendships.

These demands and concerns, if not asked or addressed by parents/ caregivers and/ or practitioners in school settings, could impact a child's emotional development in their transition to school. Similarly, Niesel and Griebel (2007) highlighted the emotional changes within a child's transition to school, as they face feelings of anticipation, insecurity, anxiety and nervousness, as well as demands of learning new rules and routines. From Carr's (1999) perspective, it could be suggested the learning disposition to trust relates to children's emotional needs and knowing that their environment is safe enough to be involved in and focus their attention. According to Carr (1999) their level of involvement within their new setting is a good indicator to see how involved they become in their learning environment.

The children's expressions of anxiety, worry or fear were also recognised in a recent study by Quenzer-Alfred et al. (2021), which demonstrated the exacerbation of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's emotional concerns. In this study, the researchers explored how Covid-19 impacted the transition to primary school for children in Germany. In this mixed-methods study, researchers included the voices of children around their experiences at the time. Results revealed that children did not express

excitement and hope about starting school and instead expressed their fear of school. For example, children reported they were worried about not being able to play; concerns about not being able to learn how to read or write; worries about being punished or failing; a fear of the teachers themselves; and fears of not making enough new friends in their setting.

Due to Covid-19, children who were included in this study had limited expectations of what they might anticipate at school regarding their new environments, teachers or what they will learn, which increased their worries and concerns about the environment and people within it during their transition to school. This study, although contextually different from starting school within the UK, confirms that children at the time had a heightened uncertainty and anxiety around starting school, impacted by gaps in wider structural and systemic support. Covid-19 research, including Nelson et al. (2021) and Bowyer-Crane et al. (2021) has already highlighted how the social and emotional needs of children were deprioritised at this time for 'recovery' curriculums, yet for children with SEND in English school settings, these anxieties and uncertainties in their transition to school which may have impacted their experiences remain under researched.

Listening to and making-meaning from children's voices in the context of Covid-19 is vital. In a study by Bateman and Danby (2013), they explored the lived experiences of children recovering from the Christchurch earthquake, New Zealand, in February 2011. In their study, Bateman and Danby (2013) carried out conversation analysis with fifty-two children and nine practitioners, in the aftermath of the earthquakes, which focussed on children's lived experiences of the traumatic events of the earthquake. By encouraging young children to recall and tell their stories and experiences with early childhood practitioners, this approach allowed children to follow a '*Respond, Renew, and Recover*' strategy (Brown, 2012). This was a strategy created by Brown (2012), designed to encourage children to recall and tell stories about a significant and traumatic event, as a way of coming to terms with their experiences, and prevent or minimise more stress being developed in the future.

The results from one of the children and practitioners demonstrated they collaboratively produced a recall of the earthquake event, providing opportunities for

each other to remember what happened. Significantly, the child here realised this was a shared experience where many were involved.

Like the Bateman and Danby (2013) study, and the '*Respond, Renew, and Recover*' strategy of Brown (2012), it highlights the importance of listening, sharing and using story-telling techniques with children and teachers supports their recovery from traumatic experiences. Bietti and Castello (2013) highlight the importance of engaging in post-trauma conversations with knowledgeable others, suggesting these techniques allow for an understanding that these feelings of anxiety are often shared. Bateman and Danby (2013) reiterate that from an early childhood education perspective, giving children the opportunity to have these interactions encourage children to investigate their working theories about a traumatic event, and help them analyse and process what happened at the time. This approach would be beneficial for children with (or without) SEND who transitioned to school during Covid-19, and through exploring and listening to the lived experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic, their stories could influence future policy, practice and provision for young children with SEND starting school during a worldwide, global pandemic, who would benefit from recalling memories and talking about traumatic events.

Currently, there is a sparse amount of literature that explores the intricate and emotive challenges for children with SEND in their transition to school during Covid-19. Children's emotional responses to their transition and Covid-19 should be further explored, determining what the specific, tangible emotional needs were of children with SEND at this time, and what significant steps schools were taking to support them with this. This question remains underexplored, and only through asking children with SEND what their challenges were at the time, will this be understood from their perspective. As already suggested throughout the literature review, there is often a misalignment between the views of adults and children with SEND, and so exploring their experiences around the emotional impact is vital for supporting them in post-crises worlds.

## **2.8 Conclusion: My study**

The review of literature has highlighted the main themes and debates within research and studies on the transition to school for children with SEND. The literature review has explored macro and exosystem level impacts, such as policy

discourses and frameworks, institutional expectations and adult-driven practices that have shaped the transition to school for children with SEND. This includes debates around developmental discourses and school readiness, and more recently, 'recovery' curriculums in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. These systemic and structural norms of transition to school, often framed by adults surrounding the child, limit the opportunity for relational and child-led understandings, especially for children with SEND.

Although relational concerns are apparent within the literature, especially for parents/caregivers of children with SEND, for example, social and emotional concerns and the importance of relationships, they continue to remain interpreted through adults' priorities, rather than the children's own lived experiences and realities.

In contrast, the body of research that includes children with SEND in their transition to school experiences is considerably small, and the research that is included in this literature review, such as children's experiences of transition emphasises a stark difference in priorities at this time. Children's data instead focussed on the importance of things like play, social connections and friendships, learning and routines, opportunities for exploration in their new environment, and having emotional security. These align closely with both the proximal processes of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) and learning dispositions (Carr, 1999), as demonstrated above. For children with SEND, it could be concluded that these relational and environmental underpinnings are also significant in their transition to school yet remain incidental to policy frameworks in English school settings, and under researched in transition to school literature and practice.

Furthermore, the literature on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates the significant disruptions on the support, routines and opportunities for children with SEND in their transition to school, which as highlighted by adults around them, exacerbated their relational needs. Significantly, governmental and policy responses at the time continued to prioritise a 'recovery' curriculum for children, focussing on measurable outcomes in literacy and mathematics, over their social and emotional needs.

Considered together, the literature review highlights a substantial disparity in transition to school processes: systemic and structural frameworks and adults'

perspectives and expectations dominate how transition to school is conceptualised for children with SEND, whilst the lived experiences of children with SEND remain underrepresented. There is a disjuncture between how adults and children with SEND interpret and experience the world, including their views on the experiences of transitions to school during a worldwide pandemic. Bagnall et al. (2022) suggests ongoing research is needed to understand the views and realities of children with SEND regarding their experiences of transition to school.

Even though studies have captured intricate and very important viewpoints of transition to school, there is still an obvious gap within the literature. By centring the voices and experiences of transition to school for children with SEND, particularly during the worldwide, Covid-19 pandemic, my study offers a relational, contextual account of transition to school, centred in the meaning-making of children with SEND. Furthermore, my study extends existing literature on transitions to school for children with SEND by demonstrating how children constructed and made sense of their transition to school through dispositions, friendships, routines and their emotional responses. Exploring the narratives of children with SEND to support future transition practice and policy could create a more child-friendly, inclusive and flexible approach to their transition to school, especially in response to a global pandemic. Furthermore, this study will add to current debates on inclusion, by highlighting how children's voices and lived experiences and realities can challenge notions of developmental and school readiness agendas, offering a more individualised, responsive and relational approach to transition for children with SEND in English school settings.

This not only adds to the knowledge within the field but also makes an original contribution to knowledge on transitions to primary school for children with SEND during a worldwide pandemic. This has been done by giving an ulterior perspective on this topic, whilst still respectfully engaging with prior research that has successfully been carried out with children and their experiences of transitions to school.

The next chapter will explore the theoretical underpinning of both Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) and children's rights (UNCRC, 1989) in more detail and how the

chosen theoretical frameworks underpin the study. It also frames the methodology in the theoretical framework, as well as the methods used to generate data.

## **CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING, METHODOLOGY AND METHOD**

### ***3.1 Introduction***

The previous chapter outlined the policy priorities within UK education systems, that has shaped the transition to school process for children with SEND in England, as well as current discourse and literature on the transition to school for children with SEND.

This chapter explores the theoretical underpinning that guided the research. It also discusses the methodological approach to the research, the rationale and justification for the chosen research design and the methods used to answer the research questions. My ontological and epistemological stances have also been considered. The study's validity, reliability, credibility, and trustworthiness will also be discussed, including ethical considerations.

### ***3.2 Positionality***

Researcher positionality is understood by many as an individual's worldview and the position adopted when undertaking research (Foote and Bartell, 2011; Rowe, 2014; Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). Acknowledging my positionality allowed for reflexive practice within the research and an awareness of the relationship between 'prospective' and 'retrospective' reflexivity (Atya and Edge, 2017). Prospective reflexivity involves the researcher being aware of their own experiences and beliefs which could impact the research process (Palmer, 2019), whereas retrospective reflexivity describes the impact that the research may have on the researcher, which in turn may contribute to reconstructing their experiences, understanding, or influence their beliefs. This reflexive stance has been an ongoing process throughout the whole research journey.

Within this research, I position myself as part insider-outsider. Being 'part-insider', I am well trained in the field of early years, primary and special educational needs, and have the knowledge and understanding of current issues in these areas. It is unachievable to fully remove or isolate myself from the study since my experiences are rooted within this field. As Punch (2012) and Holliday (2007) reiterate, it is important to recognise the position a researcher brings to the research to add

significance. However, it is also important to highlight that I also consider myself to be 'part-outsider'. I am not currently a practicing early years', primary, or SEND practitioner working within a particular setting with children, and I have never worked with or within any of the participants or settings included in this study.

My positionality and worldview stems from both my previous professional roles, and personal experiences, both of which have given me a unique and distinctive perspective into the lived experiences of children with SEND in their transitions to school during Covid-19.

These positions have not only shaped my career as a teacher and now a researcher but also shaped my values and beliefs. This includes my strong belief that every child has the right to a voice and should be able to make decisions that are important to them. This mirrors rights within the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015), the Equality Act (2010), the UNCRC (Article 12, 1989), and the UNCRPD (2008). These declarations ensure all children, including those identified with SEND, have the right to be part of decisions that influence their lives and are freely involved in making decisions regarding their educational provision. These rights place a duty on professionals within schools to make 'every reasonable endeavour' to support the views of children, allowing us to understand how different people see, feel or think about the world, seeking to grasp diverse perspectives (Hammersley, 2012).

Professionally, my earlier roles as an early years and primary school practitioner, special educational needs practitioner and a SENCo have given me contextual knowledge and understandings of transitions to school for children with SEND. Throughout the early part of my teaching career, with limited experience, knowledge and training in SEND, I felt ill-equipped to support children with SEND. Through continuous reflection and a desire to develop my own and others' inclusive teaching practices, I took on the role of the SENCo and completed the compulsory National post-graduate diploma award for SENCos. This training was the start of a career in teaching children with SEND and wanting to ensure that all children had the best start to their school experience. Holding these professional positions gave me exceptional 'insider' knowledge and understandings of different and varying school environments and educational contexts, transition and wider school policy influences, transition to school processes, support systems for children with SEND,

as well as parental/ caregiver and practitioner challenges and concerns. Having this professional experience and bringing it to my research demonstrates my unique position in being able to use this reflection when engaging with the data in an analytical way. For example, I was able to engage with the children's, parent/ caregiver and practitioner's stories with contextual understanding of their transition to school experiences and have empathic understanding of the challenges and worries they had at the time, which helped deepen and strengthen the meaning-making and interpretation of their data.

Nevertheless, my professional 'insider' knowledge also brought about assumptions that needed careful consideration, to ensure I did not influence my study findings and participants meaning-making. For example, through my professional position, I knew children with SEND often value friendships and play in their transition to school. But what I did not anticipate or predict was the depth and specificity of what the children shared with regards to the impact of Covid-19 on their transition to school experiences. This includes children with SEND recognising and reaching towards a sense of belonging and social connection in challenging contextual circumstances and creating and developing their own learning identities and connections through their own play opportunities in the smallest of spaces and places. These are just a few of the examples that demonstrate how I used my own unique position, alongside theoretical frameworks, to make meaning from the data and avoid my own personal influence over the findings.

Earlier in the introduction, I acknowledged two other huge emotional and personal transitions that has shaped the way I think, feel and am positioned within this research, giving me a distinctive depth of empathic understanding that went beyond my professional knowledge and understanding. The first one was having a baby during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the second was facing a breast cancer diagnosis merely a few weeks later. Experiencing these life-changing transitions genuinely placed me in an irreplaceable position to recognise, empathise and fully understand the challenges and fears that my participants also lived through and experienced at this time. For example, the children in my study held very vivid and real memories around the fears of catching Covid-19, bodily aches and pains, and the sadness of leaving their parent/ caregiver at the time. From my own experiences around the fear

of getting Covid-19 in case my chemotherapy couldn't go ahead and the impact it would have on my body, or the sadness I experienced when having to leave my new born baby to attend chemotherapy on my own, I really felt my participants fears and the emotive affect of transitioning to school during Covid-19. This distinctive position as a researcher was undoubtedly incomparable for enriching my analytical engagement and interpretations of the data, and without those experiences, I wouldn't have been able to access and make meaning from the data in the same way I did.

However, even though I believe undeniably that my position strengthened my study, it is vital to draw attention to the influence this personal influence could have on the data analysis. I was very aware of my personal position from the start of the study, and the risk of projecting my own emotional experiences during Covid-19 onto the children's and adult's data, rather than allowing their experiences to speak for themselves. To ensure this didn't happen, I have been ethically and reflexively transparent from the very beginning of my study regarding my own position and the knowledge, understanding and experiences I bring. Furthermore, when analysing and making meaning of the data, I ensured I used theoretical frameworks and methodological rigour. For example, when coding and creating themes within the children's and adult's data, and then making meaning of the findings within each theme, they were not only created through my own personal experiences, but also grounded in theory such as the UNCRC (1989), the BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), Carr's (1999) learning dispositions framework and the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012).

My professional positionality gave me the knowledge and understanding of transitions to school for children with SEND, my personal positionality gave me the empathic ability to hear and understand their experiences fully, and the theoretical frameworks gave me the structure to interpret their lived experiences rigorously and transparently. These distinctive positions that I hold demonstrate me as the right person for this study, acknowledging the importance of who the researcher is and their own lived experiences as a strength of interpretivist research (Punch, 2013; Holliday, 2007).

These huge life-changing transitions were the beginning of this thesis, where I wanted to have a purpose for the research, linking it to my professional experience of being a primary school practitioner, SENCo, and wondering how children with SEND, a marginalised group who usually face difficulties in a day-to-day basis, as well as their families, navigated this transition to primary school at such an unprecedented time within their lives. These experiences, just like the participants in the study, have shaped my thinking and feeling. Therefore, my reflexive and subjective knowledge is a prominent thread throughout the research, which supports the shared meanings.

This reflexive stance not only supports the ontological and epistemological position within the research, but it also supports the research methodology, the theoretical lens through which the research and data generated will be viewed and analysed, and the research methods adopted throughout the research. Given that experiences of transition to school will be unique for all children, families, practitioners, and schools, it is evident that the 'reality is neither objective nor singular, but multiple realities are created by individuals' (Coe et al., 2021: 55).

### ***3.3 Research Paradigm***

#### **3.3.1 Ontologies and Epistemologies**

A relativist ontology was adopted within this study, which recognises that multiple realities and lived experiences of children with SEND, parents/ caregivers and practitioners each construct their own diverse, yet valid realities of transition to school. Using a relativist ontology supports the notion that lived experiences and realities of children with SEND are equally as valid as adults' perspective, which warranted a child's rights perspective within the study. Furthermore, a relativist ontology aligns with Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), where different perspectives sit across the various systems within the ecology of the child, including the micro, meso, exo, macro and chronosystems.

An interpretivist epistemology was implemented within this study, which rather than seeking an objective truth, the aim of the study was to ensure the generation and interpretation of knowledge. Through exploring participants' meaning-making of transition to school during Covid-19 within their different school and family contexts,

it aligns with the BST of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) which demonstrates that transition to school is not a fixed entity but interpreted through proximal processes within systems and contexts the child develops. Furthermore, as suggested by Lundy (2007), interpreting and making meaning from children's voices is a rights-based commitment in itself. Gaining in-depth insights was an important part of the values and aims of this study, to provide richness to the data, rather than attempting to generalise the findings (Saunders et al., 2012).

Interpretivist research aspires to 'understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it' (Schwandt, 1998: 221). It is therefore socially constructed knowledge that comes from participants in the study. Findings and themes derived from the research may not be universally applicable, but what they do provide is a 'rich and contextually situated understanding' for this group of people at this particular time in history (McChesney and Aldridge, 2019).

Some early theorists argue that a positivist paradigm only regards life in measurable or scientific relations (Habermas, 1974; Horkheimer, 1972), often failing to consider personal values, context and real-life experiences of people, as they are fixated on finding a singular truth (Cho and Trent, 2006; Marshall and Rossman, 2016).

Therefore, an interpretivist paradigm was considered more suitable to the study aims and objectives than that of a positivist paradigm for this research.

The study was informed by an interpretive, constructionist epistemological perspective. Children's sense-making of their own transitions to school were explored at the individual case level yet understood as situated within a social and relational context that shaped their meaning-making. Although each child's narrative of their transition experience was unique, these meanings were socially produced through their relationships, systems in which they transitioned to school, Covid-19 and transition discourses and the ecological conditions that were apparent at this time. Interpretive, constructionist epistemology recognises and values children's voices and individual sense-making of their transition to school during Covid-19 as active meaning-makers, particularly in how they shaped or adopted agency within their transitions to school. Using this lens supports the analysis of how children with SEND experienced and made sense of their transition to school, routines and disruptions during Covid-19, and acknowledges that these meanings of transition to

school are shaped within relationships, institutional policies, practices and broader discourses, such as systemic inequalities associated with Covid-19. Using an interpretivist, constructionist viewpoint aligns with both a child's rights perspective, positioning the voices of children with SEND as subjective and unique to them in their experiences of transition to school during Covid-19, as well as recognising that their experiences are relational across contexts and systems in which they develop (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

### **3.4 Children's Rights**

*“The child is made of one hundred. The child has a hundred languages, a hundred hands, a hundred thoughts, a hundred ways of thinking, of playing, of speaking. A hundred. Always a hundred ways of listening, of marvelling, of loving, a hundred joys for singing and understanding, a hundred worlds to discover, a hundred worlds to invent, a hundred worlds to dream. The child has a hundred languages (and a hundred hundred hundred more) but they steal ninety-nine...” (Malaguzzi, translated by Lella Gandini)*

The 'voices' of children with SEND form the heart of this study, and this decision to put children at the centre of the research was motivated by not only my positionality, but also by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), and also the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). These human rights agreements in the UNCRC (1989) approved the rights of children and young people with SEND to express their views on all matters affecting them, and have their views considered and taken seriously (Articles 12), as well as the right to maximum participation, regardless of their disability (Article 23). This agreement has been reinforced by Article 7 of the UNCRPD (2006).

The rights of children with SEND have been supported within the ethical code for early childhood researchers (Bertram et al., 2025), recognising the importance of research with children and marginalised communities to have a voice and actively participate in decisions and actions which affect them (p.9). Further inspiration for advocating for children's voice in research included the work of Lundy (2007), who later created the model of child participation which emphasised the importance of Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989). Within this model, Lundy (2007) advocates for

child's rights-based participation in both creating policy and practice, and through her work, emphasises the importance of not just facilitating the voice of the child, but in doing so allowing them space to express their views freely, as well as ensuring their views are listened to and acted upon.

Some research has demonstrated that educational professionals have varying opinions regarding how much a child's voice should be included in educational matters that impact them. For example, a study by Sargeant and Gillet-Swan (2015) highlighted that several teachers encouraged active willingness of children's perspectives in educational matters, whereas others had very little trust in their competence to maintain and form valid opinions. Sargeant and Gillet-Swan (2015) reinforced that if children are not asked to give their views and opinions about the school in which they participate in, children will remain passive participants in educational processes.

To ensure children shape their identities, experiences and can be agentic in their own educational experiences, their voice is essential to understanding lived experiences (Dockett and Perry, 2014; Einarsdóttir, 2007), and 'partnerships with children are at the heart of effective pedagogy and positive educational outcomes' (Dockett et al., 2019: 139). For children with SEND, it is vital they are also given a platform to express their thoughts, experiences and lived realities. Coates and Vickerman (2013) reinforce this importance, suggesting that children's capacity to engage actively in matters that affect them should be assumed and not as a precondition, especially for young children and those with SEND. The Covid-19 pandemic represented a truly unique time for children with SEND transitioning into school, and without asking them and including them in research about their lived experiences at this time, it is difficult to gain a full understanding of what it was like for them, emphasising Langsted (1994) in Dockett and Perry (2005a) that '*children are experts in their own lives*' (p.4).

It is important to note here that children's 'voices' will all look differently. A definition of 'voice' and what this may mean and look like for children with SEND has been included in this study in section 2.7.1 (page 70). The next section highlights the guiding principles and assumptions within the study that centred the voices and rights of children with SEND, as well as reflecting on an ecological underpinning.

### ***3.5 Guiding principles and assumptions***

Careful consideration and consciousness of the research aims, literature, and the methodological assumptions for this study were vital in determining what theoretical framework to use to underpin the study. This ensured the research was situated within a theoretical framework that aligned with the methodology and participants and chosen purposefully as a meaningful guiding principle.

Within current research, many theoretical frameworks have been used to provide valuable and comprehensive understandings and insights into the realities and lived experiences of children with SEND, education, and their transition to school. These range from sociocultural perspectives which reflect historical, social and cultural contexts of a child, and how this influences their construction of meaning in their own worlds (Boyle et al., 2018; Peters, 2010), representing a shift from 'children as becoming', to 'children as beings' (Vogler et al., 2008: 6) in their transition to school. This perspective offers a more inclusive perception of child development, underpinned by the early work of Vygotsky (1962) who claimed child development occurred as a result of being active participants in their social, cultural and historical worlds.

Cognitive development perspectives on the transition to school include the early work of Piaget (1964) who drew on the idea of children going through stages or hierarchical progression based on their chronological age and other features, such as the child's temperament. These views often misalign with children with SEND who may not be developing in line with their chronological age and peers.

Other critical theories have been influenced by the early work of Habermas (1987) and Freire (1970), which aims to understand difference and inequity for children (Petriwskyj et al., 2005; Volgler et al., 2008), and this is often explored by reviewing the relationship between theory and practice, for example in the transition to school for children with SEND, a critical perspective would reconsider ideas and beliefs around concepts such as school readiness, to ensure it is inclusive, equitable and allowed for participation of all children (Petriwskyj and Grieshaber, 2011).

Another theoretical framework that is used predominantly in transition to school research is an ecological perspective, influenced by the work of Bronfenbrenner's (1977; 1979; 1986; 1993) EST, as well as Rimm-Kauffman and Pianta (2000),

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998, 2006) BST, and Tudge (2008). The ecological perspective suggests that transitions often are 'negotiated interactions among the ecologies of the systems' (Boyle et al. 2018), where children develop within a complex, nested system of multifaceted relationships, which in turn influences the child's life experiences (Paquette and Ryan, 2001). For example, the ecological perspective suggests that children's transitions to school are influenced by relationships in the systems around them, including parents, siblings, peers, practitioners, and other wider influences such as transition to school policies and events in time. As highlighted within the literature review, children with SEND are often positioned through normative education expectations, and practitioners are similarly constrained by rigid policy frameworks, with both groups interacting (or failing to interact) within complex systems. This creates tension and challenges within the transition to school process.

For this study, Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) BST was utilised as a theoretical lens which focussed on the child at the centre of their transition to school, and the systems around them. This ensured the study focussed on dyadic relationships and proximal processes for children within their systems in their transition to school during a worldwide pandemic, as well as continually considering the child at the centre of their experiences. Using this lens also allowed for the consideration of wider influences that shaped these lived experiences for children during the Covid-19 pandemic, such as wider Covid-19 policies and changes these brought in practice, both directly and indirectly affecting them.

### ***3.6 Early Ecological Systems Theory***

There is currently a vast amount of empirical evidence that supports the EST of Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1979; 1986; 1993) and the BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) when exploring questions about transitions to school (O'Toole and Hayes, 2016; Rimm-Kaufmann and Pianta, 2000; Then and Pohlmann-Rother, 2022), which adds to its validity as an effective and robust framework in which to use for such a comprehensive study of children's lived experiences of transition to school during the Covid-19 pandemic.

There are several ways the BST has been applied: Bronfenbrenner (1973; 1979; 1986; 1993) proposed not all children develop in the same way; much of how a child

develops depends on influences within layers of their environment (Guy-Evans, 2020). Using Bronfenbrenner's early perspective (1973; 1979; 1986; 1993) and his later adapted version of BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) the many layers of a child's environment can affect their transition experiences into school.

Bronfenbrenner observed ecological transitions usually occur for individuals as their 'position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both' (1979: 13). Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1979; 1986; 1993) located the child at the centre of these nested systems, including the micro, meso, exo, macro, and later, the chronosystem. These systems and their influence on a child's transition to school during a worldwide pandemic will be discussed later in this chapter.

Researchers who use alternative perspectives often critique Bronfenbrenner's systems (Petriwyskyj, 2014), and dispute the ecosystems around the child, suggesting they do not account for the diversity in children's varied lives and experiences, as well as failing to include longer-term trajectories for children in their school and home settings. Corsaro et al. (2002) and Vogler et al. (2008) claim the microsystems in a child's ecosystem often fail to prioritise the individual child. They argue that even though Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1979; 1986; 1993) assumed children are often central to their microsystems, locating them at the centre of this system does not inevitably echo the priorities of the system or context in which they are located, inhabit or develop.

Nevertheless, within current literature, there is also evidence to suggest that using an ecological lens, like the BST, is essential for exploring children's transitions to school (O'Toole and Hayes, 2016; Rimm-Kaufmann and Pianta, 2000; Then and Pohlmann-Rother, 2023). Although Bronfenbrenner's theory changed substantially over the years, his theories always remained dedicated to the 'ecology' of people and their environment (Navarro et al., 2022), considering the synergistic importance of the context and systems surrounding the child in which their development occurred.

The focus on the ecosystems around the child can be seen in Figure 1. It is these systems, and relationships within these systems that Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1979; 1986; 1993) claims impact a child's development. Each system is described below

and examples of how this relates to children’s experiences of transitioning to school are given.

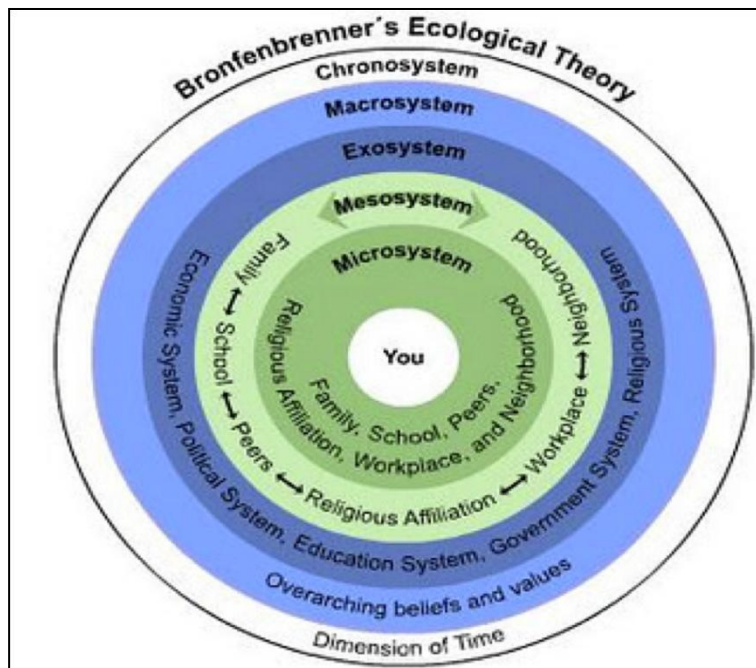


Figure 1: Ecological Systems Theory - Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1979; 1986; 1993)

### 3.6.1 Micro-, Meso-, Exo-, Macro- and Chronosystems

According to Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1979; 1986; 1993), a child has the potential to grow, develop, and flourish within their microsystems. The microsystem comprises the child themselves and interactions within their immediate environment, including family, peers, religious groups, the community in which they live, and their school. As already highlighted, some literature (Corsaro et al., 2002; Vogler et al., 2008) declares the microsystems in a child’s ecosystem often neglect the priorities of individual children, focussing more on the priorities within the system or context in which the children are located. During the Covid-19 school closures, there were many stresses and strains put on schools, teachers, parents/ caregivers, and children. Schools moved to remote learning, and parents moved to work from home.

Additionally, Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1979; 1986; 1993) claims the ‘mesosystem’ is also of paramount importance to a child’s development and well-being during their transition to school and describes this system as the set of interactions between the microsystems of the child. For example, the links made between home and school between children, parents/ caregivers, practitioners and their peers. Bronfenbrenner

(1977; 1979; 1986; 1993) suggests the number of links made, as well as the strength of these links within the child's microsystems, will impact a child's experience and outcomes, and 'the developmental potential of a setting is increased as a function of the number of supportive links existing between the setting and other settings (such as family and home)' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 215). Examples of developing links within a child's mesosystem concerning their transition to school include activities like meeting their class teacher, visiting the classroom and environment, meeting new peers, parents/ caregivers and teachers, and home or nursery setting visits.

As suggested in the recent Covid-19 inquiry (Verian, 2025), school transition was significantly disrupted for all children starting school during this time. Therefore, it is worth enquiring what these mesosystem links looked like for children, parents/ caregivers, and school settings when children with SEND transitioned to school during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, gaining an understanding of whether it was possible to develop strong proximal processes virtually and remotely, as Bronfenbrenner states 'the least favourable condition for development is one in which supplementary links are either non-supportive or completely absent...' (1979: 215).

The exosystem is concerned with the impact of distant influences and indirect environments on a child, where they could shape the child and their development, without having direct involvement. This could include strain from a parent's workplace indirectly impacting a child, (lack of) access to community services, decisions made by leadership teams, mass social media influences, and an informal social network around the child. Examples of what this may look like for children transitioning to school during Covid-19 could be the impact of parents having to work from home or become key workers in the pandemic. This change in the working environment could impact home dynamics for parents and children, which could therefore impact relationships, communication, and development of children. Strict rules like inhibiting school attendance, attending school in bubbles, and learning from home became some of the rules placed on children during this time, and although they were not involved in making these decisions, ultimately could have an impact on their development.

The macrosystem comprises influences on the child that are considered at a cultural or historical level. This system could indirectly impact a child's development through factors in the child's wider environment and includes things like the family or school beliefs around education, inclusion, and early childhood. An example of this would be a school's beliefs around inclusion and how or if the school created policies and procedures for supporting and fully including those children with SEND during Covid-19, making remote learning accessible to them. This could also include the school system ensuring they have the support they need at home to learn, as well as what the landscape looked like for them in terms of being able to attend their setting as they were classed as 'vulnerable children' on the governmental guidelines.

The chronosystem was later introduced by Bronfenbrenner (1986), as he observed across a child's lifetime that many different transitions occur, and these shifts or changes across time can influence a child's development within their ecosystems. Bronfenbrenner (1986) suggests shifts in time could impact a child's development, including traumas or major life events, such as starting school, and parents' divorce. For this study, it is vitally important to consider the impact of the chronosystem on a child's transition to school through not only a major life event like starting school, but also the implications of a global pandemic. For children with SEND, living through a global pandemic could impact their development over time as they were unable to attend school, have support for their individual needs, socialise and form relationships with peers and teachers, and have opportunities to play freely.

### ***3.7 Proximal Processes of the Bioecological Model of Human Development***

Bronfenbrenner later refined the EST, to the BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) as he observed that human development, especially in the early years of child development, often occurs through different processes of reciprocal and complex interactions between children and other people, objects, and symbols in their immediate external environment, as well as considering the contextual and individual bioecological characteristics (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). To be effective, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) emphasised these interactions as 'proximal processes', which should occur regularly and over an extended period of time.

As his work developed, Bronfenbrenner (1979) questioned the central feature of the EST, which often focussed on the context or environment of the development of the child, and shifted more to the processes and role of the developing child. He identified this in the PPCT model of the BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), where they described it as 'the combination of person and context exhibit(ing) a mutually reinforcing, multiplicative, indirect effect on the power of proximal processes as the engines of development' (p.801).

Here, it could be suggested that children do not develop from simply existing within a certain context, but through ongoing, reciprocal interactions and engagement of the child and their immediate environment.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) claim that without these proximal processes in a child's context or environment, development will not happen, regardless of the child's own characteristics or their environment. This was supported in a recent study by Schürer et al. (2025), suggesting the focus of proximal processes are essential to positive transitions to school for children, and includes children being engaged with school activities, which align with the BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). They reiterate that the proximal processes play a crucial role in shaping children's sense of feeling comfortable, safe, and secure during the transition to primary school, through the establishment of secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships.

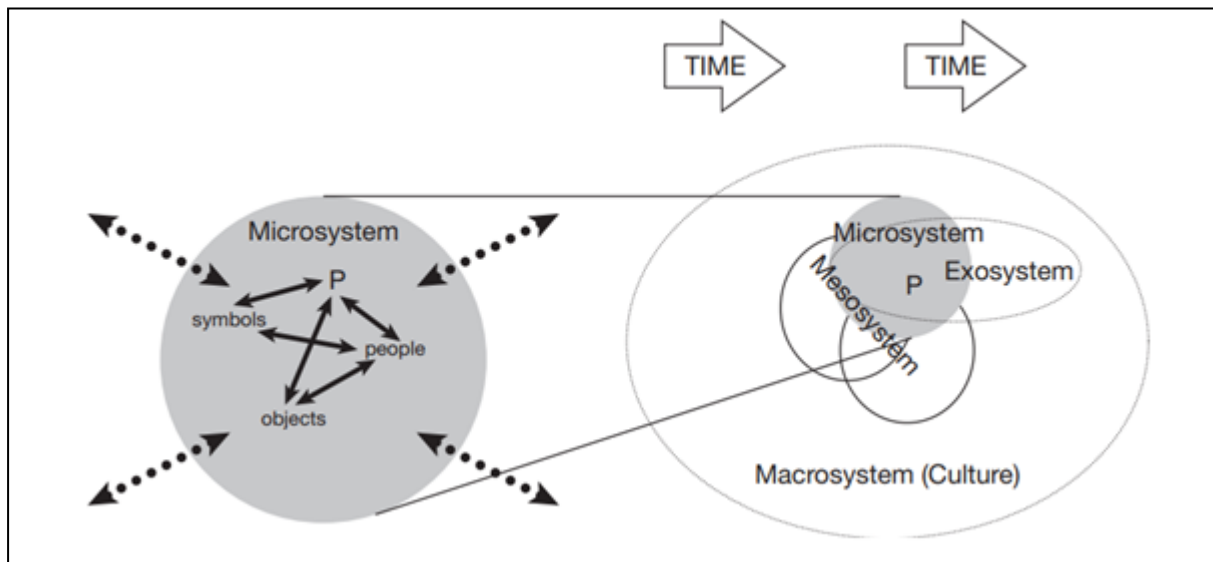
Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) suggest features such as person and context of the PPCT model are 'mutually reinforcing', suggesting that a child and the context they are in do not function in isolation. For example, both the personal characteristics of a child and the context in which they operate will influence how they might engage in proximal processes. Personal characteristics may include the child's motivation to engage, their own temperament, or a special educational need and/ or disability, as well as the context in which they are in, such as schools, family and cultures.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) claim these aspects can both afford or constrain opportunities of interaction and proximal process to occur.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) claim these interactions should be of high quality, regular, and over an extended period to be valuable for a child, for example regularly playing with young children, consistent child-child activities, frequent learning and acquisition of new skills and knowledge and taking part in regular athletic activities. It

will be worth considering what these processes looked like for children with SEND during their transition to school during Covid-19, and their experiences of developing these interactions effectively with strict rules and regulations.

The development of the PPCT concept can be seen in figure 2 below:



*Figure 2: Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time concept of the Bioecological Systems Theory. Source: Tudge (2008: 69)*

It is important to consider the PPCT for this study as it draws on the importance of the various experiences children with SEND may have had when they started school during such an uncertain period in their lives. The four components of the PPCT will be discussed in detail next.

### **3.7.1 Process**

The 'process' element of the BST is deemed an essential part of the PPCT model which involves various interactions and transactions, both proximal and distal, between the child and various environments in which they function. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) assert that within the process element of the BST, bi-directional interactions between the child and other people within different environments can have both a direct and indirect influence on the development of a child, suggesting children can both influence and be influenced by their environment. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) call these 'proximal processes' and propose for the child to develop effectively, such interactions should be continuous and reciprocal between the individual child and other persons, objects, and symbols in their immediate,

external, and wider systems, and carried out consistently over a period, not just as a one-off interaction (p.797). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) hypothesised that processes are key principles that produce human development and gave examples of proximal processes such as playing with a young child; child-child activities; solitary or group play, reading, and learning new skills. These activities mirror the type of transition activities that schools' usually offer when children start school.

Given the importance that Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) place on the proximal processes with the BST, the influence and impact of proximal processes for child development will vary depending on other factors with the PPCT model. This includes the characteristics of the person (P), the environmental contexts, both immediate and distant to the child (C), and the period (T) in which the processes take place. However, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) reiterate that the effect of the process is more influential than the context in which the process occurs, suggesting that robust, positive, and encouraging relationships could overcome the impact of the most problematic and detrimental environments. Without genuine, considerate, and compassionate relationships being established between the child and others in bi-directional interactions, even the most positive of environments may not support the development of the child. This resonates with the key theme of relationships within the literature review.

To put this into context within the transition to school experiences for children with SEND, it could be suggested that these proximal processes and interactions between the child and their environments were considerably altered during the Covid-19 pandemic. For children with SEND, not only did they have to adjust to remote learning, having to socially distance themselves from other people in restricted environments, but they also had limited interactions with teachers and peers, and their environment. This in turn may have impacted their ability to develop bi-directional interactions in their school environment. The restrictions imposed by governmental guidelines at the time could have impacted the possibility of developing these interactions and transactions for children, as well as their support network whilst starting school.

### **3.7.2 Person**

The person element of the PPCT considers the active role of children in influencing their development, with an emphasis on unique varying biological and genetic factors of the child, including individual characteristics and their diverse interactions with different environments (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006; Hayes et al., 2017).

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) also considered other personal characteristics that individual children bring to social situations and categorised them into demand characteristics, resource characteristics, and force characteristics.

Demand characteristics, which Bronfenbrenner referred to in his early work around person-context and personal stimulus, claimed that characteristics such as age, gender, and skin colour, for example can influence initial interactions due to expectations formed immediately (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006; Tudge et al., 2009).

In contrast to personal stimulus, resource characteristics are often not immediately apparent in an individual, and relate to mental and emotional resources, such as past experiences, the individual's skills and intelligence, and social and material resources, for example, access to food, housing, educational opportunities appropriate to needs (Tudge et al., 2009).

Force characteristics include things like an individual's motivation, persistence or differences in temperament of an individual, and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) explain these characteristics as two children who may have equal resource characteristics, but their individual development trajectories could look very different if one child is motivated to succeed and persist in activities and achievement, and the other child does not. Examples of these factors may include the child's genetics, their gender, cognition, motivation, and their family environment. Considering the person element of the PPCT allows the research to consider the diversity of children, especially those with SEND, and the individual characteristics, needs, and attributes they possess, which could in turn influence their interactions in different environments and impact their development overall.

### **3.7.3 Context**

The context element comprises the setting or environment in which development will occur and involves the four interrelated systems of the micro, meso, exo, and macrosystems, which mirrors the early systems of the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979; 1986; 1993).

For this research, it is vital to consider the context of the education system in which the child is part of, as well as political and governmental systems around the child, the context of the family, societal influences, and community resources that could impact a child's development in relation to their transition to school. Even though children may not directly interact within these different contexts and systems, they indirectly impact the development of the child. For example, policies and decisions made by senior leaders, local and national government policies, and varied guidelines from school leaders meant children with SEND had to stay at home and undertake remote learning. For children with SEND, these decisions in their wider systems meant they missed out on interacting with their peers, limited opportunities to develop individualised skills related to their specific needs and had limited opportunities to communicate with other adults and peers.

Other examples within the context element of the PPCT concerning a child's transition to school could be things like children's access to technology and resources whilst learning from home, especially for children with SEND who may need specialist and individualised support, and a limited ability to access public outdoor areas and spaces. For this study, it is important to explore the context of the school settings for children with SEND, considering how happy or settled they are at school, friendships developed and the opportunities they get to develop their skills and strengths.

### **3.7.4 Time**

The time aspect of the PPCT includes events and chronological time, including the age and development of children. This often reflects the child's development that can be affected across their lifetime by a range of differing factors including cultural and historical factors, economic systems, and political ideologies. It is important to consider a child's development and transition to school within a time context, due to the unique historical context of Covid-19. The global pandemic significantly changed

many societal norms within the current education landscape, including a shift in parents' work patterns to include hybrid and remote working, a change in relationships between parents and schools, potentially supporting a link between parents and school through less formal communication methods and more flexible ways of working, increased economic uncertainty, and heightened stresses on public health, with Covid-19 still being very much present in our everyday lives and within schools.

All these factors impact a child's educational experiences, as well as possibly highlighting systemic or inclusive disparities across time for children with SEND. For example, access to outside, specialist support including occupational therapists, speech and language support, educational psychologists, and social workers. It is worth considering what the team around the child looked like during this time of transition to school and the support that was in place, including exploring the vision of inclusive education for children with SEND within schools across this unprecedented time.

Overall, the BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) lens will allow the study to explore a variety of external factors within a child's environment when they transitioned to school during an unprecedented time. It will acknowledge the complexities between children with SEND and different environments that encourage or inhibit their transition to school, through exploring their own lived experiences at this time.

### ***3.8 Research Design***

#### **3.8.1 Research Questions**

The study aimed to address how the Covid-19 pandemic shaped the transition to primary school experiences for children with SEND by answering the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How did children with SEND in Birmingham experience their transition to school during the Covid-19 pandemic?

**RQ2:** How did the parents/ caregivers and practitioners interpret the transition to primary school experiences for their child with SEND during the Covid-19 pandemic?

**RQ3:** What recommendations for pedagogical practice, policy and future research can be established for supporting children with SEND in their transition to school during times of crises on a local and global platform?

### **3.8.2 Case study methodology**

To explore the lived experiences of children starting school during Covid-19 in context, a case study methodology was used as the 'overall guiding strategy', encompassing a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigmatic or philosophical positioning (Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 158).

Whilst some researchers disregard case studies for lacking generalisability and empirical effectiveness (Creswell, 2013; Thomas, 2017), the benefits of using a case study methodology for this research coincided with the research aims, providing rich descriptions and allowing for individual perspectives, real-world contexts and meanings to be understood (Thomas, 2017; Yin, 2018), rather than make generalisations or universal claims. Furthermore, case study methodology aligns with the study's ontological and epistemological positioning, recognising the individual perspectives of children with SEND, their parents/ caregivers and practitioners, and the social contexts of their environment and systemic influences around them.

Multiple, embedded and retrospective case studies were utilised in this research (Stake, 1995; Yin; 2018). Multiple cases involved five children with SEND across different school settings, as well as their parents/ caregivers and practitioners' perspective. The case studies were embedded within each child's transition to school 'case', where I gathered data from different units of analysis, such as the child themselves, their parent/ caregiver and the practitioner. As the transition to school had already happened, the case studies were inevitably retrospective, allowing the participants to reflect on their experiences. There were five cases explored in total, all situated within Birmingham LA.

Several research methods that aligned with this methodology were used within the study. This included online qualitative surveys as an initial data gathering exercise, semi-structured interviews, and creative methods with children with SEND (more detail on these can be found in section 3.11, pages 133-138). Using several

research methods triangulated the data generation, enhancing its validity and reliability in data produced (McChesney and Aldridge, 2019). The credibility of research methods and data generation have been discussed further in section 3.13 around research integrity (page 143).

### **3.9 Pilot Study**

A pilot study was carried out with three practitioners, one parent and one autistic child, based at a familiar mainstream school setting. The school was chosen through convenience sampling, providing easy access and familiarity of participants, to gain honest and constructive feedback on the quality and accessibility of the research methods. Gaining feedback on the methods, research information and consent was essential to ensure clarity of study aims for and understanding of participants, and consent within the research.

According to Gudmundsdottir and Brock-Utne (2010) and Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2001), carrying out a pilot study strengthens the research quality of a study, as it adds to the research reliability, credibility and validity. Kim (2010) would agree, suggesting a pilot study is a crucial part of the research design. Therefore, undertaking a pilot study was a very useful process as it allowed for reflection, feedback and amendments for consent forms and research methods, before undertaking the real study. The amendments from the pilot study can be seen in the table 3 below.

**Table 3: Pilot Study Findings**

Pilot Study Findings	Original Version	Changed Version
1. Functionality of Online Survey	No option for parents/ caregivers to leave email/ contact details to arrange a follow-up interview.	Option at the end for parents/ caregivers to leave email/ contact details to arrange a follow-up interview.
2. Wording on Access Request Letter ambiguous	Make wording clearer for practitioners and headteachers to be fully aware of the research aims and participants.	Access Request Letter updated to ensure aims of study much clearer
3. Consider space of working with children with SEND	Conversation with child was continuously disrupted by practitioner during the time spent at the setting working with the child.	Ensure there is a quiet space without distractions for children to feel happy sharing their experiences in a confidential way.

### **3.10 Participants**

The sample participants for this study were children with SEND, their parents/ caregivers, and practitioners within Birmingham LA. To obtain participants and develop a case as part of the case study design, purposive sampling was intended to be used. This method uses specific criteria selected intentionally to gain information-rich cases (Patton, 2002), by identifying and selecting inclusion and exclusion criteria that participants must meet to be included in the study (Creswell and Plano Clarke, 2018). The inclusion criteria can be found in table 4 (page 123).

The online survey aimed to recruit between 6-8 participants. This method of data generation was intended to be used as an initial information gathering exercise to gathering ethnographic information and contextual information of the child, family and practitioners. The data generated within these online surveys was used as a catalyst to semi-structured interviews and discussions. The qualitative details from the online survey were used to give contextual information, that is presented in the

findings chapter, located as foregrounding ethnographic information for each child participant.

For the semi-structured interviews, the study aimed to recruit the same participants who completed the online survey, which aimed to include between six to eight participants within each participant group. For the creative conversations with children with SEND, the study aimed to recruit six to eight participants. The sample size of this study corresponds with an interpretive paradigm and the study's aims, where no set sample size is required within the data set (Thomas, 2017). The findings simply provide 'insight' into the lived experiences of children with SEND starting school during a worldwide pandemic and what the realities were like for them at that time, rather than generalising for the whole population of children with SEND starting school during this time (Thomas, 2017).

**Table 4: Inclusion Criteria**

<p><b>Inclusion Criteria</b></p> <p><b>Child:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A child with special educational needs and/ or disabilities, who started reception class in 2020/ 2021.</li><li>• Attends a school within Birmingham LA.</li></ul> <p><b>Parent/ Caregiver:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A parent/ caregiver of a child with special educational needs and/ or disabilities who started reception class in 2020/ 2021.</li><li>• A parent/ caregiver of a child who attends a school within Birmingham LA.</li></ul> <p><b>Practitioner:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• An early year's practitioner of a child with special educational needs and/ or disabilities who started in their class in 2020/ 2021.</li><li>• Practitioner was involved in the transition to primary school experience of children with SEND during 2020/2021.</li><li>• Teaches in a school setting within Birmingham LA.</li></ul>
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Table four above highlights the inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants in my study. As highlighted, my participants include children with SEND, parents/ caregivers and practitioners. Whilst I acknowledge that transition to school for children with SEND is a joined-up and relational process between children, pre-schools, private nurseries and childminders, parents/ caregivers, practitioners, SENCos and outside-agency support, given that this interpretivist study was small-scale, and bounded by timescales and limited resources, it was not feasible to include everyone involved within the transition to school experiences for children with SEND. Therefore, I made a justifiable decision to only include children with SEND themselves, their parents/ caregivers, and the practitioners who supported them at this time.

This decision supported the study aims, which were specifically interested in the realities and experiences of transition to school for those within the immediate microsystems of children with SEND during Covid-19 (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; 2006). This allowed me to focus on the relationships and interactions that shaped the experiences of children with SEND in their transition to school in their immediate classroom environment at this time.

Even though it is acknowledged SENCOs help coordinate transition for children with SEND (DoH & DfE, 2015), their role within schools often operate at a wider and more strategic level, focusing on the coordination of support for children with SEND, rather than what this may look like on a daily basis within the immediate classroom environment of the child. Therefore, I decided that SENCOs would not be included in the participant sample, unless the practitioner was also a SENCO themselves. Similarly, early years settings such as pre-schools, private nursery settings or child-minders that children with SEND attended prior to starting school were not included in the participant sample for this study. Whilst I have acknowledged in earlier discussions around the significance and importance of early years settings in preparing children for transitions to school (page 32), including them in the study sample was complex, as many children with SEND in my study were not able to attend or access these environments due to the rules and restrictions imposed by Covid-19 policies, and parents/ caregivers wanting to keep their children safe from ill-health.

The recruitment of the participants for this study became complex and multifaceted. To find participants that met the inclusion criteria of the research, an initial email was sent out to senior school leaders at primary school settings and specialist settings within Birmingham LA. The school contact information was obtained through link schools with BCU, as well as using a search function on the LA website directory for all primary school settings in the region. I also used a contact within BCU for access to a specialist setting.

However, after getting very few responses through purposive sampling, snowball sampling happened organically through links made with senior leaders at each

setting, with the senior leaders passing the details of the study onto other senior leaders in different settings. As the researcher, I spent varying amounts of time within each setting, depending on the availability of participants and the time the school setting agreed. I offered to spend an extended amount of time in all settings, to familiarise themselves with the setting and the participants. Only one setting took me up on this offer, and therefore I spent two weeks sporadically attending this setting. I attended the other settings on an ad-hoc basis, depending on what could be arranged with the participants, which was led by senior leaders or practitioners within the settings.

### ***3.10.1 Participant demographics***

This study included three main participant categories: children with SEND, their parents/ caregivers, and practitioners. The methods of data generation included initial information gathering online qualitative surveys with practitioners and parents/ caregivers, semi-structured interviews with practitioners and parents/ caregivers, and creative conversations with children. These have been discussed in section 3.11 (page 133). An overview of the participants, school settings, and methods of data generation can be found in table 5 below.

**Table 5: Overview of settings, participants, and methods of data generation**

School	Setting Type	Practitioner Online Survey	Practitioner semi- structured interview	Parent/ Caregiver Online Survey	Parent/ Caregiver Semi- Structured Interview	Creative method with child
Riverbank School	Specialist Setting	3	3	1	1	1
Silver Birch Primary School	Mainstream Primary School	2	2	2	2	2
Sun Blossom Primary School	Mainstream Primary School	1	1	1	1	1
Evergreen Middle School	Mainstream Primary School	1	1	1	0	1
*Pebble Shore School	Specialist Setting	1	1	0	0	0
**Treetop School	Mainstream Primary School	1	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>		<b>9 (7 in full case study total)</b>	<b>8 (7 in case study total)</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

\*Pebble Shore School – only the practitioner participated in the online survey and semi-structured interview and therefore was not part of the overall case study findings.

\*\* Treetop School only participated in the practitioner interview and therefore was not part of the overall case study findings.

Initially, as the table above suggests, six schools participated in the study, with nine practitioners completing the online survey, and eight practitioners completing a semi-structured interview. This included two specialist settings and four mainstream primary school settings. As the study progressed, parents/ caregivers from two settings did not want to participate in the study and did not want their child to participate in the study due to medical needs. Adhering to ethical guidelines and participant choice was essential. Overall, there were four schools who fully participated in the study (with the child, parent/ caregiver and practitioner). For the purposes of this research and case study methodology, only the data generated from these four schools has been included in the findings and discussion of this study. This ensured full case studies could be explored in-depth and included all participant voices.

### **3.10.2 School Context**

The settings that participated fully in the study were distinct, and included both mainstream primary school settings, and specialist settings. A detailed description of each setting that fully participated in the study can be found in table 6 below. The two schools identified above as not fully participating are not included in this context.

**Table 6: Description of school settings**

Type of Setting	School context	Child
<b>Specialist Settings</b>		
Riverbank School	Riverbank School is an independent primary school for children aged five to eleven years and is a specialist provision for children with physical disabilities. It has a nursery department for parents and children to access from eighteen months of age.	Lola
<b>Mainstream Settings</b>		
Silver Birch Primary School	Silver Birch Primary is a voluntary aided primary school with a strong Catholic ethos. The primary school is a medium-sized primary school with on average 200 pupils and seven classes from Reception to Year 6.	Chloe Kobe
Evergreen Middle School	Evergreen Middle School is a voluntary aided primary school, with a strong Catholic ethos. Evergreen school has approximately 350 pupils on roll. Almost all the pupils are from ethnic majority groups, with four out of five pupils speaking English as an additional language. The percentage of children who attend the school is in line with the national average. There is no nursery school provision at this setting.	Basim
Sun Blossom Primary	Sun Blossom Primary is a large voluntary aided primary school, with approximately 630 pupils. The school has nursery class provision. There are currently approximately 130 children on their SEND register, with approximately 10-15 children with an EHCP and several children with a SEND provision plan.	Amna

### 3.10.3 Practitioners

Details of practitioner participants can be found in table 7, below. These include the seven practitioners who participated fully in the research and provided ethnographic information about their teaching experiences in their online survey.

**Table 7: Practitioner Participant Information**

Practitioner Number	Pseudonym	Setting Name and Type	Number of years teaching	Number of children with SEND entering Reception in Sept. 2020
1	Ella	Riverbank School (Specialist Setting)	4-6	3-5
2	Emma	Riverbank School (Specialist Setting)	4-6	0-2
3	Laura	Riverbank School (Specialist Setting)	0-3	0-2
4	Jo	Silver Birch Primary School (Mainstream Primary School)	7-9	0-2
5	Lorna	Silver Birch Primary School (Mainstream Primary School)	10+	3-5
6	Dani	Evergreen Middle School (Mainstream Primary School)	10+	3-5
7	Sarah	Sun Blossom Primary (Mainstream Primary School)	7-9	3-5

*(Data taken from initial online survey)*

As part of the full case studies, three practitioners fully participated from Riverbank School, two practitioners fully participated from Silver Birch Primary School, one practitioner fully participated from Sun Blossom Primary School, and one practitioner fully participated from Evergreen Middle School.

### 3.10.4 Parents/ Caregivers

A total of five parents/ caregivers participated in the study. Details of parent/ caregiver participants can be found in table 8 below.

**Table 8: Parent/ Caregiver Participant Information**

Parent/ Caregiver Number	Parent/ Caregiver of...	Relation to child	Setting Name and Type	Online Survey/ Semi-structured interview, or both
1	Lola	Mum	Riverbank School (Specialist Setting)	Both
2	Chloe	Mum	Silver Birch Primary School (Mainstream Primary School)	Both
3	Kobe	Dad	Silver Birch Primary School (Mainstream Primary School)	Both
4	Amna	Mum	Sun Blossom School (Specialist Setting)	Both
5	Basim	Mum	Evergreen Middle School (Mainstream Primary School)	Online Survey

Four parent/ caregiver participants were female, and one parent/ caregiver participant was male. Out of five parent/ caregiver participants, four parents/ caregivers completed both the online survey and semi-structured interview, whilst one parent/ caregiver completed the online survey only.

### **3.10.5 Children with SEND**

A total of five children between the ages of seven and eight participated in creative conversations within four school settings. One child attending the specialist provision also attended a mainstream setting part-time. This mainstream school was not included in the study, therefore results from their specialist provision will be reported only.

All children had specific needs that could be identified within the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015); two children had physical disabilities, of which one child also had moderate learning difficulties, and three children had an autism spectrum disorder. Out of the five children, three children had an EHCP in place, with one child's application for an EHCP in progress. Two children (one including the child whose EHCP application was in progress) were identified as 'SEN Support'.

The children were selected to participate in the study by senior leaders and practitioners at their school settings, based on their suitability to meet the inclusion criteria, as well as parent/ caregivers' decisions and the child's decision on whether they wanted to participate in the study. Consent and assent have been discussed previously in 3.14 (page 154). Details of the children who participated in the study are provided in table 9 below.

**Table 9: Child Participant Information**

Child	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Setting Name and Type	SEND (as identified by parent/ caregiver)	EHCP/ SEN Support
1	Lola	Female	7	Riverbank School (Specialist Setting)	Physical Disability/ Moderate Learning Difficulties	EHCP
2	Chloe	Female	7	Silver Birch Primary School (Mainstream Primary School)	Autism Spectrum Disorder	SEN Support
3	Kobe	Male	8	Silver Birch Primary School (Mainstream Primary School)	Autism Spectrum Disorder/ Speech, Language and Communication needs	SEN Support (EHCP in progress)
4	Amna	Female	8	Sun Blossom Primary School (Mainstream Primary School)	Physical Disability	EHCP
5	Basim	Male	8	Evergreen Middle School (Mainstream Primary School)	Autism Spectrum Disorder	EHCP

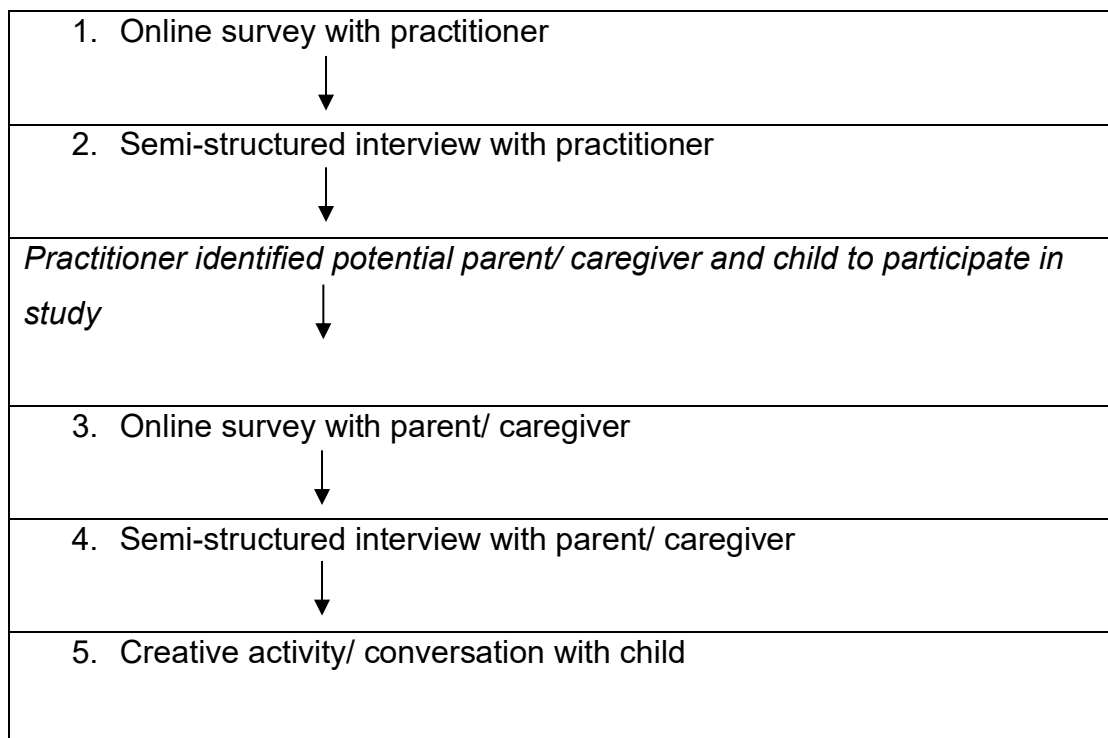
*(Data taken from parent/ caregiver online survey)*

### 3.11 Data Generation Methods

Given the paucity of research from the voice of children with SEND, and the gaps within current literature regarding children with SEND and their experience of transition to primary school, it was essential that the children's voices were central in this research. This aligns with the child at the centre of their 'microsystem' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) and aligning with Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) and the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015).

It was also vital to consider other key participants' voices within the study, as transition to primary school is viewed within the literature as a holistic experience and should not be considered in isolation. Having done so would not have given a fair representation of children's experiences of starting school. Therefore, the experiences of children with SEND, their parents/ caregivers, and practitioners were the focus of the study, all data were generated with all three participant groups.

Nevertheless, due to gatekeeping challenges from headteachers (discussed in study limitations section 6.7, page 342), data was generated in a sequential format as shown below:



### **3.11.1 Online Qualitative Surveys**

An online qualitative survey was used during the early phase of the research, as a scoping and initial data-gathering exercise. The purpose of the online survey was to gain an understanding of parental and practitioner concerns about transition to school for their child with SEND during Covid-19 to aid topics and discussions within semi-structured interviews, and to identify potential participants for the study. The ethnographic data within the online surveys has been used as part of the ethnographic data within the children's case studies.

Although the survey generated useful background and ethnographic insights, and highlighted areas where parents and practitioners felt particularly concerned, the insights helped shape interview prompts, and presenting this data would have repeated the data. Therefore, the online survey contributed to the iterative refinement of the research design, even though the data are not presented.

Online qualitative surveys are effective for researching a phenomenon with a broad lens, as well as allowing participants to engage with research in an accessible and flexible way (Marks et al., 2017; Roberts and Allen, 2015). However, there were challenges with using an online survey and not being situated in the school setting to follow-up on response rates (Shih and Fan, 2008). As the researcher, I had to send reminders to practitioners to ask them to complete the survey, and in turn, rely on the practitioners to send reminders to parents/ caregivers. This was a timely and challenging process, with some no-responses (Heerwegh and Loosveldt, 2008). Following up the online survey with a semi-structured interview mitigated the non-responses, as these questions were explored further during the interviews.

An example of the online survey for both practitioners and parents/ caregivers can be found in appendices 9 and 10.

### **3.11.2 Semi-structured Interviews with Practitioners/ Parents/ Caregivers**

To gain rich and deep data about children's experiences of transition into school during Covid-19 school closures, semi-structured interviews with practitioners and parents/ caregivers were carried out. An interview schedule was created with general topics to be discussed (see appendix 11 and 12), but it was important to be flexible and have a range of topics rather than set questions, as this allowed discussions to be flexible and natural, creating scope to raise individual experiences in detail that

the participants or I may not have anticipated (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Thomas, 2017). Semi-structured interviews allow for both the profundity of information to be obtained, as well as having the flexibility to discuss specific issues around the theme, which according to Thomas (2017; 206) is having the 'best of both worlds', compared to structured or unstructured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were deemed effective as they allowed purposeful interactions between participants, discovering what they feel and think, and what significance or meaning it may have for them and others (Coe et al., 2021). Seidman (2019) reiterates this power of using semi-structured interviews to gain knowledge of unique and lived experiences, claiming 'at the heart of in-depth interviewing is an interest in other individuals' stories because they are of worth' (p.9).

The 'worth' that Seidman (2019) talks about was essential in this interpretivist study, and in-depth interviewing ensured an insight and appreciation into other people's perspectives about their child's transition to school experiences. This allowed meanings around the topic to be made, and the significance of their life events to be shared. This offered a means to greater discovery and greater understanding of transition into school for children with SEND during Covid-19 school closures (Coe et al., 2021). Additionally, using semi-structured interviews was also useful to clarify and triangulate additional sources of data generated through surveys and other creative research methods used. To ensure participants felt comfortable discussing sensitive issues, interviews were conducted in an accommodating way to suit individual wishes. This included meeting parents at a café and a park and walking and talking about their children's experiences of starting school in an informal environment.

Even though Thomas (2017) claims transcribing interviews is time-intensive, this process of transcribing verbatim was invaluable and instrumental in becoming immersed within the data, ensuring an understanding and make-meaning of what the children, their parents/ caregivers and practitioners were saying about such a poignant time in the transition process to school. This ensured data was accurate and consistently captured, outweighing the time-intensive nature. Data generated through interviews provided validity and credibility, offering an honest and authentic

understanding of the transition experiences that children underwent during Covid-19. This method also allowed for discussing sensitive data, which alternative methods such as focus groups fail to offer (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

### ***3.11.3 Creative Conversations with Children with SEND***

Creative methods of data generation, such as the 'Mosaic Approach' (Clark and Moss, 2011) influenced the creative research methods used with children with SEND in this research. Here, Clark and Moss (2011) use a variety of multiple research methods to gain knowledge about young children's perspectives and usually include methods such as child conferencing (interviews), child-led photography, child-led tours, mapping, parent interviews, and practitioner interviews. Using a variety of methods allows the researcher to weave together a 'mosaic' for each child, through an opportunity for dialogue, reflection, and interpretation (Clark and Moss, 2011). Instead of seeing the mosaic as a final answer about a child's experiences, they provide and provoke ways of co-creating knowledge between children, parents, and practitioners. Clark and Moss (2011) claim within this data generation process, children's perspectives, voices, and experiences should be deeply respected, and using a range of creative methods with children is necessary to draw on the strengths of individual children and offer them a range of opportunities to think and communicate.

For children with SEND, providing individualised and unique methods of data generation was essential within this study, to give them the opportunity to voice their experiences around transitioning to primary school during the Covid-19 lockdown, focusing on their strengths and interests at this time. The voices of parents/ caregivers and practitioners were interweaved throughout the children's own mosaics to provide a robust and interconnected representation of the realities of starting school during a world-wide pandemic for children with SEND. The children who participated in the research had a wide spectrum of needs, such as speech, language and communication needs and ASD, physical needs such as cerebral palsy, and SEMH. To engage the child as best as possible in conversation regarding their transition to school during Covid-19, creative methods were used (see appendix 13 for an example of questions used to initiate conversation with children). These activities were chosen by children themselves, but information was gathered from

their parents/ caregivers and practitioners before the creative session took place such as the child's communication preferences, and their likes/ dislikes. This meant creative activities were well-suited to the child's strengths and interests and engaged them in a discussion in a fun and creative way. These resources ranged from role-playing with dolls, drawing and colouring pictures, to the use of photography and school tours around their setting. The creative methods chosen during these sessions are included in the children's ethnographic data in their case studies, section 4.2 – 4.6 (pages 161-252).

Whilst the data were generated after the children with SEND had started school, and were in Year 3, the distance between their transition to school and their engagement in this research did not undermine the validity of their stories. Aligning with an interpretivist approach, it was evident that children included in the study reflected on what was meaningful to them in their transition to school, including how they made sense of their transition to school experience over time. This challenges deficit assumptions around the ability of children with SEND to recall past events or articulate and communicate their experiences.

Considering the voice of the child with SEND was essential as the study aimed to explore the lived experiences of children with SEND in their transition to school during the school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As Einarsdóttir (2007) emphasised in her research with children – 'children, just like adults, are citizens who hold their own views and perspectives, they have competencies and the right to be heard, and they are able to speak for themselves if the appropriate methods are used' (p.197). This aligns with Pillay's (2014) views that children should be key contributors within educational research, as well as the UNCRC (1989).

Mannay et al. (2021) claims the use of creative methods allow researchers and participants to engage differently in research and are an effective method for carrying out research within educational settings and with children (Biesta, 2018; Mannay et al., 2021). There have been several ways that both researchers and practitioners have encouraged children to express their voice and agency, through activities like child-led photography, drawing, walking tours, collaging and many

other ways that recognise a child's 'hundred languages' of expression (Malaguzzi, 1996). This allows for opportunities for diverse types of voices to be expressed and heard, especially those children who use multimodal or alternative forms of communication to expressive language. These values that Malaguzzi (1996) talks of, such as recognising the many voices of children, emulate the values underpinning this study, including ensuring children with SEND can express their views, opinions, and feelings around important aspects of their lives and learning.

Other researchers including Pramling-Samuelsson and Johansson (2006) used participant observation, whilst Graue and Walsh (1998) used videos for recording interviews and observations. Clark (2005), Dockett and Perry (2005b), and Veale (2005) have also used methods like draw-and-talk techniques to gain children's views and experiences by listening to their narratives and interpretations. Additionally, photographs taken by children are another creative method that has been used throughout research as an opportunity for children to express their views and experiences around a topic. This is when children discuss the photographs, they have taken with the researcher to elicit meaning and interpretation and guide any interviews that may follow (Clark, 2005; Clark and Moss, 2011; Dockett and Perry, 2005b; Einarsdóttir, 2005; Mannay et al., 2021).

Some researchers, including Mannay et al. (2021) and Cappello (2005) highlight the importance of engagement of children in research methods, especially in something like interviewing. To engage children in this method of research, it is claimed that researchers should use things relatable to the child or something they like, for example, props, toys, drawings, sand, clay, photographs, Lego, puppets, and dolls (Doverborg and Pramling Samuelsson, 2003; Mannay et al., 2021). Research by Einarsdóttir (2005; 2007) demonstrated how using creative methods like these discussed above can engage children within research. This was evident in Einarsdóttir's innovative cardboard game that also operated as a questionnaire to find out about the children's views, opinions, and experiences of their school setting.

### **3.12 Working with Data**

*“We do not provide a full holiday package; we provide a compass and a map to navigate your adventure.”* (Braun, Clarke and Hayfield, 2019)

#### **3.12.1 Thematic Analysis Approach**

Thematic Analysis (TA) is a ‘method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes – themes are your ultimate analytic purpose’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 40). There are commonalities between various TA approaches, such as grounded theory, qualitative content analysis, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), such as striving to find patterns in data sets.

However, recently, Braun and Clarke have moved on from their original idea of TA in early 2006, to coin a term called Reflexive Thematic Analysis, and continue to use RTA as an open and flexible method (or cluster of methods) of data analysis. Braun and Clarke (2019; 2024) claim RTA as an easily accessible and theoretically flexible interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis and facilitates the identification and analysis of patterns or themes in each data set. Central and distinct to RTA is the focus on ‘the researchers’ reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process’ (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 594). This puts the researcher at the heart of the analysis, allowing them to reflect on their subjectivity and positionality throughout the study, and how that has contributed to knowledge/ knowing of the data set. Using RTA (Braun and Clarke, 2022; 2024) gave me the opportunity, space and time to use my subjective experience and knowledge in relation to transitions within the early years, and utilise this ‘knowing’ to make meaning of the data, especially viewing data analysis as ‘meaning-making’ rather than truth-seeking or discovery (Braun and Clarke, 2022; 2024). Instead of seeing my own experiences and positionality within the data as potential bias (Nadar, 2014), subjectivity from my perspective as the researcher has been used as a strength of the research (Braun and Clarke, 2022; 2024).

RTA is thought of as a reflection of the researcher’s interpretive analysis of the data conducted at the intersection of the dataset, theoretical assumptions of the analysis, and analytical skills and resources of the researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

Therefore, it is respected that no two researchers will intersect the criteria in the

same way, and as such, Braun and Clarke (2019) suggest there should be no expectation that codes or themes created or interpreted by one researcher will be reproduced by another researcher. Therefore, the themes that were crafted from the data were through my own interpretation. Even though Braun and Clarke (2022) highlight how one single coder is normal and good practice in RTA, as part of the study's credibility and rigour, my PhD supervisors 'sense-checked' the codes and themes, which provided robustness and credibility to the data and analytic process.

This stance reflects the study's aims, exploring the experiences of transition to primary school for children with SEND, where no two transitions will be the same due to individual experiences and influences within their immediate and wider contexts and systems in which they are situated (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2022; 2024) encourage researchers to embrace this subjectivity, reflexivity, and creativity as a strength in knowledge production.

As already highlighted within the ethical considerations (section 3.13, page 143), remaining reflexive and sensitive throughout the study has been very important given the delicate nature of the study involving children with SEND and discussions around the impact of a worldwide pandemic on starting school. Having self-awareness as a researcher was important in shaping the research design and interpretation of the data. Creswell (2013) suggests this process of reflexivity as 'coming to know the self within the process of research itself' (p.183).

As the RTA method is iterative, this involved continually and repeatedly engaging with the data, creating codes, and themes, and refining them until the final sub-themes and themes were established (Braun and Clarke, 2024). Applying this method to the data allowed codes and themes to be created from the data in an organic way and relate closely to the data, through careful reading, immersion, and coding.

The six phases of RTA proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022) were used in a flexible and artfully iterative way to analysis the data. Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest that all phases do not have to be carried out when analysing data through RTA, and instead of using it like 'a full holiday package' it should 'provide a compass and a map, to navigate your adventure' (Braun, Clarke and Hayfield, 2019: 344).

### **3.12.2 Becoming Familiar with the Data**

To become familiar with the data, I fully immersed myself into every aspect of the research process; from developing the initial survey questions and semi-structured interview schedules, carrying out face-to-face semi-structured interviews with parents/ caregivers and practitioners, spending time listening to children's experiences, noting down my thoughts and feelings after conversations and interactions, to transcribing the interactions of each participant. Before undertaking any form of data analysis, I felt very familiar with the data set and the participants in my study.

### **3.12.3 Generating initial codes**

Through an iterative process, initial codes that aligned with the research aims were generated from the data. To do this, 'time and space' was given to the data, which helped to 'develop nuanced analysis...producing rich, complex, non-obvious themes that could never have been anticipated in advance of analysis' (Braun and Clarke, 2021: 332). Giving myself 'headspace' and time to sit with the data in my head allowed for further insight into the data so that the 'analysis becomes deeper, more interesting and less obvious through a repeated process of close engagement' (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 54). Gough and Lyons (2016) describe this process as waiting for inspiration to strike.

To ensure rigour within the data, the review and 'new comment' tool on Microsoft Word were used to tag and highlight initial codes on the interview transcripts. As Braun and Clarke (2022) reiterate, the 'codes are the building blocks of analysis' which allow the researcher to 'capture meaning relevant to the research question' (p.52). Two files were created: one with 'raw data' and another with 'working data'. Transcripts were then read and re-read iteratively, making commentary throughout, which turned into initial codes.

These codes were a mixture of semantic codes, which were obvious to me when reading the data, as well as latent codes, which required deep reflection, thought and engagement with not only the data, but my own subjectivity and positionality. Furthermore, I also considered theoretical assumptions, specifically through an interpretative lens and using Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) BST and child's rights lens (UNCRC, 1989) and used this to interpret the accounts of the lived

experiences of children with SEND transitioning to primary school during a worldwide pandemic, as well as parents/ caregivers and practitioner perspectives.

Approaching the data analysis in this way reflected the studies aims and values, underpinned by an interpretive paradigm that captures meaning and giving voice for participants to tell their stories. This approach to coding was similar to Trainor and Bundon's (2020) description of a 'consciously curious researcher'; focussing on children's stories, receptive to learning and presenting their different experiences, but 'looking to connect the data and place it in the box of 'currently know', but also make sense of the 'unknown' data outside the box' (Trainor and Bundon, 2020: 9). Making meaning of this unknown data creates new knowledge for scholarly literature on the lived experiences of children with SEND in their transition to primary school, making an original contribution to knowledge (Wellington, 2015).

#### **3.12.4 Searching for themes and sub-themes**

An important part of theme creation in this study was ensuring themes were 'patterns of shared meanings' that told a story about the data, conceptualising the meaning of the data, rather than capturing a topic from the data set. This is an important part of RTA that Braun and Clarke suggest should be 'used to convey the sense of there being a key message each theme is trying to convey' (2024: 9).

I had to sit with the data and remind myself of Gough and Lyons (2016) message of waiting for inspiration to strike. This was particularly challenging, yet a significant part of the data analysis process, given the rich tapestry of data and recognising the interwoven links between all the data generated. The children's perspectives, along with their parents/ caregivers and practitioners discovered multifaceted layers of interaction in the transition to school for children with SEND during Covid-19, a foresight of proximal processes within the BST framework (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

#### **3.12.5 Reviewing and Defining the themes**

To review the themes, I found solace in the analogy that Braun and Clarke refer to in their guide to RTA (2022), where they describe creating themes is like a 'dandelion seed head', where it has a central idea or concept (calyx), and components of the central idea (pappus) which are all connected to the central idea.

Taking this analogy further, I reflected on the fragility of a 'dandelion seed head' during the creation and reviewing of themes within the children's data, as well as the perspectives of their parents/ caregivers and practitioners. It was important to create themes that told the story for children's lived realities and their experiences of starting school during a worldwide pandemic and constructing shared meanings of children's experiences at such a poignant time in history.

### **3.12.6 Producing the Report**

To produce a report of the findings in a robust way, it was decided that child-centred case studies would be the best way to demonstrate the findings. Due to the complexity and nature of data generation, and wanting to tell the children's stories, but also wanting to ensure all parts of the story were included (from practitioners, parents and caregivers), it was decided that children's views would be central to the research, and adults' perspectives would add to the findings, offering an alternative perspective.

### **3.13 Research Integrity**

#### **3.13.1 Ethical considerations for all participants**

It was vital that ethical issues were considered throughout the whole project, especially for educational research that involved research with children with SEND. This refers to the axiology, considering the philosophical approach and value of making the right decisions within research, including different aspects of the research process, the participants, the data, and the reporting of results (Finnis, 1980). To respect the axiology of the research, this study followed BCU Ethical Agreement and Guidelines and drew on important principles within the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (British Educational Research Association, BERA, 2024), Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers (Bertram et al., 2025) and the Concordat to Support Research Integrity (2025). It also drew on 'ethics in education' principles and Ethical Research Involving Children [ERIC] (Graham et al., 2013; Hammersley, 2012; Alderson and Morrow, 2011).

Drawing on such principles ensured the research had regard for the human values of participants, including the sensitivity and values of carrying out research with children with SEND. Key considerations that underpin all research, including

ensuring the research is inclusive of different values, interests, methods, and perspectives were included; respecting the diversity, values, wellbeing and dignity of individuals and groups within communities, their privacy, and autonomy throughout the research; conducting research with integrity, employing the most appropriate methods for the purpose of the research aims; as well as considering social responsibilities as the researcher when conducting and disseminating the research, maximising the benefit of the research and minimising harm to its participants. Minimising harm was of utmost importance for the participants in this study, especially children with SEND, following the recommendations from BERA (2024) and EECERA (2025) to ensure participants are not harmed by any research.

An ethical application was submitted to the Birmingham City University [BCU] Health, Education, and Life Sciences (HELS) Research Committee, and full approval was given to carry out the research (see appendix 1). The ethical application set out a rigorous plan for data generation, storage, analysis, and deletion, as well as any potential risks of the research.

#### *3.13.1.1 Participants' Autonomy*

The 'autonomy' of participants was carefully considered (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). An information sheet was shared with participants before collecting any research (see appendices 4 and 6). This provided participants with research information, ensuring they were fully informed of the aims and methods of data generation (BERA, 2024). This allowed all participants to make an informed choice as to whether they wanted to participate in the research. There was also an opting-in consent letter for participants (Thomas, 2017), which rather than assuming consent was given, ensuring there was an active choice about becoming involved in the research (see appendices 5, 7 and 8 for examples of the adult and children's consent forms). There was also a right to withdraw at any point throughout the research process (BERA, 2024).

#### *3.13.1.2 Gatekeeper Permission*

Permission to conduct research was sought from senior leaders at school settings, who functioned as gatekeepers to access parents/ caregivers or children with SEND within the research (see appendices 2 and 3 for a permission of access letter and vetting letter for schools). Mannay et al. (2021) highlights how working with

gatekeepers can be particularly complex and may include going through more than one gatekeeper before conducting any research with the participant, for example, agreement from the head practitioner, class practitioner, and parent/ caregiver. My experience of gatekeepers mirrored the words of Mannay et al. (2021), as a complex and challenging part of the research process, whereby they had the power and control of who was included in the study, specifically the children with SEND and parents/ caregivers, access to the school and how long I could spend at the school. Additional permission was sought from parents/ caregivers and practitioners for working with children with SEND. This has been discussed in section 3.13.2, page 145.

### *3.13.1.3 Risks of the Study*

Additionally, the risks of the study were considered, especially around discussions involving transition and Covid-19 that could potentially provoke strong emotions that may be distressing for children or adults (Graham et al, 2013). As a researcher and a professional, it was within my duty of care to respect the nature and sensitivity of the topics discussed, remaining ethical throughout the data generation process. This included signposting participants to support services within the school or community, such as outreach support, SENCo, or other key service providers. Other key ethical issues were considered for this study, including the ethics of research with children, and have been addressed below.

### **3.13.2 Ethical research involving children with SEND**

Including children in research is essential and part of their rights to have a say and to be heard. The UNCRC (1989) states the views of children and young people are worthy and granted children (between birth and eighteen years old) to have the right to have their wishes recognised, respected, listened to, and valued. These core values are reaffirmed within the ERIC framework (Graham et al., 2013), which claims the essential elements of including children in research are their rights, relationships, and reflexivity. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [NSPCC] (2023) further highlights the importance of conducting research with children, gaining an understanding of what children feel, and think, as well as find out about their experiences or issues that may affect them. EECERA's ethical framework (Bertram et al., 2025) reiterate the importance and careful consideration of ethics

when carrying out research with children, significantly around the respect for children's rights and participation, but also the importance of researcher's responsibility towards participants, especially children.

Even though it is acknowledged that children should be included in research, ethical considerations need to be carefully well-thought-out throughout the whole process, in a reflexive approach, to protect children's safety. This is echoed by the NSPCC (2023) who claim that any research carried out involving children must balance the aims of the research with the wellbeing and safety of its participants. This follows the beneficence or utilitarianism principles from BERA's key considerations when carrying out research, maximising the benefit of the research and minimising harm to participants. Furthermore, when carrying out research with children, considering their duties within the research is essential. This includes respecting their autonomy by ensuring the aims and methods are appropriate, suitable, and fair; respecting children's rights to protection from harm, neglect, and discrimination; and ensuring children have the opportunity for self-determination – where they can give informed consent or refusal to take part in the research (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Graham et al., 2013; Bertram et al., 2025).

For this study, it was essential to consider all these different ethical issues, including the benefit of the research for children, their form of involvement, the inclusivity of children, how to ensure their safety is of utmost importance, give consent and identify and reduce any risks posed by the research. To ensure ethical considerations were well-thought out at different stages of the research, I used the ERIC framework (Graham et al., 2013), BERA (2024) and EECERA's (2025) key considerations for carrying out research with children.

Gaining informed consent from children followed an ethical and children's rights approach to the study, adopting ethical practice from Ethical Research Involving Children (Graham et al., 2013). This ensured I was respectful of their dignity, ability, and capabilities to express their experiences of transitioning into school. Following ERIC (Graham et al., 2013) and BERA (2024) guidelines, it was essential for children to understand the research and their participation in it, as well as be able to

give voluntary consent and know their rights to withdraw at any point. I created a visual and engaging information sheet/ consent form for children, and using the pictorial representation, discussed my role and what type of questions I would ask them. The children then could tick, point or show their own communication card for 'Yes' or 'No', by using a 'happy' or 'sad' visual representation. An example of the consent and information sheet used for children can be found in appendices 8.

### **3.13.3 *Beneficence of the research***

It is fundamental as part of the study's interpretivist paradigm, and the research aims of exploring the lived experiences of children with SEND transitioning to primary school during the Covid-19 school closures that children with SEND are included in this research and their voice is heard. Including children in research about them ensures they are properly researched, and their lived experiences and voices come from them. This enhances the status of children through appropriate involvement in research, as highlighted in the ERIC framework (Graham et al., 2013).

Maintaining professional standards and following research principles such as 'beneficence' was vital (BERA, 2024). This meant ensuring any benefits of the research outweighed any potential risks to participants, with the research aims balancing the wellbeing and safety of participants (NSPCC, 2023), as well as ensuring participant views and experiences were not misrepresented or distorted (Graham et al., 2013). As the research involved children with SEND, specific measures were considered, such as the use of inclusive and creative methods of data generation (Mannay et al., 2021) to allow meaningful participation of disadvantaged, vulnerable, and discriminated against groups of children (Graham et al., 2013).

Ensuring the research was of benefit to children, both directly and indirectly was an essential aspect of this research. Giving children the space and opportunity to communicate their experiences of starting school during a worldwide pandemic allowed the children to share feelings, thoughts, worries, highs, lows, fears and expectations at this time. Additionally, including children with SEND at the heart of the study ensured there were also indirect benefits to them, for example, giving practitioners and parents/ caregivers an awareness of how to support them in future

transitions or worldwide pandemics. This follows the 'audience' and 'influence' strands of the Lundy model (2007), which highlight that there should be a direct impact for children's voices in research, rather than a tokenistic approach. The importance of using children's voices to shape matters that are important to them in a pandemic crisis is essential. This reflects the work of Bateman and Danby (2013), around the aftermath of the Christchurch Earthquakes, New Zealand, where they reiterated the importance of early years practitioners working with young children to recall and share their experiences and stories of this time, to prevent and minimise future stresses caused by traumatic events in time.

#### **3.13.4 Inclusivity**

As the research involved children with different types of SEND, specific measures were considered, such as the use of inclusive and creative methods of data generation to allow meaningful participation of disadvantaged, vulnerable, and discriminated against groups of children (Bertram et al., 2025; Graham et al., 2013; Mannay et al., 2021). There are a variety of ways I ensured the inclusivity of children with SEND in the research. Firstly, adapting the research tools and creative methods to meet the individual needs and abilities of children taking part in the research was essential. Adapting the research methods ensured children had choice over what method was suitable for their individual needs, giving them agency and opportunity to use their preferred communication and creative methods. This is especially significant for children with communication and interaction needs. Alderson and Morrow (2011) suggest this is respecting the 'worth and dignity...of all members of the human family' (UNCRC, 1989). Giving children 'space' to view their lived experiences was an essential part of inclusive research with children with SEND (Lundy, 2007). This included making sure children felt happy, safe and quiet spaces to communicate or reflect on their experiences.

#### **3.13.5 Reflexivity**

The study has also taken a reflexive approach by considering and pre-empting any ethical considerations and issues at the planning stage, which can be seen in the ethics chapter and ethical application, as well as hoping to consider and engage in any ethical issues that arise in practice or during the data generation phase (Powell, Graham, and Truscott, 2016). Engagement with parents, practitioners, and children

with SEND allowed me to reflect on different meanings and interpretations of the data, provoking questions, assumptions, and beliefs about children's real-life experiences, challenging my own beliefs and ideas (Braun and Clarke, 2024; Powell, Graham, and Truscott, 2016).

Continuous refining of the research aims, research paradigm, and research methods has been an essential part of the ethical journey of this project, to continually respect the rights, dignity, and wellbeing of the children included in the study (Bertram et al., 2025). This ensures that the ethical considerations not only follow ethical codes of conduct, but are also considered alongside the values, beliefs, attitudes, my own knowledge, and experiences of working with children with SEND in the decision-making process. This ensures the research respects all participant's rights, relationships, and reflexivity from the ERIC framework (Graham et al., 2013).

### ***3.13.6 Credibility, authenticity and meaningfulness of the Research***

In line with an interpretivist study and using RTA (Braun and Clark, 2022) as a data analysis tool, which explores the construction of meaning-making, it was vital that the study's credibility, authenticity and meaningfulness of the data was transparent throughout. Guba and Lincoln (1989) reinforce that qualitative, interpretive studies require a rigorous framework to establish the trustworthiness of a study, to demonstrate whether interpretations of participant findings are reliable, well-evidenced and accurate. Within their trustworthiness framework, Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest researchers should reflect on areas including the study's credibility and transferability, as well as its authenticity and meaningfulness. Throughout the study, I also reflected upon the Concordat to Support Research Integrity (2025) to support ethical and trustworthy research carried out with children with SEND.

#### *Credibility and authenticity*

To ensure my study was credible and the findings were a true representation of my participants' experiences, I used Guba and Lincoln's (1989) framework to ask myself questions such as do the findings accurately represent the constructed realities of the participants in my research. To ensure my research was credible and trustworthy, I reflected on several areas;

Within the data collection, I used multiple methods, including creative conversations with children with SEND, initial data gathering surveys and semi-structured interviews with parents/ caregivers and practitioners. I took inspiration from the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2011), to use several different data collection methods with different participants to build rich, layered, thick descriptions and contextual pictures of each child's transition to school experience. To ensure participant accounts were honest and reliable, I spent extended time and prolonged engagement with children at each setting in their chosen creative activity. I also spent quality time with parents/ caregivers and practitioners, with some choosing to walk and talk, and share their experiences over coffee. Through these activities, I built rapport with my participants, their wider school settings, and with senior leaders, as well as redistributing power dynamics between myself as the researcher and my participants (Bertram et al., 2025).

To ensure credibility of the findings and data analysis, and making meaning of participant data, I used direct quotes from participants, staying close to their own data and lived experiences. I also repeated the data back to my participants, for example if a child mentioned they didn't know their friends' names, my response was to repeat 'you didn't know your friends' names?'. This strategy was useful for sense-checking what the participants said was accurate and representative of their experiences, offering space to confirm their views or offer more information.

Using RTA (Braun and Clarke, 2024) as a data analysis tool became a source for meaning-making in this study, which was essential for transparency and credibility. RTA was an important part of this study due to the nature of the research; I was exploring the lived experiences and realities of transitioning to school during a worldwide pandemic for children with SEND. Yet, I could not ignore my own inevitable subjectivity within the coding and theme development process, reflecting on my own assumptions and practices, expertise and knowledge, and how this has shaped and defined the data analysis (as highlighted in section 3.2 positionality). Being a reflexive researcher has ensured that I have critically reflected at every stage of the research process through reflexive note-taking; considering how my disciplinary, theoretical and personal assumptions have shaped the design choices

throughout the study, for example, ensuring the voices of children with SEND were central to the study, as well as delimiting the knowledge produced from the data.

To ensure my study was authentic, and representative of the multiple perspectives of my participants, I gave children with SEND the space and time that Lundy (2007) draws our attention to in response to Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989), giving the children with SEND opportunities to share their own lived experiences and things that matter to them. Using their experiences, I made meaning of their data to maintain that policy and pedagogical practice within English school settings for supporting the transition to school needs to change to make it child-centered, relational and co-constructed with children with SEND. This in turn leads to action, and these forms of action have been highlighted within the study recommendations for pedagogical practice, policy and future research. This also supports the 'meaningfulness' that Guba and Lincoln (1989) highlight, as the study findings address directly to the participants and their lived experiences of starting school during a worldwide pandemic. As demonstrated in 'Chapter 6: Recommendations and Conclusion', the study findings connect directly to current transition policy, both within schools and wider government spaces, including the recent White Paper proposals for SEND reform in English school settings (DfE, 2026), and the recent Covid-19 inquiry findings (Varian, 2025), with direct implications for pedagogical practice.

### *Meaningfulness*

According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), the meaningfulness of a research study relates to the genuine significance of the research, for the participants, the field in which the study is situated, and wider policy and research. For the participants in my study, the meaningfulness was evident in several ways; Children with SEND were given a chance to share their vivid, in-depth experiences of their transition to school during an unprecedented time in history. These are experiences that are currently missing from current research and overlooked within school settings, yet as Bateman and Danby (2013) reiterate, their stories are vital for sense-making within crisis events, to avoid long-term trauma throughout their childhood. For parents/ caregivers, the opportunity to share their experiences of a challenging and difficult period of their child's transition to school, and feel heard, were significant, and

appreciated for simply having someone to listen to them and help make sense of this time. This was the same for the practitioners, who felt the burden of rules and regulations of Covid-19, yet felt the responsibility of ensuring children with SEND were supported and safe and educated.

This study also has meaningfulness within its field of inclusion, disability studies and transition to school literature for children with SEND. Not only does it challenge dominant deficit and outcome-drive narratives of transition to school experiences for children with SEND, but it offers an alternative, relational, child-led understanding of transitions to school. This study speaks to imperative and important national needs, given the increasing prevalence of children with SEND in UK and English school settings, and the current government's White Paper (DfE, 2026) commitment to providing mainstream education for more children with SEND.

### *Transferability*

Even though my study does not aim to generalise the findings for all children with SEND in their transitions to school, the study findings significantly demonstrate their transferability capabilities across different contexts and educational environments (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). The thick descriptions and ethnographic information for each child and family included in each case study ensure that practitioners from different settings could determine if the context and findings from this study transfer to their own context or children with SEND. Additionally, implementing creative, agentic, engaging research methods with children with SEND demonstrates the transferability potential of the study's methodology, including the use of creative conversations to explore the lived realities of children with SEND. This has been discussed further in section 6. 6 'Research Approach' (page 340).

Using child-initiated and creative methods that supported children's communication methods ensured my research had rigor, by using appropriate methods that ensured participants could communicate their lived experiences in ways that suited them. Using my professional knowledge and skills as a qualified teacher to work with children with SEND assured I gave them the care and respect they deserved and protected their integrity and identity by ensuring the data was confidential (see section on data anonymity in 3.15 'Generation and Storage of Data', page 157) by using pseudonyms throughout. I held accountability throughout the whole research

process to ensure the research environment was suitable for participants, and also for ensuring participants felt happy and comfortable sharing their lived experiences with me. Using these principles of research integrity ensured responsible research practice and a robust study.

### ***3.13.7 Identifying and reducing risks***

Another part of the ethical process was identifying and reducing any potential risks of the research. It has been identified that discussions around transition and Covid-19 could potentially provoke strong emotions that may be distressing for children or adults (Bertram et al., 2025). As the researcher and a professional, it was within my duty of care to respect the nature and sensitivity of topics discussed, remaining ethical throughout the data generation process. This included the ability to stop or pause interviews if it became too sensitive for participants, or signposting participants to support services within their school or local community, such as the local offer, outreach support, the school SENCo, or other service providers. Furthermore, child protection disclosures during the data generation phase of the research were considered as a potential risk. As the research involved children who could be considered vulnerable, any information disclosed during the discussion that suggested a child or member of the public was at risk of harm, I knew to follow safeguarding procedures at the child's school.

### ***3.13.8 Researcher responsibility***

Through a training needs analysis and reflecting on skills and knowledge that I have already developed throughout my profession as a primary school practitioner, it is evident I was suitable to conduct this research as I already possess an excellent set of transferrable research skills. This includes having a good knowledge base within my area of expertise, specifically education, early years, and SEND. Having been a primary and special needs practitioner for over ten years, a SENCo, having a master's in education (MEd) in Child Autism and Fellowship in Higher Education status at BCU, my subject knowledge, and understanding of educational research are already of a very high standard.

### ***3.13.9 Power Dynamics***

For this study, it was essential that I considered the impact of power differentials between myself as the researcher and the different participants within my study. To

carry out equitable research with participants, especially children with SEND, I ensured children with SEND actively had a voice in the research and contributed equitably alongside their parents/ caregivers and practitioners. This was supported by Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) and the rights of children with SEND, ensuring shared and distributed power within the research process (Bertram et al., 2025).

To ensure I addressed any invisible power between myself and the children with SEND, I used creative, engaging and child-friendly methods, chosen by the children themselves, to lead the conversation. Employing these considerations allowed children to develop rapport with me as the researcher, and ensured the session was informal and fun. I joined in with their chosen creative method, for example participating in role-play, colouring and drawing.

I also ensured I considered the invisible power dynamics for the adults participating. For example, the parents/ caregivers chose the location, time and topics discussed during our session together. This ensured they felt comfortable, open and honest within the discussions.

Another way I strived to reduce and distribute power dynamics between myself, and children and other participants was by volunteering to help within the school settings for an extended period of time. This helped to build rapport and relationships with the children with SEND, parents/ caregivers and practitioners. Only one school invested in this opportunity, and on reflection, it was useful to gain further insight and understanding into the child and family experiences and school contexts.

### **3.14 Consent**

Before any research was carried out, informed consent was acquired by all participants (see appendices 4 and 5 for examples of parents/ caregiver consent and information sheet, appendices 6 and 7 for practitioners, and appendices 8 for children's consent form and information sheet). Informed consent means participants were fully informed of the research aims and objectives, methods of data generation, and their rights, such as withdrawing, during the research process. All participants were fully informed and able to make their own decision on whether they wished to participate in the research or not. To ensure participants had informed consent, I included a participant information sheet, which outlined the research aims and

objectives, information about being involved in the research, consent, the benefits and risks of the research, and information about how data is stored and kept confidential. The consent for children with SEND was through a creative, visual, child-friendly consent form and information sheet.

### **3.14.1 Child Consent and Assent**

As this study is based around child-rights perspective and their agency around matters that affect them, it was essential that the children included in the study had an opportunity to make informed decisions about their participation (Dockett and Perry, 2010). Often, it is viewed within some research that children's competence to make such decisions for themselves often preclude their involvement in research (Moss and Petrie, 2002). However, this research demonstrates children with SEND as competent social agents within social and cultural settings, who are capable of shaping both their own and others' experiences.

Morrow and Richards (1996) suggest that researching ways that seek to promote children's agency and rights bring about a range of legal and ethical implications, such as children making informed decisions about their participation. This was an essential element of my study, to respect the rights of children with SEND, and ensuring they were fully informed of what the research was about and the implications for participating. As highlighted by Dockett and Perry (2010) legally, 'young children are considered to have neither sufficient age nor maturity to provide informed consent to research participation' (p.233). This consent must be provided by a parent/ caregiver. Therefore, within this study, the first form of informed consent was through the gatekeepers of the school, including senior leaders, and parents/ caregivers. However, to ensure ethical rigour, I sought children's agreement to participate in the research, which Dockett and Perry (2010) describe as 'assent'. This is an 'agreement obtained from those who are not able to enter into a legal contract' (Ford et al., 2007:20). Principles of ongoing assent were used within this study (Bertram et al., 2025), which was beneficial for children who had used multimodal forms of communication. Considering ongoing assent ensured I considered children's preferred communications to signal their choices and ascertain their willingness to take part in the research (Bertram et al., 2025).

For children with SEND, there is a possibility they may not understand what the research is about or what they are being asked. However, it is the responsibility of the researcher, with support from gatekeepers such as parents/ caregivers and practitioners, to communicate the research aims and objectives, methods of data generation, what will happen to the findings if they take part, and their rights for not wanting to take part. It was vital to consider the individual needs of each child and their ability to understand and communicate within this study, as well as the opportunity to give continuous consent throughout the process of data generation.

During creative conversations with children, monitoring and responding to ongoing assent was essential (BERA, 2024; Bertram et al., 2025). I used my professional judgement by drawing on my vast experience as an early years practitioner, primary and special educational needs teacher and SENCo, to recognise when children demonstrate their understanding and willingness to participate in an activity, and when they do not want to participate. This observation and monitoring formed part of the conditions for ongoing assent for children within the creative sessions, and I used my professional experience to notice, recognise and respond to children's multimodal forms of communication to express this ongoing assent.

It was evident throughout the creative conversations that the children included in my study fully understood what they were agreeing to when we went through the pictorial consent form. This understanding can be seen through the children's own data and accounts of their experiences of transition to school during Covid-19, demonstrating their willingness to discuss matters that were important to them in detail. Additionally, children's ongoing assent can be seen through their sustained engagement with their chosen activity, their curiosity, enjoyment and fun within their sessions. For example, the children played with a trainset, dolls house, drew and coloured pictures, and had fun taking photographs of their current setting, for an extended period.

I monitored ongoing assent continuously in all five sessions, and this included both verbal and non-verbal communication of children. For children included in the study who were verbal, I was aware even though they could talk, they may not have an ability to know when they could stop or had not wanted to say they had finished with their chosen activity. For the child who was non-verbal, he was very competent

in using other forms of multimodal communication, such as pointing to the happy face to give consent to participate in the session with myself, smiling, using echolalia, pointing at key pictures, and his body language and movement whilst playing with the trainset. During this session, this child took himself to the door of the room we were playing in, demonstrating his ongoing assent in action, and very clearly communicating he had finished the session and wanted to return to his classroom. This was a very powerful example of using bodily conduct that became a condition for his assent.

### ***3.15 Generation and Storage of Data***

To adhere to the Data Protection Act (2018) and follow UK General Data Protection Guidelines (2018) I considered the safe use and storage of personally identifiable data (PID) collected through the research methods. I decided to protect the confidentiality and security of data generated throughout this study, rather than claim anonymity for participants. This is because fully anonymised data is not subject to UK GDPR, but it also means participants cannot leave the process at any time (UK GDPR, 2018). I wanted to ensure participants had the choice of withdrawing if they wished and therefore proposed that confidentiality was of utmost importance. I ensured this confidentiality of participants by replacing any PID with a pseudonym, to avoid any traceability of participants and the school settings. Furthermore, to ensure confidentiality was maintained throughout the whole process, any PID data generated was used and stored with care and respect (Thomas, 2017), using a secure, encrypted OneDrive system at BCU.

Once the transcribing of interviews and participant findings were completed, the original audio files were deleted from the BCU OneDrive immediately, avoiding any traceability of participants. Once all the data had been analysed and written up, the rest of the data such as the questionnaires and artefacts were deleted, protecting the participants' confidentiality. To retain evidence of consent within this study, the signed consent form from participants have been stored on the encrypted OneDrive system at BCU. This is in accordance with the University's legal obligations. This data will be stored for up to three years after the project has been completed, retaining some personal data up until December 2029. After this period, any information held about participants will be destroyed from the encrypted OneDrive

system at BCU. However, consent forms for children must be held and stored securely until they turn twenty-one. Therefore, these will be retained and stored securely on the encrypted OneDrive system at BCU until 2037/2038. After this period, any information held on the encrypted OneDrive system at BCU will be deleted and destroyed.

### ***3.16 Dissemination of Findings***

How and with whom I will share the findings of the research is an important aspect of the research that has been carefully considered. Including the participants in the dissemination of the results is good practice, and it allows them to see their own input into the research and the outcomes of their involvement. This adds to the inclusivity, trustworthiness, and transparency of the research (NSPCC, 2023). Therefore, I aim to share the findings of the research with the children with SEND, parents/ caregivers, and practitioners who took part in the research and data generation in child-friendly formats. This includes using doodle art posters to highlight the main findings.

## CHAPTER 4: CASE STUDY FINDINGS

### ***4.1 Introduction***

The previous chapter discussed the methodology and methods that underpinned the study, including an explanation of the research paradigm, ontological and epistemological positioning, case study methodology and validation of methods used to generate data including online qualitative surveys, semi-structured interviews and creative conversations. It also highlighted the ethical considerations that were threaded throughout the whole study, including ethics around working with children with SEND.

This chapter provides five case studies for the children with SEND, their parents/ caregivers and practitioners included in this study. The case studies are structured with the child's voice as central, and then the parent/ caregiver and practitioner voice after. This was done specifically to ensure the children's lived experiences were shared first, without being dominated by adult voices around the child. Structuring the case studies with the child's voice and lived experience at the centre is consistent with both Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) ecosystemic positioning of the child at the centre, and the UNCRC (1989), centring children's rights and voices in matters that impact them. This structure clearly demonstrates what children with SEND valued and experienced in their transitions to school during a worldwide pandemic. This included a focus on key places, spaces and relationships within their immediate microsystem, incorporating their home environment, school and classroom settings, and relationships and interactions with people, places and objects. These key theoretical underpinnings and concepts of the BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) have been highlighted within each case study, ready to support theme development and discussions in Chapter 5.

The case studies then include the perspectives of parents/ caregivers and practitioners, building a rich ecological picture of each child's transition to school experience during Covid-19, focusing on how the people around the children interacted with and understood their transition to school experience at this time. To gather these perspectives, semi-structured interview questions for parents/ caregivers and practitioners were generated from the initial data gathering survey,

with general topics to be discussed (see appendix 11 and 12, and section 3.11 in Chapter 3), and themes created from participants' own survey responses, as well as the natural flow of the conversation. As already highlighted, it was important to have a range of topics around transition to school during Covid-19, rather than a set of specific questions, as this allowed discussions to be flexible, relaxed and natural, creating scope to raise individual experiences of their child's transitions in detail that the participants or I may not have anticipated (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Thomas, 2017).

## **4.2 Case Study One: Lola**

### **4.2.1 Ethnographic Information**

**Age of child:** 7

**Pre-school:** Attended nursery setting at Riverbank School, as well as weekly parent classes from 18 months old.

**Date of Transition to School:** September 2020

**Age of child at transition:** 4

**School Name:** Riverbank School

**Area of School Setting:** The school is based in a suburb within Birmingham Local Authority.

**Type of School:** Independent Specialist School for children with physical disabilities.

**School Context:** The school provides education for children on both full and part-time placements. They follow the national curriculum but also have a separate physical movement programme, with an aim to bring together holistic movement therapy and education into one setting. In this programme, Lola receives both learning and movement opportunities, supporting her with her physical disabilities.

The school has a very welcoming and inclusive ethos, where the practitioners provide specialist support related specifically to the child's individual needs. The school works in partnership with parents/ caregivers, outside agencies and mainstream settings to support the child and their families with their specific needs.

**Ratio of practitioners/ children:** 1:2 support

**SEND:** Physical Disability (PD) and Mild Learning Difficulties (MLD). Lola has cerebral palsy.

**SEN Support/ EHCP:** EHCP

**Family background:** Lola lives with her mum, dad and older brother. Lola's parents both worked during Covid-19; her mum worked on the weekends, and her dad worked during the week. Both parents were keyworkers, which meant Lola was able

to access any 'bubbles' at her school settings. Bubbles were small groups set up by schools to ensure children with an EHCP could continue to access school support.

**Practitioner information:** Three practitioners, Ella, Emma and Laura from Riverbank School were interviewed as part of the case study, as they all teach in the class that Lola attends and supported Lola with her transition into school during Covid-19.

Ella and Emma are the leaders within the classroom and are familiar with Lola and her family from when they attended the preschool group at Riverbank. Laura is currently Lola's key worker, and at the time of Lola's transition into the school group, Laura was a student practitioner within the same classroom, helping Lola with her transition into school.

**Creative Method:** Lola chose to use imaginative and role-play to share her experiences of transition to school with me. She chose the dolls and pretend play kitchen, and we talked whilst playing together. We used role-play as a catalyst to our conversation through the dolls and kitchen, with Lola reflecting on her playing with these items before Covid-19 happened.

#### **4.2.2 Lola's perspective**

##### ***I like learning – “I like to learn different things”***

During her conversation, Lola spoke very positively about school, especially her love of learning;

*“I like that, I like to learn different things”.*

*“I like to learn maths, I like to learn maths, I like to learn maths.”*

*“We learn about capacity...So we learn about volumes...That was long ago.”*

It is evident Lola has a love of learning and can draw on experiences and memories from when she started school, and the routine and structure that learning and sessions within her school environment brought to her at the time were important. This was especially significant in such a turbulent time in the wider school and community environment, and the learning element allowed Lola to have the grounding, security and routine in her school environment that was potentially missing. These insights illuminate Lola's experiences within her immediate microsystem, particularly the space and importance of connection to her new environment through creating her own routine and learning identity (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

Lola was also asked about her favourite thing at Riverbank School, and reflected on her attendance at Riverbank School compared to another school she attended part-time;

*“That I get to come for three days.”*

##### ***Social Connections and Belonging – “I like to be with my friends”***

Within the creative conversation Lola spoke about the importance of relationships and friendships she has now established at Riverbank School, and when asked if she liked coming back to school, Lola replied;

*“Yeah I do...Cos I like to be with my friends”.*

Lola went on to talk about her friends in detail, providing an explanation of what friend attends Riverbank on what days. Knowing what days her friends attend

Riverbank School is important to Lola as part of her routine and structure within her classroom environment;

*“X, he’s leaving today, and X who only comes here for one day and then X who comes here for like three days but he’s going to see the school right now...And then X who’s changing his days to Tuesday and Friday...And then my last friend here is X...So we have different like friends come over at different times so, yeah.”*

Friendships, connections and a sense of belonging to the school where her friends are, are very important to Lola, and developing these relationships was crucial in her transition to school. Here, Lola was reaching towards a sense of connection to her environment through developing and actively constructing proximal processes and interactions with her peers (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

### ***Importance of Play – “I liked to play”***

As part of the creative conversation carried out, Lola chose to role-play with the pretend kitchen and baby dolls. Lola enjoyed this role-play activity, which lasted approximately 30-40 minutes. During the role-play, Lola directed me as the researcher to play with the dolls, advising me what they should wear and the type of food I should feed them. Lola did the same with the dolls she chose. As the researcher, I copied her play. Lola’s artefacts of her play can be seen below, where she used the iPad to take photographs of her own play;



*Image 1: Lola set up a bed for her dolls*



*Image 2: Lola ‘cooked’ the dolls food*

The images above were photographed by Lola, and they are showing two different elements of the imaginative and role-play that Lola and I participated in together during her creative conversation. The first image (image 1) shows the dolls going to bed. Lola organised the dolls into their pyjamas and directed me to help and place them in the correct order. Lola told me exactly where to place each doll, and the blanket. The second image (image 2) shows the lunch that Lola cooked for her dolls before they were put to bed. She talked about making sure they ate healthy and named the foods she was giving them, such as lettuce, corn on the cob and oranges. These two images were chosen to support Lola's case study as she took them herself, which demonstrated her agency over what was important to her in that moment, and depicting the importance of her play, around feeding and organising the baby's bedtime. Lola chose this activity because she remembered playing with the dolls and kitchen when she first transitioned into her class, and so capturing these images were significant to her own memories of transition to school. These images fully captured the essence of our creative session together, which centred around Lola's enjoyment of role-playing with the dolls.

Lola placed great importance on play as both a social tool and a tool for communicating and building relationships with her peers and practitioners. Objects such as dolls, the pretend kitchen and pretend food were important to her play, and she used them as a connection to her new classroom environment. This is another example of Lola demonstrating the construction of proximal processes within her classroom environment, specifically towards objects and spaces in her environment, in whatever microsystemic space was available to her (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

When asked what her favourite thing to play with was when she came to Riverbank School, Lola highlighted;

*"the dolls"*

Additionally, when asked 'What did you like about staying at home?', Lola replied;

*"I liked to play".*

Lola highlighted the social connections of play when she was asked who she played with at home, responding; *"Ben...Ben is my brother"*.

Lola also drew on memories of role-playing dolls within her nursery setting at Riverbank School, and making connections within her school environment through objects in her play, commenting;

*“I remember this play area.”*

*“This is what they were like, they were like, cos I was in nursery, they had like little dolls too.”*

### ***Initial Feelings – “I was shy”***

Lola had uncertain feelings about starting school, with initial anxiety coming into a new environment;

*Interviewer: Ooo look, a little baby one (pointing at the baby clothes). What can you remember about starting school?*

*Lola: That I was shy*

*Interviewer: Were you shy?*

*Lola: Yeah, I wouldn't talk to anyone (laughs)*

*Interviewer: Wouldn't you? Was it a bit scary starting school?*

*Lola: Yeah*

*Interviewer: And then how did you feel when you when you settled in?*

*Lola: Good*

*Interviewer: You felt good.*

*Lola: Happy*

*Interviewer: You felt happy. Are you still shy now?*

*Lola: No.*

Once Lola had developed her sense of belonging and connection to the environment, developed friendships and a sense of security, Lola felt happy and

confident in her classroom and school environment. Lola used positive adjectives to describe how she felt once she'd settled into school, including;

*“happy” “good”.*

Lola talked a lot more about friendships with her peers, compared to relationships with practitioners in the setting. When Lola was asked who helped her make friends in her class and made her feel happy settling into school, she responded;

*“people”*

However, when asked later in the conversation about her memories of the play area (that she had already spoken about), and people and friends in her class, Lola responded with her key worker's name;

*“Laura...Laura is the one who helped me.”*

Lola's findings here demonstrate the challenges she faced within her immediate microsystem context, due to Covid-19 and the unprecedented period of chronosystemic disruption it brought with it into children's immediate environments (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). This can also be seen in the findings below where Lola found it challenging to find out her friends and peers names during her transition to school.

### ***“Finding out their names”***

During the Covid-19 lockdown, Lola missed out on opportunities to socialise with her friends in a physical capacity. She drew upon these missed opportunities when she talked about what she found difficult when she first started Riverbank School and how she initially felt about making friendships in her class environment;

*Interviewer: (whispers) Wow, you clever thing. What did you find really difficult when you came first came to this school?*

*Lola: Of finding out what they are, finding out their names .*

*Interviewer: Finding out their names, all the boys and girls?*

*Lola: (Nods yes)*

*Interviewer: So how did you find them out?*

*Lola: Good*

*Interviewer: Did you ask somebody?*

*Lola: Yeah (but shakes head as in no)*

*Interviewer: No?*

*Lola: Yes*

*Interviewer: Yes, you did? And have you got friends there now?*

*Lola: I have.*

Due to the Covid-19 restrictions, Lola missed out on opportunities to develop her social skills due to social isolation during Covid-19. Finding out the children's names was important to Lola, to provide an initial opportunity to establish friendships, peer interaction and social connection. This was an example of Lola reaching towards friendships and social connections, trying to construct proximal processes in challenging chronosystemic contexts (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). It was obvious that these initial greetings of the children in the classroom setting were not created during the transition to school.

### ***Covid-19 – “that’s when the flu started”***

During the conversation, Lola was asked what she remembered about Covid-19. Lola expressed negative memories of Covid-19 and a fear of the illness. She was able to reflect on her own experiences and memories of having Covid-19;

*“Yeah Covid was horrible. I didn’t like Covid because that’s when the flu started.”*

*“When I had the flu it was horrible because I had to like. So I had to go to the doctors and they have like this foam thing that goes down my throat...And it makes me talk very funny.”*

*“I like caught it [Covid-19].”*

Lola also had vivid memories of the physical pain that Covid-19 had on her own body;

*“And the flu was horrible because I actually had it...And it’s horrible when your back is aching and you can’t stop.”*

During the discussion, Lola also reflected on her disability from a young age, with an awareness of having cerebral palsy;

*“When I was a, when I was a baby, I had, like a breather...so it was like red”  
“because I had a fever...so I was hot and cold”.*

### **Resilience – “I can move around on my own”**

Lola reflected on her own experiences and memories of starting school during Covid-19, which highlighted her lack of self-confidence in her new classroom environment and the social impact of not being able to transition into school in the usual way. Lola reflected on this time;

*“That I was shy...I wouldn’t talk to anyone.”*

From the findings above related to friendships, it is clear that even though Lola initially lacked early social experiences and interactions as she felt shy and wouldn’t talk to anyone, which in turn delayed her social confidence, Lola overcame this with support from practitioners in her environment to know her friend’s names and form social connections with them, demonstrating the resilience in her transition to school, and desire for reciprocal relationships (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

It was evident further into the creative conversation with Lola that she had many skills that she brought to her transition to school during a challenging time, including independence and resilience. This can be seen when asked who helped her to move around at home during Covid-19;

*“I can. I can. I can move around on my own...When I was a baby, I could only crawl because I have, like, cerebral palsy. That’s why I get to come here.”*

In response to Lola and her sharing information around her own abilities, Lola was asked if she can now move all on her own. Lola replied saying;

*“Yeah. I go to swimming now on my last day of KH.”*

Here Lola is referring to her other school setting that she attends two days a week. What is noticeable is how proud Lola is of her achievements, the difference in her confidence from when she first started school, and how nothing is holding her back within her class, home or wider community despite acknowledging her physical disability. These are examples of Lola’s force characteristics being used within her microsystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), as well as learning dispositions such as persisting with difficulty and dispositional breadth (Carr, 1999).

### ***Significance of School for Lola***

For Lola, school represented far more than an environment for learning during her transition to school during Covid-19. As demonstrated in her findings above, Lola placed importance on developing and constructing social connections and friendships with her peers and objects within her environment, and school was a place where she could play, use her imagination and see familiar faces and people. For Lola, school was a place of comfort, belonging and safety, even when she felt unwell.

### **4.2.3 Lola’s Mum’s perspective**

#### **Social aspect of school**

Although Lola mentioned play as important to her, during her interview, Lola’s mother did not mention the word ‘play’ when discussing Lola’s transition to school. This divergence between Lola and her mum around ‘play’ is an interesting finding, emphasising the significance of obtaining the voice of the child.

Lola’s mum reiterated the importance of school that Lola talked about above, including her enjoyment and love of learning, the importance of developing friendships and social connections within her school environment;

*“she does like she does like her reading and stuff, but she likes the physical stuff there and her friends.”*

*“Definitely having the friends there, you know, like ‘O’, she’s been with all for a long time and meeting the other children ...but she loves it...her transition was good because she's just come so much out of her shell.”*

## **Child-Practitioner Relationships**

As well as friendships, relationships between Lola and the practitioners at Riverbank School were a very important part of Lola's transition to school from her mum's perspective, as well as the relationship between the practitioners and Lola's mum. These are examples of mesosystemic importances that Lola's mum considered a vital part of transition to school (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*"I think the setting...the setting and the staff, they're like they're amazing there."*

*"I think that's only down to [Riverbank]. I don't think I necessarily would have had that experience at another school. I just think because they're the way it is there because like I said, she has gone from a young age, yeah, I would say that, that's...helped, yeah, I know the way they were and the constant keeping in touch in lockdown."*

*"they just make, it just all seems a lot easier. So like you know, I've got no worries about dropping her to school. I wouldn't be fretting all day thinking aw is she settling, is she OK?"*

## **Parent-practitioner Relationships**

Lola's mum reflected on the relationship between parents and practitioners, where she highlighted a positive relationship with practitioners, which it made for a supportive transition for Lola. This is an example of effective mesosystems surrounding Lola's transition to school (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*"...the staff and the school itself that made that transition and knowing and they keep you updated, and it's constant...if I ever had a problem I know I can speak to them."*

## **School as a Sanctuary**

Lola's mum confirmed how much Lola enjoys attending Riverbank School, and highlighted the importance of Lola attending baby classes and preschool sessions at the same setting, which ensured Lola became familiar with the setting and the practitioners, which helped in her transition to the school setting at this time;

*"...I don't think we've had any problems because she'd been going there from such a young age I think she was ready to go downstairs and be with the other*

*children...she was at [Riverbank] from 18 months old...so we used to do the parent stay and that's where you go and stay with them ... then we got to the point of the nursery where we'd leave and come back and get her...it took her a bit to settle on that part, then going forward after that she was fine."*

Lola's mum drew on further memories of Lola transitioning to school, and observing a noticeable improvement in her self-confidence from when she first started school;

*"She's happy there, she calls it, she used to call it my [Riverbank]...she's just comfortable there."*

Lola's mum reiterated Lola's enjoyment and security of attending Riverbank, by even wanting to attend when she feels unwell;

*"It was like last week...she'd had botox on the Saturday, and then she wasn't well in the week. And then she was ok on the Wednesday, she went to school, and then she came home and she was ill... and she still wanted to go to school. She still wanted to go and I was like, you can't go there you'll give it to everybody else."*

*"But she just loves it and like last night, because she might have broken her finger, but she wouldn't tell me it hurt because she wanted to go to school. I'm still going to school tomorrow"*

Lola's mum also draws on feelings of connection and belonging to the school setting that Lola highlighted in her conversation;

*"the staff are there for us, the staff, you know...I know that not every school can do it, but it's like you feel it's just an extended part of our, our family kind of thing."*

### **Lola's Dispositions**

It was very clear within the findings from Lola's mum that Lola has many personal dispositions that she brought to her transition to school. This includes having self-confidence, independence and resilience within her environment, as well as the strength and determination to overcome challenges, like the turbulence of Covid-19 restrictions around starting school;

*"Oh yeah she's determined to walk without sticks."*

*“She's telling us that she she will just come out, like, out of nowhere and say I am going to walk one day, darling.”*

*“[Lola] is quite, if she's not happy doing something, she'll let them know.”*

Lola's mum reiterates Lola's agency within the setting by reflecting on what Lola likes to do at Riverbank School;

*“...she likes that she gets to move around...she likes the walking, she likes the physical stuff.”*

Here, Lola's mum is highlighting Lola's force characteristics (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) and learning dispositions of Carr (1999) at play within her transition to school.

### **Covid-19 (emotional turbulence)**

Interestingly, Lola's mum didn't share any information about Lola's fear of Covid-19 or Lola's memories of illness at a young age that she reflected on during her conversation.

However, Lola's mum did share the negative impact of Covid-19 on supporting Lola's specific needs, particularly from the lack of support from outside agencies that had been involved in Lola's medical needs from a young age;

*“she didn't, but she has got one [a physiotherapist]. But through COVID... we didn't even get general wellbeing call to say look guys I know we can't get round there, but we just want to check in on [Lola]. It was as if she didn't exist and I was quite upset and was quite cross at the time because these physiotherapists have known her since she was nine months old. They've had her from a very young age because she got diagnosed quite young....”*

Even though Lola's mum didn't explicitly comment on the fear Lola had around contracting Covid-19 and other illnesses like the flu, it is evident that Lola's medical needs were of concern to Lola's mum during this time, and she felt let down and disappointed by outside agencies who failed to provide that care and support for Lola and her family at this time;

*“so they've had her from a young age and we didn't even get a call or anything... To me, they were like an extended part of the family because they're in and out of our house, they're dealing with our child, personal and they wasn't there through none of it. And yeah, so that that wasn't good.”*

Here, Lola's mum draws on the challenges of exosystemic and chronosystemic level of Lola's transition to school, evident through a lack of outside agency support and changes in Lola's environment due to Covid-19 restrictions (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

### **Online learning Challenges of Covid-19**

Lola's mum reflected on several other challenges related to Lola's transition to school and the move to online learning. Lola's mum shared her experiences and difficulties at this time, especially in providing home-school support for both Lola and her brother. However, she did highlight that even though this was a challenge due to Lola's physical disability, the school were very supportive and helpful in guiding parents through a movement programme (which has been highlighted in the ethnographic data for Lola, page 161);

*“It was hard because Lola's learning it's not just about learning, it's about a physical disability as well. That said, [Riverbank] were on it and like you know, they've done online sessions and we used to do the movement sessions as well because they put the learning all into like movement...it's hard work with a child with physical disabilities to try and get them...doing it all right and correct, so I would say we struggled as parents.”*

*“...So sometimes I'd have them on online classes at the same time, so I've got [Ben] in one room doing his, then I've got to run in there, then I'm coming back to do Lola's online class so it was difficult.”*

Even though Lola's mum found home-school support challenging, she could see some benefits of online learning for Lola, specifically around friendships and relationships;

*“I think Lola, Lola enjoyed it to a sense, in a sense that she was doing something and she could see her friends and she could see her teacher.”*

Additionally, when Lola's mum was asked what Lola found most challenging at this time regarding her transition into school, Lola's mum suggested it was the change in routine that was difficult for Lola, commenting positively on the extended family time Lola enjoyed without any wider environmental demands or pressures on daily routines;

*"I think she might have just got used to being at home with us, because as silly as it sounds, at the time it was all you think, oh it was awful, and you know you can't believe what you're going back too, but then when you actually look back if you take away what was happening in the world, as in regards to how serious Covid was, it was nice family time because we didn't have the stress of anything, it was just us at home...and you get to do more stuff, there's not as much stress, so I think she might have struggled in that was 'cause then she'd got to go back into a routine"*

#### **4.2.4 Lola's Practitioners' Perspectives**

##### **Playing online**

Both Ella and Emma commented on how they engaged Lola in her play through things like the pretend kitchen and making sandwiches. Not only did this activity engage Lola's interests, but it also allowed the practitioners to develop a relationship with Lola in a fun, positive and engaging way.

Ella explained how she motivated and engaged Lola in play-based learning;

*"I can see that you really like your toy kitchen behind you. Well, what if can you go make me something I would like, and I would expect it to go over, make it independently without Mum's help, she had to get up from her chair, side-step across to her kitchen, find the different things that she wanted. So I think I had asked her for a cup of tea, a sandwich and a cake...I asked her to get these different items. And I know that she had all these things at home and with her pretend foods that she had tomatoes, lettuce, ham, cheese slices so she could make an actual life looking like sandwich."*

This finding draws attention to practitioners attempts to develop, support and co-construct proximal processes within Lola's transition to school, through trying to

develop reciprocal relationships with practitioners and Lola, and Lola and objects in her home microsystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), via online systems. Emma drew on her memories of providing fun and engaging activities for Lola, which demonstrated how well Emma knew Lola, despite not being able to get to know Lola face-to-face;

*“She likes to play with lots of things and I’m sure we implemented like, you know, playing with the dollies or like, let’s feed the dollies with like fruits and veggies.”*

Both Ella and Emma drew on observations of Lola via Zoom, which allowed the practitioners to get to know Lola and her interests. The usual strategies that Emma and Ella used to support children with SEND in their transition to school, and getting to know the children well, including their likes and dislikes, changed during this time, as face-to-face interaction was inhibited.

The role-play continued during the Zoom session between Ella and Lola, and Ella drew on developing Lola’s skills such as problem-solving and following instructions;

*“And same with her with a kettle...I said, don’t forget to boil the water for me, I don’t want a cold cup of tea, and it was silly little things like that...and it’s really motivated them...But whether it was maths or English, she still, we role played, we, you had to pick me up 4 different, how many parts do we have to our sandwich? Let’s count them. How many slices of bread do we need? And it was just incorporated in those different things and realising that we achieved so much without realising what was and a lot of it’s done through play.”*

Not only did Ella engage Lola in learning through play, which was something Ella knew Lola liked to do, she also was able to incorporate aspects of the movement programme into the learning from home opportunities.

### **Playing in the school environment**

Similarly, Laura drew on Lola’s engagement in play, especially to develop a sense of belonging within her school environment, developing relationships and proximal processes with her peers (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*“I think actually doing games where they were in groups but not next to each other helped a lot because she was able to still identify like the other peers surrounding her.”*

All three practitioners emphasised the importance of using play with Lola to develop relationships with the practitioners in the setting. Play through Zoom was an essential tool used by the practitioners at the time that facilitated opportunities for children and practitioners to build relationships that usually would have been developed and supported through playing alongside or together with both peers and practitioners within a classroom environment;

*“So that really helped actually like through play. Also playing with her to get her to get to know us, because actually not being able to go so close to each other had a massive impact..., because she’s shy anyway, it was hard to develop that relationship how we probably would now where you can go close to like a child. And because she was shy and she didn’t project her voice to the class it was quite hard.”*

Finally, Emma drew on the play opportunities for Lola as an important tool that is suitable for her age and development milestones, which highlighted the importance of a play-based early years environment for the setting;

*“So we try to, we try to make it as playful as possible in order to keep her engaged because she was quite young at that time.”*

### **Lola’s Dispositions**

It is evident from the findings that the practitioners all concluded that Lola initially had low self-confidence when starting school, but as soon as she felt comfortable, Lola was able to utilise skills and dispositions to support her in the transition to school. All three practitioners reflected on how Lola was shy when she first entered the setting, but as soon as she felt comfortable and secure in her environment, she flourished;

*“she used to be very quiet when she first came in and then they said as soon as she’d settled she was bossing them all about and telling all the children what to do.”*

*“You wouldn’t expect you wouldn’t have expected the little girl that did transition with us, that she had gone through COVID, or it had been through that weird timing ....*

*But she's like every other child in our group. There's no difference between her she's settled in just as well. If anything, she's probably one of the most bossiest ones in the classroom, she's like a little practitioner...she was quite a shy little girl when I think back. She would always speak towards the table and need to remind us to lift our shoulders back, raise your head so you talk to the person so they can hear you."*

*"she'd be really shy. Whereas she got to know us really quickly, she got to know her friends."*

Ella highlighted how the practitioners were shocked at how well Lola transitioned into school during such a disruptive time of starting school, and even though there were missed opportunities, Lola was very resilient to the change in structure and environment, and practitioners drew on her force characteristics of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), and learning dispositions (Carr, 1999), that she brought to her new school environment;

*"she just shocked us all. We thought it would be a bit of a more of a worrying transition to be like Oh, I'm in this really huge room...It echoes it's massive...And I never consider the environment and that aspect of how things echo and how they perceive it..., and how it's so different, or how just having their comfortable things around them, their paintings on the walls that are not there anymore."*

*"It's a whole new environment, but she loved it. She came in and...It was as if she was meant to be here. She'd known no different. She got straight into it. She knew what she was doing."*

### **School as a Sanctuary**

During all three practitioner interviews, they all spoke about what transition means to them at their setting, but what was noticeable was that their perceptions of transition were very child-centred and spoke of things like feeling comfortable in new environments, feeling happy, supporting children, and building relationships. These values echo the expectations of Lola and her mum regarding Lola's transition to school;

*“...the passion there is and the love that you have between the parents and the staff and it's something that's that we all realise that isn't a common thing in many practises and I do think that's one of the main things that makes us stand out to make us so different to what other schools are because we grow with them. We are a part of their families, they're a part of our families, and all and all we want is the best for them.”*

### **Fostering Relationships**

Building relationships with Lola was an important part of the transition to school experience for the practitioners at Riverbank School. However, it is evident that fostering these relationships between Lola and the practitioners was more challenging than normal due to the Covid-19 restrictions. Online methods were used to develop these relationships, rather than having embodied interactions and face-to-face communication.

Ella highlighted the importance of the relationship practitioners at the setting has developed with Lola, as well as the familiarity that Lola has in Riverbank School having attended the nursery setting and pre-school parent and toddler sessions at the school;

*“And granted, that was due to her being a part of the [school] for so long and us being such a close family between all departments...that she was aware of a few of us... [Emma] used to work upstairs also so there was familiarities.”*

The importance of the practitioner-child relationship was reciprocated by Laura, and reflected on using the online tools again to develop that relationship with Lola;

*“so they [practitioners] used Zoom to try and get her to be familiar with like the practitioners that would be in the classroom so they did some play sessions with her at home.”*

Prioritising the development of proximal processes between adults and Lola in her setting during her transition to school at the time was evident throughout the practitioner's findings (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

## Affordances of Covid-19

Laura suggested that even though Lola knew the practitioners at the setting, and they were putting in strategies to develop her familiarity with them, it was important that for a child to feel comfortable and secure in their learning environment, the bond and attachment in the relationship needed to be more secure;

*“she did already know some of the practitioners already previously coming into school group and I think that’s a good thing about like where we work is that it’s all so close knit but actually, although she knew of them she didn’t have that secure bond just yet, and also, she didn’t also know some of the children already in school group, which I think also had an impact.”*

Throughout the practitioner interviews, they all placed importance on the relationship between the practitioner and parents/ caregivers. This is an example of positive mesosystemic relationships between parents/ caregivers and practitioners (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) that supported Lola’s transition to school at the time. The practitioners created an image of holistic support and development for parents/ caregivers;

*“And it we just made the connection between parents. They were more confident coming up to us to ask us questions.”*

*“they’re quite good parents, so I think they tried everything as possible...They were easy going in a way so they were happy to go with the flow and just try everything...It must be hard because the children were at home or that when you know quite a lot of time.”*

Additionally, Lola’s determination and resilience could be related to the positive attitude and supportive environment within Riverbank to achieve the best she could achieve;

*“That’s what we love about this school. It’s always, it’s constant. We don’t like giving up. We will try and if it doesn’t work one way, we’ll find a way where it does work, we’ll problem solve.”*

*“There’s no stopping her once she’s got something set in her mind...she’s like dynamite. She’s no, there’s nothing getting in her way, she’s no, she’ll push it out of*

*the way. She's like, she'll jump over the hurdle, no matter what obstacle comes her way. She won't accept defeat, but I will be doing this, I want to do it and that, that's where you have to leave it with [Lola], so".*

However, Laura reflected on how much Lola has developed over the past year, suggesting up until now Covid-19 impacted Lola's development;

*"this year she's come on like on leaps and bounds, but actually I think this is the first full year...But yeah, sorry, I think this year has really been the first full year where COVID actually hasn't had an impact."*

### **Social Impact of Covid-19**

The practitioners highlighted the importance of social connection for children and the difficulties they faced in not being able to see their friends. This highlights the social impact that the Covid-19 restrictions had on children like Lola who, instead of transitioning to school and socialising with their peers, had their learning online in isolation;

*"difficult for them because they couldn't socialise with their friends on that who would be here on that day, they'd have to see on the screen and because they have learning difficulties, it was very hard to comprehend, should I be in school and see my friend, but we are online I have to do some work on the computer."*

Laura drew attention to a barrier for Lola when building relationships with practitioners, such as the use of masks within the classroom setting;

*"You know, so actually, like adult wise, I think although we put in place like zoom and stuff, it was still hard for her to get to recognise the staff member because of everything was over our faces."*

These exosystemic structures like Covid-19 policies that prioritised masks and distancing rules challenged the development of proximal processes for Lola in her transition to school (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Laura recognised this as the biggest barrier for the development of relationships between the practitioners and

Lola, and noted aspects of building trust and rapport with children in their learning environment;

*“I think the biggest barrier was getting to know the children and developing those relationships...it doesn't happen overnight it's a long journey, but I feel like it prolonged it even more...covering the face using the masks like, and also like with a mask like you, you shout so actually, that's not like your actual voice. I felt like there was sometimes where I was a bit like I was sort of being a different person than I would normally be... not really having a joke and a laugh, but actually sometimes it's nice to have a little bit of an inside joke with a child when you're sat next to them and then carry on working. But actually you couldn't be that close so you couldn't ...So I feel like the barrier was building relationships...And part of like what we do, the relationship is so important because they need to have trust in us.”*

### **Observation of Parental fear of Covid-19**

The practitioners reflected on the noticeable fear that all parents had around Covid-19 for their children who attended the specialist setting, which related specifically to their child's medical needs and the fear of contracting Covid-19 in the school setting. This meant that even though the school was open for children to attend, many parents decided to keep their children at home;

*“To start off with, we had some children in some children on zoom, so it was 50/50...Depending on the parents if they felt comfortable with their child coming into school.”*

The practitioners respected the wishes and knowledge of parents regarding their child's medical needs and whether they should send them to school. To support parents in their decisions to protect their children, the school setting ensured the children could still be involved in sessions via Zoom;

*“And the child's needs themselves or their medical issues and things like that. So some parents felt it was safe for them to be at home...and we accepted that when we said you could Zoom in.”*

#### 4.2.5 Summary

A summary of similarities and difference of perspectives with regards to Lola's transition to school during Covid-19 are highlighted below. These have been discussed in detail within Chapter 5 'Discussion' (page 265).

- **Playing to develop Relationships and Proximal Processes:** Lola used role-play to develop proximal processes, which included reciprocal relationships with peers and practitioners, and role-play objects within her environment. Lola used online 'play' to develop social connections with peers and practitioners, and as a form of communication. Lola's mum did not mention 'play' in the same way, focusing more on the importance of developing social connections with friends and practitioners.
- **Positive Dispositions:** Lola, her mum and the practitioners all drew on the strengths of Lola and her learning dispositions in achieving her potential at school, despite her own challenges of her physical disability and challenges of Covid-19.
- **Familiarity with the Setting:** Lola's mum and practitioners drew on the affordance that attending the nursery gave Lola in terms of being familiar with the setting and development of relationships. Lola highlighted how she was still 'shy' when first attending her setting, and the importance of making friends and knowing their names was a concern.
- **Online challenges:** Online Innovative strategies were used to support Lola, including play and the movement programme. Lola's mum said these sessions made Lola happy as she could see friends and practitioners. Lola's mum found the sessions difficult to manage due to Lola's physical disability and having to support siblings with home-schooling. This challenge was reciprocated by practitioners, although difficulties arose around children missing out on making social connections.
- **Connection and Belonging:** The feeling of connection and belonging to the school setting is reciprocated by Lola, her mum and the practitioners, drawing on feelings of connection and belonging to the school environment and being part of the 'family'. These reciprocal relationships, that Bronfenbrenner and

Morris (2006) identify as proximal processes, were an important aspect of starting school for Lola from the perspective of all three participants.

### **4.3 Case Study Two: Amna**

#### **4.3.1 Ethnographic Information**

**Age of child:** 8

**Pre-school:** Attended private nursery setting.

**School Name:** Sun Blossom Primary School.

**Date of Transition to School:** September 2020

**Age of child at transition:** 4

**Area of School Setting:** The school is based in a suburb of Birmingham Local Authority.

**Type of School:** Maintained primary school.

**School Context:** The school is a maintained primary school with a catholic ethos. It is a large city school with approximately 650 pupils on roll, and a three-form entry. The school has a large nursery pre-school setting for pupils to attend prior to starting school in Reception, and three Reception classes.

**Ratio of practitioners/ children:** 1:1 for physical support only, not academic learning.

**SEND:** Physical Disability (PD). Amna has a rare physical disability, which affects bone and organ development. Details of her exact condition have been removed due to it being an identifying feature.

**SEN Support/ EHCP:** EHCP

**Family Background:** Amna lives with her mum, dad, brother, and paternal grandparents. Amna and her family are of Muslim faith. This is an important part of Amna's family life, with extended family members playing a vital role in Amna's upbringing. Throughout the pandemic and her transition to school, Amna had regular hospital appointments and medical needs where she needed to shield from family and peers, which was a difficult time for her and her family had to navigate. Amna's parents worked during Covid-19 and were both keyworkers at the time. This meant Amna had access to the 'bubble' system at her school setting, although she did not

attend as often as she could have, due to her needing to regularly isolate and shield from her peers.

**Practitioner information:** One practitioner, Sarah, was interviewed as part of the case study for Amna, as she was the Reception teacher who supported Amna in her transition to school during Covid-19. Sarah is the Early Years leader at Sun Blossom Primary School where Amna attends and has been a practitioner at the setting for eight years.

**Creative Method:** Amna chose to draw and colour pictures with me as a way to share her experiences of transition to school. Whilst sharing her experiences, Amna drew a picture of me, and labelled it as 'smiley'. As Amna drew and coloured her picture, we chatted about her experience of starting school and what she remembered about Covid-19.

### **4.3.2 Amna's Perspective**

#### ***I like learning – “playing with toys...doing sports”***

Amna reflected on positive memories of starting school, focussing on her enjoyment in the social element of school “*like wow I get to finally have a rest and visit somebody*”. For Amna, school is more than just learning, and the connection to others is important for her, which having missed these opportunities, was longing for by the time she could attend again. This is an example of Amna reaching towards the social connections and proximal processes in her school microsystem, emphasising the importance of relationships in her transition to school, yet recognising chronosystem challenges associated with Covid-19 (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

When asked what she liked to do at school, she said “*playing with the toys...and doing sports and my mom watching me to do sports*”. Amna sees school as more than just a learning environment, talking about her mum being part of her school environment too. Amna enjoys the inclusive element that her school offers her, being able to participate in sports even with a physical disability.

#### ***Social Connections and Belonging - “A good day looks like lots of friends...”***

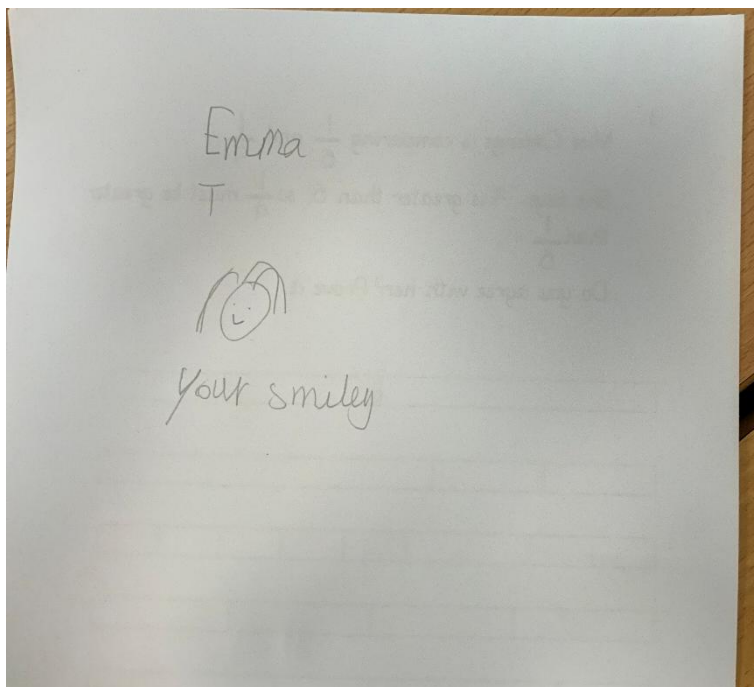
As already highlighted above, for Amna, it was evident that social connections and friendships within her school environment were very important to her, especially during her transition into reception class. Amna discussed friendships with peers, and this was a clear finding that Covid-19 had a social impact for Amna starting school. When Amna was asked what a good day looks like at school, she replied focussing on friendships and the support of friends to help her access her environment;

*“A good day looks like lots of friends, and they would be polite and come to lunch with me. That time when I didn't have any friends I felt lonely and nobody would take me to my dinner. And then, I felt lonely and I started to cry and went to let them know.”*

It is clear within the findings that the social aspect of play was very important to Amna through the development of friendships. However, it is also evident the impact of Covid-19 had on Amna being able to develop these secure friendships when she started school, with feelings of sadness and loneliness. This finding demonstrates Amna's wishes for constructing proximal processes with peers in her immediate microsystemic environment, to develop her sense of belonging to her new school but also drew on the challenges of the chronosystemic restrictions around social distancing and being on her own (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

***Importance of Play - "there was lots of toys like sand..."***

As part of the creative conversation carried out, Amna chose to do some colouring (which she chose to take home with her), and then went on to draw a picture of me (the researcher), which can be seen in the artefact below;



***Image 1: Amna drew a picture of me (the researcher) with the comment 'your smiley'***

In her creative session, Amna chose to colour a picture. This was something she said she enjoyed doing, and during this session, she also commented that she liked drawing. Halfway through her colouring, which is featured on the other side of Image 1 above, Amna turned her paper over and decided to draw a picture of me, and

wrote 'Emma...your smiley'. She was very interested in me, and asked me lots of questions about myself, including asking if I am a doctor or a nurse. Evidently, Amna has regular hospital appointments and her experiences of that were reflected in this interaction. These questions redistributed the power dynamics between myself and Amna in that moment, and I explained I was just someone from a university who was really interested in Amna's school experiences. This image was chosen as part of Amna's case study as when I asked Amna if I could take a photograph of her colouring, she pointed at the drawing of me and said 'take a photograph of this'. Here, Amna demonstrated her agency in our creative session through deciding what image I could photograph, as well as demonstrating her relational disposition of connecting with myself and the importance of building and developing those relationships in her school environment.

During the creative conversation, Amna relayed memories of play when she first started school. Amna remembered playing with sand, and focussed her memories on the connection to imaginative and creative play;

*"There was lots of toys like sand...sand, and where you could colour some pictures."*

When asked what she liked doing when she was in reception class, Amna reinforced her enjoyment of playing with sand, as well as her interest in imaginative and role-play;

*"playing sand more, I liked that...we tried to build like, you know, it's a circle and you try and make somebody food?"*

Amna's use of 'we' suggests she was playing with or alongside other children in her setting. Amna also enjoyed playing at home when she wasn't able to attend school;

*"probably playing with my [muffled]."*

*"just with colouring, watching TV, having some food."*

Amna was agentic in the construction of proximal processes within her microsystemic, through playing alongside or with others and objects in her environment in the smallest of spaces and places in her microsystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

***Emotional turbulence - “Kind of felt so sad because nobody could come to visit me”***

Amna shared her memories around what Covid-19 meant to her, with a connection to illness;

*“Covid is like when you first like started illness.”*

Amna was asked whether she attended the nursery at this setting. She replied, with a clear memory of this time, linking it to her medical needs;

*“It's like this school. It's like when they say like purple one, next to all the shops...that one, and there were so many injections I started crying from them because it was for me.”*

*“I didn't have one in each arm. It was every single one was in my port...and I hate blood tests...I don't like blood tests...I still cry from them.”*

Amna is relating Covid-19 with her own medical needs, possibly due to her going through medical appointments at the same time as Covid-19.

Amna also drew on the emotional turbulence of starting school and emphasised her feelings at the time due to the inability to make social connections. This was due to the challenging chronosystemic context of Covid-19 (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), and the rules and restrictions in place, such as distancing and isolating. Due to her vulnerability of contracting Covid-19, Amna was restricted in her ability to see family and friends, yet this was very important for her;

*“...they couldn't meet anyone because they didn't let you in...something like isolated something.”*

*“Kind of felt so sad because nobody could come to visit me or something...Just have to stay at home.”*

***“I don't know the names”***

Initially, Amna didn't know the names of the peers in her class, but she did remember her friend 'T', a friend who also attended the same nursery setting as Amna;

*“I don't know the names but I remember when I first had ‘T’ when I first entered reception and nursery...she's in Miss G [class], which is where I'm sitting right now. Sometimes she can play with somebody else, so I play with my friends that are in my class.”*

When Amna was asked who her friends are now, she mentioned other children and everyone in the school. This suggests that friendships are crucial to Amna within her school setting, and during her transition to school, she was negotiating social connections and her sense of belonging to her new school and class, reflecting her construction of reciprocal relationships and proximal processes with her peers (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*“I’ and ‘I’, and everybody in the school.”*

***Resilience - “...and then I lost, so I'm trying to win the next one”***

During the conversation, Amna displayed many skills such as perseverance and resilience in her school environment, without her own physical disabilities and medical needs holding her back or providing barriers in her environment;

*“...my Mom said that she's gonna come into sports day even though she had her exam marking going on. And then she said that remember last time when when you do your sport day in year two and then Miss B my teacher assistant, she was dropping all her paperworks (smiles)...And then, and then I lost. So I'm trying to win the next one...it hasn't started yet, it starts in Year 3, I hope.”*

Amna also reflected on challenges she faced when she started school, which related to the formal learning and curriculum, but has since overcome them;

*“When I started school I found everything hard like RE, topic, and some science, English, math...because it was my first time trying maths and English.”*

Amna also explained how not being able to hear in her environment was challenging and excluded her from her reception class environment. This was due to nobody knowing about her inability to hear properly.

*“Miss D, I was Miss D, got, you know, she was the first one to know that I had, I didn't have my hearing aids and I was deaf...My parents didn't know, so didn't believe her. But when they knew, because they thought I was ignoring them but I couldn't hear them so they took me to the audiologist”*

*“...when I was in Reception I had no hearing aids at all so I couldn't hear...so what I did was nothing really. Not talking to them.”*

Amna also explained how not being able to hear was difficult, but she demonstrated her resilience in not being able to hear, by discussing how this was problematic for her at the start but then she 'got used to it' later on. Amna was asked how it feels to have hearing aids, to which she replied with feelings of happiness. For Amna, having the ability to hear her peers and teachers makes her feel happy and included in her environment. She also displayed an acute awareness of her own needs;

*“it feels great...yeah [smiles and nods head yes].”*

*“I'm having a Cochlear implant operation....it's very soon.”*

When Amna was asked if she was looking forward to that, she expressed negative feelings, but also emotional resilience;

*“No because the first time you hear it, you you hear strange noises...and then you get used to it...and you're allowed cochlear implants when you're asleep, do you know that?”*

These findings here demonstrate Amna's force characteristics being used in her microsystem to support her own transition to school (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), such as her persistence and motivation. Furthermore, it demonstrates her learning dispositions in action, through persisting with difficulty (Carr, 1999).

### ***Significance of School for Amna***

For Amna, school represented a place that was significantly more than a place to learn. It was her safe space, where she saw it as a place to connect with her peers beyond learning, developing her sense of belonging within her school community through sustained proximal processes. Amna placed important emphasis on friendships and social connections with peers, that gave her a sense of security and meaning within her transition to school, and a place to have fun and be herself.

### **4.3.3 Amna's Mum's Perspective**

#### **Social and Emotional (dis)connections**

Amna's mum highlighted the constraints of socialising with family members for Amna, specifically not being able to play with family members like her cousins due to Amna's specific medical needs and her vulnerability to being exposed to Covid-19;

*"We were more cautious of anything not happening to her that would have been detrimental and knowing about the condition. So, I think it had more impact on her emotions as opposed to physical well-being, so we kept her as well as we could...we had extended family members, but we told them about her vulnerability, so I think there was a lot of she wasn't able to play with her cousins. And we had to separate that and make it known... it was very difficult because we lived with the grandparents...It means that she needs to isolate and be away from extra people'.*

Amna's mum reflected on the social impact of Covid-19 and Amna's experience of starting school;

*"I think the biggest barrier is probably the emotional, you know, the social, emotional need. Even if that meant not just friendship groups, but even the reassurance from adults. And the fact that she needed that more than anything. And like I said that although the kids don't vocalise what they feel all the time, but they would be feeling it nonetheless."*

#### **School as a Sanctuary**

Amna's mum reflected on the role of Sun Blossom Primary School for Amna, suggesting it was a place where Amna felt safe and secure;

*"...she felt like this was her safe haven, you know, this school became more than just a school for her..."*

Amna's mum reiterated Amna's positive disposition of school when describing a time she may have had Covid but was determined to go to school;

*"...Back then it was like the eagerness of wanting to go to school, I think it was taken away so it made her more determined to want to go. So I think at certain points it would be a case that she'd have a cough we do the Covid test regularly at home to*

*make sure everyone was ok, and then she would be like, but don't tell the school because they won't let me come."*

## **Friendships and Social Connections**

Amna's mum drew on Amna's experiences of starting school, where friendships were an important aspect of that, and due to her turbulent transition to school, as well as her medical needs, meant developing friendships was a challenge for Amna;

*"I think her school years where the transition could have been a lot more smoother...instead, it became another obstacle in the way of her learning, because like I said previously, the condition was more so physical, and cognitively, she was sound. So it meant that she could still thrive and have the experience that we would want for her as parents. But obviously with COVID coming in, then it became another thing to explain to her. So we'd first initially started to explain to her what her condition meant, and then we were saying, OK, the emotional aspect was very important for us, to make sure she had the friends and everything else. And then that was affected. And then we were told that because of her condition, she was known as vulnerable. And for that reason, she had to isolate."*

*"Her hospital appointments were affected. We were told that she couldn't be seen if she had flu like symptoms or anything that remotely looked like COVID, even though part of her condition meant that she had all of these additional things anyway, because she's more nasally...So I think it was that over cautiousness, and not being able to make friends and, you know, have some sort of normality where she wanted to speak about herself, and she wanted to be, I think she used the word normal, but just considered as a human being for once as opposed to just...being labelled as the person with the condition."*

Even though Amna's mum highlights the difficulty that Amna had initially making friends as she wasn't able to attend her school setting, she did acknowledge that Amna did have friends and was able to form and develop social connections with ease when she was at school. This demonstrates further Amna's resilience in making and developing friendships and social connections in her school microsystem, a further example of Amna constructing proximal processes

(Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), and reaching towards being involved, taking an interest and communicating with others in her transition to school (Carr, 1999);

*“And I think she did have, like, one or two friends that she's still friends with. So she'd say, ohh, you know, I met such and such and we spoke about this and what have you.”*

*“She's quite popular in the sense of making friends...And she's not an introvert. She's quite extrovert. The opposite of her brother.”*

### **Amna's Dispositions**

Additionally, Amna's mum explained how Amna used her skills and strengths such as resilience and an ability to cope with change, allowing her to manage the turbulent landscape of her transition when not being able to go to school;

*“She's very resilient anyway. You might have gathered that in your meeting with her. I think the medical side of things actually helped, because of the unpredictable nature of her condition meant that she was more open to change. So she wasn't like, this is my routine. You could sit her down and tell her you're not able to go to school anymore because this is what's happened.... So she could understand the fact that she couldn't go to school. But she couldn't understand why. I think that was the issue that we had. So it was like you're doing this now, but then the why question we weren't able to answer that either.”*

This further supports Amna's learning dispositions in practice, specifically persisting with difficulty (Carr, 1999), and her force characteristics of her own motivation and persistence in her transition to school during Covid-19 (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

### **Sibling support**

Amna's mum noted how supportive it was for Amna to have her brother at school, which helped and supported her transition into school. She also noted how the smaller 'bubble' system allowed Amna and her brother to be together in the school setting, which provided Amna with familiarity in an unfamiliar environment;

*“...she’s got an older brother in the school, they were both going together and sometimes the activities would involve them sitting together, and I think that helped the fact that she wasn’t just taken into her age range so to speak, because the classes were so small, the bubbles were so small, it meant he was with her quite a lot of the time. So I think that helped ease her in...then it became a little bit more settling and more comfortable like you know her wanting to go to school.”*

### **Child-Practitioner Relationships**

Amna’s mum drew on the relationships developed between Amna and the practitioners at her setting, which she implied the smaller groups and ‘bubbles’ were effective for Amna to have that one-to-one interaction with them. This is an example of Amna reaching towards the construction of proximal processes and reciprocal relationships with her practitioners at the time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*“So she was wanting, I think because the staff and pupil ratio was so small and it’s so close it helped in the sense that she was able to have that one-to-one interaction with the teachers.”*

### **Parent-Practitioner Relationships**

Amna’s mum also drew on her memories of the relationships between parents and practitioners, suggesting that it was a challenge to develop these mesosystemic relationships between parents and practitioners (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), due to the inability to communicate face-to-face;

*“I think that was probably part and parcel of it because a lot of my communication was then via e-mail and with her vulnerability and how I wanted to find how she was getting on in the day, I would have appreciated just that little bit of (pats arm) at the door to say she’s OK, she was OK today. Even those few words would have made the world of difference to me...I’m not bothered about whether she was good at spellings or anything. I just wanted to know how it was with her returning. And I felt like I needed to ask those questions by an e-mail, which I didn’t think was the right way.”*

Due to the intricacies of Amna's medical needs, it was important for Amna's mum to relay this information clearly and accurately, but due to Covid-19 restrictions, meant there was a breakdown in the communication between parents, practitioners, school leaders and teaching assistant support;

*"I think, a lot of miscommunication was because of Covid. And I think one of the things for example like pain relief was, I left pain relief in school because she has a lot of muscular pains. It's as and when she needs it, and I didn't make that apparent as and when she needed it because I wasn't able to talk to a teacher and have that message relayed. It was whatever was on a piece of paper, and however you would interpret it. So then it turned out that Amna would, at a particular time, go to the medical area and ask for paracetamol."*

### **Emotional impact of Covid-19**

Amna's mum reflected on the emotional impact of Covid-19 for Amna and her family. This included the emotional toll of being unable to make social connections, the fear of how vulnerable Amna was at that time, as well as family bereavement due to Covid-19, which has emotionally affected Amna and her family.

Amna's mum explained how Amna often expressed worries around Covid-19, which caused an emotional and unsettling time for her. Amna's mum reflected on the time when Amna started school, which not only included the educational aspects, but there was also a huge emotional impact for Amna due to the death of two very close relatives, due to Covid-19;

*"She would ask questions like, when is it going to end mum? And there was that uncertainty where no one knew."*

*"And I think then in addition to that...She lost her granddad's brother, who she was very close to, and then he fell ill all of a sudden, I think she was video calling him."*

*"...That was really unsettling for her cos she didn't understand. And I think she's just recently started to understand that he lost his life because of that. So I think even going to the funeral, we weren't able to...So I think that was in addition to the educational side of things. It was the personal as well. And then her great grandma*

*passed away. And that happened like a month after...So again, those three months that she was considered vulnerable. Not even going to school because at that point, she had the hospital letter to say she shouldn't be going anywhere."*

Having family members passing away from Covid-19 had a huge impact on Amna and her family, which included the fear of keeping Amna safe due to her vulnerabilities. Amna's mum shared that Amna will often talk about her grandmother and great grandad passing away, which demonstrates the fear and emotional impact of Covid-19 is still present for her. Amna's mum also highlighted a strategy she used with Amna to reflect on a difficult time, through writing prayers;

*"But then afterwards it eased a little and then she was able to go into, SEN children were allowed to enter school. And I think when the grandma passed away that was a little bit unsettling again...then she saw all the feelings that we had because it was obviously a bereavement and we all were dealing with it in our own way and I think that was quite unsettling for her. So I think there were points then then we just started to reflect and start writing prayers as a form of trying to overcome those few weeks."*

When Amna's mum was asked what the biggest barrier Amna had during her transition into school at this time, she reflected on the social and emotional challenges brought on by Covid-19 and the importance of reassuring Amna through such a challenging time. Amna's mum highlighted the strategies of support that were essential to support Amna develop resilience at this time, including reassurance and support from adults around her, and saying prayers.

### **Pressures of home-schooling**

Amna's mum discussed the pressures of being a key worker whilst Amna was at home and the mixed feelings and experiences of attending the 'bubble' system at school;

*"I was a key worker, so I had to go to school and then childcare became an issue as well, because obviously everyone within the house was a key worker. It came to a*

*stage where kids with vulnerabilities were allowed to go back into school...if childcare was an issue. And I think that although she had that experience and she enjoyed it because it meant that she came into school and there was some sort of normality in terms of the beginning of the day and the end of the day, it wasn't the same...she didn't have the same curriculum...everyone was doing their own thing so it was bespoke to the child as opposed to following a set structure."*

Amna's mum noted the difficulties and pressures she faced being a key worker in her own job, as well as providing home-learning educational opportunities for Amna;

*"...So I think a lot of the educational side was done by myself. Which was difficult balancing, you know, the idea of key worker, going to school, doing what I needed to do, and then at home, the education just wasn't stopping. It was constant, so I did feel a bit overwhelmed myself as a parent."*

### **Challenges Amna faced due to Covid-19**

Amna's mum reflected on Amna's inability to hear when she first started reception class, and how it was left undiagnosed. This created a barrier in Amna's transition to school to provide the correct support for her and her specific needs. The overlap between Amna's, her mums and the practitioners reflections on the barrier of Amna's hearing loss will be discussed further in the discussion section;

*"She was lip reading at the time, which meant that she was hindered in the communication aspect because she wasn't able to understand, and her hearing impairment was also something that was left undiagnosed until reception, because although she had this impairment, it wasn't known. So it meant that a lot of her reliance was then, the way she described it was a lot more muffled. And I can only imagine, and that's why I can't imagine how she learned because obviously, when hearing is a big part of learning. And I just felt like that was, that was a big thing."*

In addition to her hearing disability, Amna's mum felt that the school and practitioners did not have the necessary knowledge regarding Amna's physical medical needs, and due to this lack of knowledge and experience, the support that

Amna needed was delayed and therefore limited her experiences in the school environment;

*“...I think with her particular condition in the school in general, it’s taken a long while before reasonable adjustments have been made, and I can only assume it’s because of the fact that it’s the only physical disability that they’ve experienced, so I think it was a lot of trial and error. So I think you know the rarity of her condition meant they hadn’t ever encountered something like that, so I think a lot of the time there were things that could have been avoided, necessary adjustments being made to begin with...so had things been in place from the beginning, like the ramps that they’ve got now. Prior to that, it wasn’t, there was no ramps. So there would be certain steps etc that she couldn’t go down, so then it meant...so it was like limiting her...”*

Amna’s mum noted the turbulent experience of navigating Amna’s medical diagnosis with starting school during a worldwide pandemic, noting how the strict governmental guidelines hindered Amna’s experiences of starting school due to the inability to share vital information regarding Amna’s medical needs;

*“I think without Covid, it probably wouldn’t have happened because I would have been in more of a position to push things along. I would have been more active in terms of gaining medical and because obviously the medical advice was important regardless of Covid, we’ve, because I needed to then relay and cascade that information to the staff here to say this is what she requires, adjustments that need to be made, but all of that I thought was on the back burner because I was only able to say so much because their response would have been Covid, the government guidelines almost hindered her experience, school experience, because obviously you wouldn’t argue with what the government are saying. And it wasn’t the government weren’t differentiating case-to-case, so you know her emotional, social, what she was going through, that wasn’t something that was a priority, cause the priority was to make sure that this was kept and contained, and that was the ultimate priority because it was a life and death situation as opposed to making reasonable adjustments for her to be able to get into school life.”*

*“so I do think that perhaps if Covid didn’t happen, she would have had a smoother run, in terms of, you know, getting stuff on board.”*

#### 4.3.4 Amna's Practitioner Perspective

##### Changing teaching strategy

Sarah, the practitioner, highlighted how, due to the lack of experience children had playing in a classroom or nursery environment, her teaching style had to change at the time to meet the needs of the children starting school, which included stripping back the learning environment and the play opportunities within the classroom;

*"...you set everything up in July thinking that it's going to be great, but actually when the cohort came in and you think, ok, this is not what they need, they needed it stripped back."*

*"...I think they've missed out on so much learning from their educational settings...it was a lovely year that year in terms of the heat, so they were probably outside playing a lot...routines were out the window at home and rules as well. And I just think everything was almost forgotten or just not taught or not learnt by parents and teachers alike, so it was retraining and a lot of things that we've not really had to do before."*

Sarah didn't specifically comment on Amna's interests around playing and social connections to peers. Interestingly, Sarah explained how she had observed children entering reception at that time had an obvious inability to play, having missed out on the opportunities to attend nursery or preschool settings, playgroups, and playing alongside or with other children, due to the Covid-19 lockdown;

*"We did have to put away lots of kind of intricate toys, and play based things because a lot of the children didn't know how to play, which was shocking. It's not always been that way, but we found that children really struggled to play with toys and have an imagination and they missed out on a lot again with nursery if they didn't come here. So we had to bring it back to basics. Almost have nursery provision to begin with and then as the year went on, we had to do a lot of training with how to play, how to sit with them and you know, use your imagination and work with those children."*

Due to the Covid-19 restrictions around distancing within an early year's environment, Sarah explained how children were only allowed to play with a selected few items in the trays provided for them, which not only caused confusion for

children, but restricted their usual patterns of play and social connection opportunities;

*“What was difficult was they all had to sit at tables...we had to sit at tables and they all had their own singular table with a tray of toys that they could play with, which seems absolutely crazy at the moment. Even saying that aloud... , and they couldn't touch anybody else's and that was hard.”*

However, Sarah did point out that the smaller groups and 'bubble' system suited some children, giving them a more focus and adapted to their specific needs. This echoes the findings from Amna's mum, where she suggested the smaller group suited Amna and her specific needs, allowing children like Amna an opportunity to develop reciprocal relationships with their practitioners;

*“...But again, some of them were OK because it was smaller and they had more input from us and we were able to focus more on the needs that they had. But some of them just, yeah, it it was tricky just to have so much isolation.”*

### **Not knowing the child and their needs**

Sarah didn't specifically explore or highlight Amna's strengths during her transition into school. However, she did talk about the intricacies of Amna's medical needs and emphasised how she only got to know Amna and her specific needs later within the Autumn term of that year due to her being classed as 'vulnerable' and having to isolate from her peers. This lack of knowledge around Amna's specific needs was also highlighted by Amna's mum, where she noted that reasonable adjustments were not available straight away for when Amna started school;

*“...She was really vulnerable, so that was difficult because we couldn't quite figure out how tall she'd be in terms of using the toilets and the sink, whether we need to get another toilet in for her, but it turns out they were small enough, she was fine. She did fit through them, and we made adjustments with toilet seats and steps...She needed to sit on a chair, which we didn't know at the time...We then found that she needed hearing aids, so for a couple of months, she probably couldn't hear me that well”*

Sarah reflected that due to a lack of opportunity for face-to-face interaction with Amna and her family, what Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) would suggest as challenging mesosystems, she couldn't get a full understanding of Amna's specific needs and what adjustments she needed to make within the classroom environment or strategies to support her. This meant that Amna faced several barriers within her school environment for several months, before Sarah observed that she had hearing difficulties;

*"...I think perhaps if we had more meetings and I'd spoken to her and I'd heard the way she'd, she'd actually spoke, um I'd probably think she might have needed further hearing tests and perhaps hearing aids, but I didn't, so I didn't know...it's quite sad."*

### **Parent fear of declaring SEND**

Sarah noted how, especially during that year, parents didn't turn up to transition meetings to share information about their child's specific needs, observing the fear of parents in declaring their child's special needs before they've started school. However, Sarah commented how this is problematic for being prepared and making adjustments for their needs before they start school;

*"I didn't really have a Teaching Assistant that year to be honest because we didn't really have much in place for the SEND children at the time ... a lot of children we find that do have those special needs, I think some of the parents are afraid to put it on forms, and they don't tend to tell us until the day that we come in, which is quite hard because we can't prepare for them, so for us, it's obviously always better that that we we're prepared."*

### **Emotional impact for parents and children**

Sarah didn't comment on the specific emotional impact of starting school for Amna. However, in the findings, it is clear that Sarah is aware of the emotional impact that starting school without a usual transition had on children and their parents at that time;

*“Everyone was a little bit frantic and nervous about coming in and they had to be convinced that it was OK. We all had masks. We had to sit apart from each other and it seemed quite formal for the children to come into that setting and see a stranger sitting across from the table. But it was helpful knowing they could come in with their parents, they couldn't see me properly as I was wearing a mask and a lot of them sat on their parents laps and were really shy. Normally you'd see them play a little bit more, explore the setting. But these children were quite clung to their parents.”*

Sarah also reflected on how stressful the transition to school was at the time for children with SEND, their parents, and practitioners, due to a lack of familiarity with the school environment and practitioners, including following new rules and routines of the class environment. Due to wider exosystemic policies and chronosystemic challenges of Covid-19 that meant families and children could not become familiar with their school microsystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), this lack of familiarity added to the emotional impact of a turbulent time for everyone involved in the child's transition to school;

*“it was stressful in terms of knowing that the children had to come into this new setting and knowing that they weren't familiar with it, they weren't familiar with us as teachers...to be expected to kind of be in a formal reception class and sit and listen and they just weren't ready to. It was hard on the teachers as well because we still had to get our jobs done. But it was hard to see them because it was really stressful for them. We didn't have an SEN hub set up, we have now because of that year.”*

Sarah commented on the emotional challenges of Covid-19 for children with SEND, especially in understanding the ambiguity of the rules within the classroom environment, such as hand-washing, distancing and lack of choice and agency over what and who the children play with in their classroom;

*“...we had a lot of tears from a few of the children, to be honest. It was difficult for them to comprehend why we have to do this, and you don't want to put too much pressure on them knowing that actually this is a big scary pandemic, but lack of understanding also as to why I'm washing my hands so many times, I don't want to go to the bathroom that many times and I want to play with all the other toys, not just the ones that I have in the tray, a lot of confusion let's say for some of the children.”*

## **Trust of parents**

Sarah commented that parents had a distinct lack of trust in the setting and practitioners, due to their lack of familiarity with the practitioners and school environment. This shows the challenging mesosystemic relationships that were happening between parents/ caregivers and practitioners (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*“I would say the trust in the setting, and knowing that we can meet their needs and knowing that we know what’s best for them. But again, that was quite tricky because we didn’t know the children very well and some of the children didn’t meet with us beforehand. Some parents were ok, some parents were quite shocked, I suppose. If they put their child in and they weren’t diagnosed with any special educational need at the time or it wasn’t flagged up and some parents were quite shocked to realise that we did have concerns about their children, and that was quite upsetting for some of them, yeah I think mostly the trust.”*

## **Supporting parent(ing)**

Sarah noted how this was a stressful time for practitioners having to also support parents who didn’t realise their children potentially had special educational needs and disabilities, due to missing early health checks at this time;

*“...it was stressful...the children’s reactions of course, but the parents who were on board, it was always so much easier when the parents who were prepared, but the parents who weren’t, who had probably missed a couple of check in the doctors and not sending them to nursery, I think it was stressful, having those conversations with those parents, when they don’t understand why my child’s struggling. Not knowing that they should be toilet trained at that age, it was quite a lot of we’re teaching the parents how to do these things, it’s something that we weren’t really prepared for because those are the things I prepared for in nursery, never used to have to prepare for them in reception really...”*

## **Unfamiliar Environment**

When Sarah was asked what the biggest barrier or challenge was for children with SEND starting school, she commented on the unfamiliarity of the classroom setting

and a change in routine and structure for children. This was like Amna and her mum's account, where they both commented on the unfamiliarity of the school setting and peers and practitioners within it;

*"I would say just the unfamiliar setting. I think the routine and the structure being completely different to what they were used to...just left with people that they don't know and have probably only met once or twice, especially with some of the children having quite a lack of understanding about transitioning to school, why they need to go, and actually who these people are. Even if they did join onto the Zoom and it's I suppose it's quite difficult for them to kind of think who, who is that? What is this I'm looking at? For some of them, especially the children who are non-verbal, they would have struggled with that and just been left in a setting, or what they would feel has just been left in a setting without their parents and having all of these other children, all of this noise, all of these new resources would be really overwhelming for them.*

*And it was quite evident that it was overwhelming for them."*

### **Strategies from Covid-19**

Sarah explained how, from responding to the challenges of Covid-19, several strategies were created and are still being currently used now at Sun Blossom Primary School. This includes a video tour of the Reception class setting, and the setting up of a SEN hub, to support children with their specific needs;

*"...That year we did take pictures of our setting and I remember taking a little video and talking over it and said about this is the toilet, this is where we hang our coats. We still use that now but didn't before Covid..., I think we did it the second lockdown and they were, I think that's appreciated because parents quite often don't know our names and kind of send the children, and there's a lot of staff and it's good for them to be able to put a face to a name, so we've carried on with that."*

The SEN hub was created as a safe place for children after observing the emotional and social impact that Covid-19 had on some children. Sarah noted how this space allows children to access a quiet and calm environment, away from the busy classroom environment;

*“So we have a hub that well, it was a bit of a makeshift hub that year. We didn't have many resources because we weren't really prepared. We had a small room where we, the children needed, they just needed a space to be able to escape from the classroom because it was so loud for some of them...all of the children were a tiny bit feral because routine went out the window during COVID anyway. They just needed a space to kind of chill and relax and gather their thoughts and know that they don't need to be in the classroom the whole time... it had lovely lights and lots of sensory toys...we kind of just had to gather things overnight and just kind of create a space that might help, it might not help.”*

Sarah also reflected on strategies used for transition support during Covid-19, that they now don't use as a school, including video calls and one-to-one meetings via Zoom. However, Sarah highlighted the benefits of using these strategies for information gathering and building relationships with parents of children with SEND, yet as a school setting, decided to not continue with these strategies after Covid due to a lack of time and poor response from parents;

*“the video calls we don't do now..., the children would come on with their parents and we'd again show them around the classroom. But we had quite a poor response from that to be honest. It was probably only about six children that actually joined the zoom call and the one-to-one meetings don't happen either, and that's purely due to the time...it was more meeting the parents and them kind of informing me as what will help their child...so it was just about creating a relationship with the parents. And knowing that actually we would do our best to help, we will put in things in place and tell me what works at home, kind of thing and we can try and build that here. But again, with some children who we weren't aware of that had SEN didn't come to those meetings.”*

### **Outside agency support**

Sarah reflected on the support of the school SENCo in identifying children's needs and putting strategies and support in place for them before they started school. Sarah commented how they communicated with children's nursery settings to find out this information;

*“So we had a SENCo at the time and who was already familiar with some of those children from nursery anyway, so we had one-page profiles, we had some communication with their, all their nursery teachers who did a verbal transition with us as to what helps those children. We also had speech and language therapist, but who worked inside of school so we had a couple of children with quite severe speech delay...”*

However, Sarah did highlight how many of the children starting school during Covid-19 did not attend any pre-school or nursery setting prior to starting school, which means, unless parents shared the information regarding their child’s needs, the school would not have known any further information until they started school;

*“But I think a lot of parents kind of didn’t want to send them to nursery as it is not obviously statutory anyway, so I heard a lot of children just weren’t sent into nursery.”*

Sarah highlighted the support from outside agencies like occupational therapy, who supported Amna in her transition to school. Sarah noted how they used online platforms like Zoom, as well as the school SENCo, to share information regarding Amna’s specific needs, but this wasn’t until Amna had already started school;

*“In terms of outside agencies, not really, just the occupational therapists for [Amna], because she’s had that since birth, so she’d already had some many agencies behind her...thank goodness Reception were able to meet her needs while the classroom was suitable, it’s not as big, we had quite a few zoom meetings with those outside agencies. Eventually we had meetings with hearing as well. And parents would send a lot of reports over from medical professionals also so we could read through and see what she needed and put in place, and they were in contact with the SENCo all the time.”*

Sarah’s findings here show a positive experience of outside agency support at the exosystemic level (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) during this time of chronosystemic interruption in Amna’s transition to school.

### 4.3.5 Summary

A summary of similarities and difference of perspectives with regards to Amna's transition to school during Covid-19 are highlighted below. These have been discussed in detail within Chapter 5 'Discussion' (page 265).

- **Belonging:** School plays an essential role in Amna's life, and this was emphasised by both Amna and her mum, it's a place where she feels safe, secure and included.
- **Social connections:** The social elements of school are vitally important to Amna and her mum, such as developing connections with practitioners and peers, and forming friendships and proximal processes. Amna initially found this difficult by not knowing peers' names.
- **Systemic and Structural Challenges of Covid-19:** The practitioner acknowledged opportunities to form connections were largely missed due to the restrictive measures in place, including 'bubble' systems and mask-wearing. Despite restrictions, both Amna's mum and the practitioner positively observed that it gave Amna the opportunity to have one-to-one interaction with practitioners, noting that smaller groups were particularly beneficial for children with SEND.
- **Relationships:** Reciprocal relationships with peers and practitioners were valued by Amna and her mum but acknowledged by the practitioner that these were missing due to the strict rules and guidelines of Covid-19. This impacted the level of trust and honesty that Amna and her mum had with the school in supporting her needs/ health concerns.
- **Role of Communication:** Amna's mum emphasised challenges in communicating vital information about Amna's medical needs which often led to misunderstandings in her care. This was due to restrictions around face-to-face interactions and not being able to articulate information the same way via email. The practitioner reinforced this challenge in supporting Amna due to lack of ability to meet Amna face-to-face before she started school and not being fully aware of her specific needs.

A delayed discovery of Amna's hearing impairment meant both Amna's parents and practitioners were both unaware of her hearing difficulties for a substantial amount of time.

- **Emotional impact:** The emotional impact of starting school at this time for Amna and her mum was significantly noticeable, with heightened concerns and fears of Amna's vulnerability. This was around the significance of Amna's medical needs and avoidance of contracting Covid-19.
- **Reactive support:** The practitioner highlighted how her teaching style at this time was reactive to the changing guidelines, rules and regulations of Covid-19, rather than being able to provide structured support and planned adjustments for children with their transition into school in a proactive way.

## **4.4 Case Study Three: Chloe**

### **4.4.1 Ethnographic Information**

**Age of child:** 8

**Pre-school:** Chloe had a private childminder prior to Covid-19 since aged 14 months.

**Date of Transition to School:** September 2020

**Age of child at transition:** 4

**School Name:** Silver Birch Primary School

**Area of School Setting:** The school is based in a suburb of Birmingham Local Authority.

**Type of School:** Maintained Primary School

**School Context:** Silver Birch Primary School is a maintained primary school in the suburbs of Birmingham LA. It is a small school with a one-form entry, with approximately 200 pupils on roll. During September 2020, there were a higher proportion of pupils starting with siblings at the school. At this time, 3-5 pupils entered reception with an identified SEND. Initially, 0-2 in September 2020, but part way through the year, several other children with SEND joined the school (where the school was allocated through their EHCPs). The usual transition to school support consisted of; school visits, moving up days, and communication/ meeting with the child's parents/ caregivers. During Covid-19, this changed, and the school supported children with SEND in their transition through; a virtual/ online tour of the school (including dinner hall, toilets, and playground) and a distanced school visit.

**Ratio of practitioners/ children:** 1:2 (for specific sessions, not all learning time).

**SEND:** Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Chloe also has a genetic condition and under a paediatrician, which has been excluded from ethnographic data as it is an identifying feature.

Chloe's ASD diagnosis wasn't in place during her transition to school, and it was only during this time that Chloe's parents observed behaviours and concerns that were

shared with the school setting and paediatrician (who made the autism referral, as Mum had been told by the paediatrician that ASD is related to Neurofibromatosis).

**SEN Support/ EHCP:** SEN Support

**Family Background:** Chloe lives with her mum, dad and younger sister. Chloe did not attend nursery or pre-school, but she did have a child-minder on a regular basis before Covid-19. Chloe and her family live near Silver Birch Primary School, and during lockdown regularly walked past the school building, even accessing the school building once as the location for voting in the general election. Chloe's parents both worked during Covid-19 lockdown, with her mum initially on maternity leave when Chloe started school.

**Practitioner Information:** Two practitioners, Jo and Lorna from Silver Birch Primary School were interviewed as part of the case study for Chloe. They both taught in the Reception class during Chloe's transition to school, and then they continued to teach Chloe in the following year's, notably in Year one and Year Three. Lorna has been teaching at Silver Birch Primary School for twenty-one years and is also the school SENCo. Jo is the literacy coordinator at Silver Birch Primary School. Their findings have been presented in section 4.5.4 in combination with Kobe's case study to avoid duplication of data.

**Creative Method:** Chloe chose to use my iPad to take photographs of her school setting. We walked around the school, and she led the way. I suggested we went back to her Reception class for a look. Chloe took photographs of objects and spaces significant to her, such as her coat peg, reading corner, outdoor spaces and water bottle. Chloe and I then looked at the photographs together which aided our discussion.

#### **4.4.2 Chloe's Perspective**

***I like learning - "...What made me feel safe at school was like when we did work"***

Chloe drew on memories of starting school and feelings of safety. Chloe suggested she felt safe when she did specific lessons, which highlighted Chloe's need and reassurance for routine and structure in her days. This finding illustrates Chloe's experiences within her immediate microsystem, constructing her own familiarity and belonging through connection to spaces and objects in her classroom (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). This could have been a chronosystemic response to the unstructured and chaotic nature of Covid-19;

*"...what made me feel safe at school was like when we did work...and my favourite lessons are everything."*

#### **Chloe's Artefacts:**

As part of the creative conversation carried out with Chloe, she chose to use my iPad to go around her school and take photos of things that she remembered from when she first started school, and objects and spaces that were important to her. I suggested we go back to her Reception class for a walk. Chloe directed the way and was very excited to be back in the Reception setting. After Chloe had taken photographs of things that were important to her in the Reception setting, she asked if we could go to every class she had been in, remembering all the different things that were important to her. She took photos of places she sat, her coat peg and where her water bottle used to be. In the Reception class, Chloe took photographs of her old coat peg, which was now her sister's coat peg. She also took photographs of the reading area and outside spaces, specifically the football goals and the playground. We used the photographs as a catalyst for a discussion about starting school at this time.



*Image 1: Reading corner in Reception class*



*Image 2: Football goals outside Reception class*



*Image 3: Chloe's coat peg*



*Image 4: Outdoor space outside Reception class*

The images above (images 1-4) are photographs that Chloe took herself during her creative session with me, where she used an iPad to photograph important things to her in her transition to school during Covid-19. She took these photographs within different spaces and places of her school and classroom environments. When using the iPad to take photographs of her setting, Chloe took photographs of important spaces, objects and places within her school setting, including her coat peg when she was in Reception class, as well as places like the reading corner, outdoor spaces, the location of her desk and seat in each class, and where her water bottle

was placed, commenting throughout *“that’s where I sat”, “that was where my peg was...my sister’s peg, and that’s where my peg used to be”, and “that’s where the fruit was, and that’s my water bottle [claps hands excitedly].”*

The photographs that were included in Chloe’s case study above were chosen intentionally, as Chloe really resonated with these objects and spaces within her immediate microsystem of her school environment. This is an example of Chloe establishing proximal processes within her environment, specifically to objects and spaces like the outdoor areas, coat pegs and personal belongings, and reading corners (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). These images were significant and meaningful to Chloe, revealing her agency and meaning-making within her microsystem of her new school environment, and drew on the importance of spaces in this environment that made her feel connected to the school and class.

### **Social Connections**

When Chloe was asked what makes her feel happy in school, Chloe reflected on bullies she has at school, and went on to say she knows who to go to when seeking support in her school environment;

*“Like I have three bullies in this school...I can tell the deputy head or SENCo...and the one that’s the SENCo is my teacher.”*

Chloe is continuing to navigate the uncertainty of friendships in her school environment, yet she is aware and secure with the adults within her setting for making her feel safe. Chloe also reiterated this feeling of safety and connectedness to her practitioners, when she was asked who helped her settle into school, stating *“my teachers”*.

Further into the discussion, Chloe was asked about friendships, where she reflected in a positive way, commenting on her friends *“A, L and K, K is my boyfriend [laughs]”*.

These findings above demonstrate the challenges Chloe faced in developing and establishing consistent proximal processes with peers in her environment, yet also her desire to want to reach towards friendships and social connections within her microsystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

***Importance of Play – ‘that’s just our playground, whack it in the goal’***

Chloe shared her interests for outdoor play during her transition to Silver Birch Primary School. Chloe chose to take photographs of the outdoor space in the Reception class, and the football goals. Revisiting the photographs, Chloe was asked if she liked playing outside, to which she nodded her head yes “*that’s just our playground, whack it in the goal*”.

Chloe’s focus on the outdoors and her enjoyment of physical play such as football highlighted the importance of the outdoor space in her engagement and enjoyment of school. Her reflections demonstrate the significance and functionality of outdoor spaces in nurturing play and physical activity opportunities for children starting school, and how they were used during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also reveals Chloe’s desires to construct proximal processes with specific and familiar spaces to her in her new environment, developing her sense of belonging and connection within her school microsystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

Chloe reflected on her enjoyment of football later in the conversation, commenting on her water bottle, which was a bottle of her favourite football team “*it’s shiny cos I’m a Villa fan*”.

***Emotional turbulence - “well I was a bit upset cos, well, I didn’t want to leave my mum.”***

Chloe recalled memories of starting school, and it was clear that this was an emotional time for her having to leave her mum. Chloe had spent a considerable amount of time at home due to the continuous lockdowns, and when the time came to leave her mum to go into school, Chloe found this transition very difficult. This was also a change in her routine and found it challenging to cope with initially;

*“Well I was a bit upset cos, well, my, cos I didn’t want to leave my mum.”*

*“No, it’s because I like her [laughs].”*

Later in the conversation, Chloe recalled positive memories of starting school, suggesting it took a while for her to settle into a routine in her school environment;

*“about leaving...my mummy, yeah...I felt a bit sad, but then I got into it when I was in year one.”*

### **Covid-19 - *“It was Covid then, so we didn’t get to do much stuff”***

Chloe indicated when she first started school that she couldn’t do much due to Covid-19 rules and restrictions of having to stay at home, and enjoyed things like relaxing and watching television;

*“Well like we, it was COVID then, so we didn’t get to do much stuff.”*

*“We we only came to school for a little bit...we had to just stay off at home...like I had a sort of a rest and watched Mr Bean.”*

When Chloe was asked if she had to do any learning at home, she replied

*“Yeah...like work I do now but a lot easier, yeah but today maths was really hard.”*

### **Restricted spaces**

Chloe initially had vague memories around her transition to school, commenting *“I didn’t...I can’t remember if I did or not”* when asked if she had transition days in her school.

Chloe was asked about her routine in Reception class, like eating lunch and playing in the playground, where she reflected on vivid memories of eating her lunch *“in class”*, explaining that it felt *“a bit weird...it’s because it’s sort of tidy, we never got to go in the hall”*.

### **Significance of School for Chloe**

For Chloe, school was initially a challenging environment, particularly around the emotional impact of leaving her mum, and challenges of forming friendships and social connections with peers. However, over time, Chloe’s data demonstrated that school has become a place of comfort and security, routine and predictability for her, where she enjoys learning and participating in wider school life.

### 4.4.3 Chloe's Mum's Perspective

#### Parent expectations

Chloe's mum commented on her expectations and hopes around Chloe's transition to school, which were not how they had envisaged it, and due to Covid-19, the reality of Chloe's transition to school looked very different;

*"Obviously it wasn't what we hoped, it was very hard for her, very hard for me, not so hard for my husband cos he was like she'll be fine.... It wasn't how we thought it would be, she'd lost x amount of months with a child-minder and she'd been there since she was fourteen months old."*

*"So that was from the March, and she was at home with me then from the March, till I think she went back to her child-minders was it June time for about one day a week, and she even struggled with that, even though she's been going since she was fourteen months old she was crying."*

When Chloe's mum was asked what her expectations looked like for Chloe's transition, she reflected and made comparisons with her youngest daughter's experience of transitioning to school, after Covid-19, which included an emphasis on proximal processes such as developing relationships with practitioners, friendships and being familiar in the classroom environment (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*"How it was for my youngest one...being able to come, her have time with her teacher, have time in the classroom, see her class friends, it wasn't any of that whatsoever...all of that settling in process"*

*"There wasn't any oh come on let's go see your classroom, go and see your teacher, there wasn't anything. We had to queue up, and they were taken off us by the previous head."*

#### Emotional Impact

It was clear in the data that both Chloe and her mum had an emotional response to Chloe's transition to school. Chloe's mum reflected on the instability and change of routine for Chloe, as well as her inability to attend the child-minders, where she had consistently attended from a young age. When Chloe's mum was asked about her

transition into school, she responded with memories around attachment and separation difficulties, which impacted Chloe's transition into school;

*"I think it was hers was more leaving me...Because I was still at home on maternity with her sister. So she like they're at home while I got to go off...I think cos it's more the struggling being away from me"*

However, Chloe's mum did suggest that if Chloe had experienced the normal transition into school, she would have coped better emotionally;

*"I do think a transition as it should have been would have helped her greatly. But the fact she was just basically carried in, by the previous head, away from me kicking and screaming...Don't leave me, Mummy, come with me. I cried, even other mum's cried and that, and she was crying, obviously."*

Chloe's mum described Chloe's transition to school as 'heartbreaking'. When asked to expand on her thoughts around this, Chloe's mum further emphasised the emotional impact of Chloe's transition for both Chloe and her mum;

*"I think seeing your child cry is absolutely devastating 'do not leave me', but you got to go, no you're going in and you got to walk away, and that's just, it's probably all my pregnancy hormones... but it was heartbreaking seeing her like that because I've never seen her like that before".*

### **Parent-Practitioner Relationships**

It was clear that Chloe's mum felt parent-practitioner and child-practitioner relationships were a vital part of Chloe's transition to school, which Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) describe as mesosystems, yet throughout the data it is also clear that Chloe's mum felt there was an obvious lack of opportunity to develop these relationships;

*"Mrs H was her reception teacher and Year One teacher for a bit and she went on maternity. So, you know, we got to know Mrs H very well, even obviously now. And*

*it's nice that she's had her throughout most of the time here, but we just never got to build up that relationship to begin with."*

*"Like now obviously we got the relationship, but then there was no relationship. And then when Covid, lockdown hit again and they're at home."*

Chloe's mum drew on her memories of communicating with practitioners via phone calls and emails, and it was only at the point of the second lockdown did she feel she had a better relationship with the practitioners in Chloe's class. This was something different to what she had previously experienced with Chloe's child-minder, where she had frequent updates about Chloe's day;

*"I think that's when we more built up a relationship with the parents, with the staff, because it was emails, this is the homework, it was phone calls... before that, I mean, we obviously could phone and probably e-mail, but it didn't happen no...that was difficult cos I was so used to that with a childminder going 'ohh she had a good day'...you look back and she's just never had any of that".*

Despite the difficulties in initially developing parent-practitioner and child-practitioner relationships, Chloe's mum reflected on the expertise of the staff in supporting parents and children with such a difficult transition to school, highlighting the unstable mesosystems around Chloe in her transition to school at the time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*"I think how the teachers were with the children helped to put our minds at ease because we know... it's brilliant, the school teachers are great and you know you'll be fine, she'll be fine sort of thing."*

### **Child-Practitioner Relationships**

Despite the initial challenges around transition into school and the emotional attachment, Chloe's mum reiterated Chloe's enjoyment of school, recalling Chloe talking frequently about school in a positive way, and naming certain practitioner's, making a positive link between home and school;

*"And she loves school. She did love school. She was always coming home and saying Mrs H, Mrs H, Mrs F, who was a teaching assistant. And she did enjoy it. She*

*would get upset at night, 'I don't wanna leave you, Mummy'. It was nothing to do with school."*

Chloe's mum reinforced how Chloe's emotional reaction was due to her attachment with her mum, rather than the school environment.

When asked what she thought was important to Chloe when she started school, Chloe's mum continued to reinforce the importance of relationships with peers and practitioners for Chloe when starting school *"I think she would have said that I know who my teacher is and my friends"*. For Chloe's mum, the development of proximal processes and strong reciprocal relationships for Chloe in her new school environment was important (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

### **School as a safe place**

As suggested above, despite the challenging transition to school for Chloe, her mum reiterated Chloe's love and enjoyment for school, suggesting that Chloe thrives on having a structured routine, as well as the social connection that school brings her;

*"...She absolutely loves school, like if we took her out now she'd go mad at me...PE she says is her favourite, she likes RE, she's just joined the choir... she's got a concert Friday morning here...she just loves school"*

### **Chloe's Dispositions**

Chloe's mum commented how Chloe was resilient in her transition to school despite the challenges she faced due to Covid-19, demonstrating Chloe's force characteristics, including her motivation and persistence (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), and learning dispositions such as persisting with difficulties (Carr, 1999);

*"from how she first started...cos we never thought we'd get there but she loves it, absolutely loves it."*

When Chloe's mum was asked to reflect on a positive at this time in terms of Chloe's transition to school, her mum commented on the supportive, caring and

understanding nature of the school setting. This reflects Chloe's love and enjoyment of school that her mum reflected on above;

*"From when she started, I think, because all the teachers are so nice, and obviously they understood how the children would be and its such a lovely school, that, that really helped...the teachers are so lovely for the children".*

### **School support**

Chloe's mum reflected on the support the school gave Chloe's parents for Chloe whilst being at home. During Covid-19 lockdown, Chloe had been given a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder after being referred through her medical team, and mum commented that once they had this diagnosis, *"we had a lot of meetings because her behaviour at home is shocking"*.

The headteacher helped Chloe's parents implement strategies to support Chloe and her behaviour prior to her diagnosis, through providing SEN Support within the school. Mum reflected on the support Chloe received;

*"She has one to ones, she goes off for intervention with her spelling, with her writing, and they're just, they're like, aware of her needs...that there's no need as such to go that far cause she does cope very well at school, it's just at home that she's a nightmare."*

This finding here is an example of a well-developed mesosystem between Chloe's mum and the headteacher who supported Chloe's transition at the time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

### **Missed opportunities**

Chloe's mum recalled the missed opportunities, strategies and techniques that the school could have employed that may have supported Chloe's transition to school experience during Covid-19, such as using things like videos and online platforms to develop children's familiarity with practitioners and the school setting;

*“I wanted her to settle in well and obviously it was a different head then, I feel that maybe a video from a teacher or even the head could have been nice, ‘Hello, I’m...’ because there’s only thirty children per class per year, ‘I’m such and such and I’m going to be your head’...I think something like that would have been nice for a lot of the children. I know it would have helped Chloe.”*

When asked why this may have helped Chloe, Chloe’s mum reiterated the importance of being familiar with the school environment and the people in it for Chloe’s transition to school, highlighting the importance of developing proximal processes within Chloe’s school microsystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*“To give her that reassurance, this will be my teacher, this will be my classroom...she didn’t know ...so that would have helped something like that would have helped her, would have helped her a lot.”*

### **Restricted spaces**

Chloe’s mum highlighted other opportunities that Chloe missed out on during this time due to Covid-19 restrictions, such as in inability to explore and become familiar with other important spaces within the school environment and their functions, for example eating dinner in the classrooms and not the dinner hall, not being able to attend assemblies. Chloe’s mum’s reflections on these restricted spaces suggest how confined children were in their school environment when they could attend their school setting again, and their usual school practices were very different;

*“...when [Chloe] started...they had to eat in the classroom, couldn’t go into the dinner hall cos obviously they all couldn’t mix, there wasn’t assembly, so you know, it’s sad, very sad but obviously that’s gone, nothing you could do about it.”*

### **Parent strategies for familiarity**

To support Chloe with starting school at this time, Chloe’s mum recalled several strategies she put in place to help Chloe become familiar with her school environment, which included regular walks within the school vicinity;

*“I mean, she’d been to school because we only live down the road so...this is where we vote, so she’s been in, but that, the hall, and that was that... I was walking past with her every day, come on this is where you’ll be, where you have to go.”*

Another strategy Chloe’s mum adopted at this time was making connections with other parents in similar situations through social media platforms, which allowed their children to connect and make friends prior to starting school, demonstrating a co-construction of support in developing reciprocal relationships with peers (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*“We met up with two children, only by fluke cause of good old Facebook, you know ‘Who’s going to [Silver Birch] in September?’, so I made friends with two of the mums and it was the one little boys birthday party and she asked me and the other mum to go along.... And that was just the summer before they started..., they had a familiar face which is nice.”*

### **Home-school challenges**

Chloe’s mum reflected on the challenges they had as parents in supporting Chloe with home-school learning and support whilst also coping with the demands of working at the same time;

*“The home-schooling, it was a nightmare, it was horrible cause I was back at work then... my husband works from home anyway so in one way it wasn’t any different to him...but the home-schooling...even now trying to get her to do homework is a nightmare, but no she’d scream, she’d hide under the table, she’d say she’s not doing it, I mean many times have I said to Mrs H she just won’t do it”.*

When Chloe’s mum was asked why Chloe found home-schooling such a challenge, she explained that their role was as parents, and not teachers;

*“Because we’re not, we’re her parents, we’re not her teacher at the end of the day”.*

*“We’d say you need to try and do it, it might not have been how it should be done, and it probably wasn’t ...but she was a nightmare, a lot of times like, I said come on leave it, we’re going out, and we’d just go for a walk”.*

#### 4.4.5 Summary

A summary of similarities and difference of perspectives with regards to Chloe's transition to school during Covid-19 are highlighted below. These have been discussed in detail within Chapter 5 'Discussion' (page 265).

- **Familiarity of school environment:** Chloe's mum and practitioners highlighted similar challenges for Chloe's transition to school, such as being unfamiliar with the school environment, practitioners and peers. This familiarity of spaces within the school and class environment were important to Chloe, her mum and the practitioners, but acknowledged that due to Covid-19 restrictions, were non-existent and limited.
- **School as a safe place:** School plays a vital part in Chloe's life, as a safe place of stability and routine. Chloe, her mum and the practitioners all acknowledged the importance of routine and structure for Chloe in her school environment.
- **Emotional impact:** Chloe and her mum had a strong emotional response to Chloe's transition to school, where they both found it a very difficult transition after Covid-19 lockdown. Practitioners supported Chloe and her mum with this difficult transition through their support.
- **Positive dispositions:** Despite the difficult start, all participants commented how Chloe had positive views of school and commented on the enjoyment and love of school that Chloe has, demonstrating her positive learning dispositions and force characteristics (Carr, 1999; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).
- **Home-school challenges:** Chloe's mum highlighted the difficulty of providing home-school support for Chloe as she wouldn't respond to parents teaching her. Additionally, Chloe's mum commented on the difficulty providing this support and being managing work commitments. The practitioners adapted their home-learning provision to support these parental challenges.
- **Post-Covid support strategies:** Practitioners implemented strategies to support children after Covid-19, to support them in the skills they had missed out on, such as social and emotional intervention support programmes.

## **4.5 Case Study Four: Kobe**

### **4.5.1 Ethnographic Information**

**Age of child:** 8

**Pre-school:** Attended private nursery

**Date of Transition to School:** September 2020

**Age of child at transition:** 4

**School Name:** Silver Birch Primary School

**Area of School Setting:** The school is based in a suburb of Birmingham Local Authority.

**Type of School:** Maintained Primary School

**School Context:** Silver Birch Primary School is a maintained primary school in the suburbs of Birmingham LA. It is a small school with a one-form entry, with approximately 200 pupils on roll. During September 2020, there was a higher proportion of pupils starting with siblings at the school. At this time, 3-5 pupils entered reception with an identified SEND. Initially, 0-2 in September 2020, but part way through that year, several other children with SEND joined the school (where the school was allocated through their EHCPs). The usual transition to school support consisted of; school visits, moving up days, and communication/ meeting with the child's parents/ caregivers. During Covid-19, this changed and the school supported children with SEND in their transition through; a virtual/ online tour of the school (including dinner hall, toilets, and playground) and a distanced school visit.

**Ratio of practitioners/ children:** 1:1 (part-time)

**SEND:** Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

**SEN Support/ EHCP:** EHCP

**Family Background:** Kobe lives with his mum, dad and older sister. Kobe's older sister also attended Silver Birch Primary School when Kobe started, and so the family were well-known to the practitioners. Kobe attended a private nursery prior to starting at Silver Birch Primary School. Kobe did not have an ASD diagnosis prior to starting school.

**Practitioner Information:** Two practitioners, Jo and Lorna from Silver Birch Primary School were interviewed as part of the case study for Kobe. They both taught in the Reception class during Kobe's transition to school, and then they continued to teach Kobe in the following year's, notably in Year one and Year Three. Lorna has been teaching at Silver Birch Primary School for twenty-one years and is also the school SENCo. Jo is the literacy coordinator at Silver Birch Primary School.

**Creative Method:** Kobe chose to draw a picture whilst sharing his experiences of starting school. He drew his school, with blood around the edge (as explained below, page 229). Kobe and I then played table football together, as the conversation continued.

#### 4.5.2 Kobe's Perspective

##### *I like learning – "...it's like the good part"*

Kobe commented on school in a positive way when asked if his school is important to him;

*"Yeah I think it is...because I think its like the like the good part".*

Kobe recalled his enjoyment of learning. When asked what he likes to do, Kobe reflected on lessons within his school day using positive language, suggesting he enjoys the structure, routine and choice within his learning environment;

*"I like to do like every single literacy lesson".*

*"Starting school, so I remembered I was like in reception, but it was like it was like, very fun...we got to do like colouring, just well like, I can do writing."*

Here, Kobe is establishing proximal processes and relationships to objects and spaces within his new school microsystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). This is supporting Kobe's sense of belonging and connection to his new school environment.

Kobe referred to his enjoyment of online learning platforms, through things like "timetables rockstars" and reflected on year one and two learning "numbots" and *"well sometimes we watch a video and ten ten...we also watch some literacy thing"*.

During the creative conversation, Kobe decided to draw a picture with the pens and paper that were on offer to him. When asked what he was drawing, Kobe replied;

*"a building...you'll find out...This is [Silver Birch Primary School] building...Well, you have been here, but this is probably for you, this wouldn't be the first building you have seen"*.

Further into the conversation around Kobe's picture, he said *"I'm drawing this into red blood, that's my picture...red blood is in our bodies by the way...well I know blood is in my body by the way...it just helps us to like keep us alive as long"*.

Kobe commented on his own drawing *"How, how is it that big?"*



*Image 1: Kobe's drawing of Silver Birch Primary School and 'blood'*

During our creative conversation, Kobe chose to draw a picture. In the picture above (Image 1) Kobe drew his school, with 'blood' (red section in image) next to it. As he was drawing, Kobe narrated his work, saying '*you won't know where this place is*', and so the anticipation of him being able to tell me this was his school, with blood around it, grew. Kobe was very proud of his work, and even more excited that I couldn't guess where it was. From the creative conversation and his drawing of school with blood around it, it was evident that school was a significant place for Kobe during Covid-19, where although he faced challenges (as highlighted in the data below), he also felt very secure and happy there, demonstrating his ability to form proximal processes to spaces, objects and environments in his microsystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Kobe talked about Covid-19 through connecting it with blood, death and skeletons, and evidently drew this depiction in his idea of school and Covid-19. This vivid image and description also demonstrates that Kobe was still processing the impact and trauma of Covid-19 and starting school, which evidently highlights the emotional affect of Covid-19 on Kobe at this time.

### **Social Connections and Belonging – “like I was starting getting friends...”**

Kobe suggested he had difficulty in navigating friendships when he started school, and recalled the difficulty in keeping friendships at the time;

*“like I was starting getting friends and I was like when someone has no friends”.*

When asked who his friends were, Kobe recalled their names with vague memories, as well as uncertainty in knowing if they were really his friends;

*“I think it was A, A, I think R, and I, I sometimes”.*

Kobe commented he sometimes played things like ‘monsters’ and ‘games from books’ with friends but went on to refer to playing online games like Roblox, suggesting Kobe enjoyed playing in isolation, as well as demonstrating challenges in navigating friendships with his peers.

Kobe’s findings here demonstrate his want and desire for friendships and social connections in his microsystem yet recognises the challenges of the context in which he transitioned to school, due to chronosystemic changes in routines and opportunities to develop secure friendships (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

### **Relationships with Practitioners**

Kobe had a vivid recollection of the practitioners in his setting, often naming them and remembering all the practitioners he has had through his school-life;

*“So I can actually remember Miss V was teaching us like when I was in Reception...I was with like Miss V and was teaching music and we do like different ones, like a boat, aeroplane, train and um, I don’t remember the last one, was it? I don’t remember”*

*“...I remember year two I actually saw Miss V, Miss V, Miss O and like they did like, which I remembered”*

*“So it was Mrs H at Reception, then it was Miss L, and then it was Miss B is now a different teacher I think, then year three I had Miss T and Mrs H, then year four Miss R, year five and six has, I don’t know”*

These findings further demonstrate Kobe constructing proximal processes with adults in his school microsystem, supporting him with a sense of connection, familiarity and belonging to his new school environment (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

### ***Importance of Play – “I like playing on my Xbox One”***

Kobe reflected on his particular interest in playing online games. When asked what he liked to play with when he started school at Silver Birch Primary School, he had vague memories of playing;

*“I think it was like toys...and like that I don’t remember...”*

Kobe shifted his focus quickly, recalling playing whilst being at home, and when asked what he liked about staying at home, he responded *“I like playing on my Xbox One...like my favourite game like Roblox”*. He also mentioned online games that he enjoyed through online learning platforms, such as ‘Timetables Rockstars’, ‘Numbots’, and ‘Ten:ten’.

### ***Emotional Impact of Covid-19 – “it’s when you die...”***

Kobe was asked what he can remember about Covid-19, where he drew on memories of starting school and his Reception class teacher;

*“So I can actually remember the, Miss V was teaching us in like, when I was in Reception...”*

Kobe also drew on his memories of being at home during this time;

*“I remember, I was like at home and just like having like, when I was about five age I think”*

Additionally, Kobe related memories of Covid-19 back to the conversation around blood on his picture, commenting around death;

*“Wait, it’s, it’s when you die, you like have, like skeletal fingers...what the heck, that’s creepy”*.

### **Sibling support**

Without prompting, Kobe commented on his sister and how she used to attend Silver Birch Primary School, making connections to his family members and using family as an emotional anchor to his school environment when starting school;

*“like try and guess my sisters name...starts with O.”*

*“...she used to come to this school...now she doesn't she's in secondary school.”*

### **Significance of School for Kobe**

For Kobe, school represented a place of stability and predictability, in an unpredictable landscape during Covid-19. Kobe regarded school as a place to learn and have a stable routine, which he enjoyed through specific lessons, yet due to a challenging context, faced challenges around friendships and social connections with peers. For Kobe, the visible connection to his practitioners and adults within his school setting were important for him, supporting him in developing his connections and sense of belonging to his new environment.

### **4.5.3 Kobe's Dads' Perspective**

#### **Parent Hopes and Expectations of Transition**

Kobe's dad reflected on restrictions around Kobe's transition to school during Covid-19 and his disappointment in Kobe missing out on vital aspects of his transition, such as becoming familiar with the school environment, knowing the expectations of starting school and support for his specific needs;

*“For me it would have been more support...to give Kobe longer periods in the school to what he was going to expect when he came. Knowing Kobe as I do, he does struggle with change. I'm completely honest he probably needed three or four weeks of that transition and you know whilst two hours one week, four hours, I get it, but he probably needed full days because he just forgets things so quickly.”*

Kobe's dad recalled the difficulties of the lack of support network around them to support Kobe at the time. This includes wider exosystemic support (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*“so that was probably the biggest bit was having that support network around, but we just, wasn’t able to at the time.”*

### **Transition reality**

Kobe’s dad recalled the reality of transition for Kobe, highlighting the restricted and limited nature of being able to become familiar with the environment and the people in it;

*“To be honest, it was very much just a day in the school, a few hours each week like so I think it was three, three or four sessions one day a week, and I think it was like two hours to start off with then four hours and five etc...and that’s pretty much gave him a flavour of what was to come, but it wasn’t enough for Kobe, in my opinion.”*

When probed around the support for Kobe starting school, Kobe’s dad commented that support for Kobe’s transition was also restricted;

*“Very limited, so we had we had some obviously sessions in school, but I think it was, I think it was three sessions I think to transition him in.”*

### **Sibling support**

Kobe’s dad reflected on his memories of Kobe having support from his sibling when he started school, which in turn helped Kobe become familiar with the school environment and practitioners within it. This view was shared by Kobe when he discussed his sister being at school;

*“...I think the only benefit that Kobe had that probably some, a lot of other children didn’t was he had a sibling here...so he had an older sibling that was already here, so it made that transition a little bit easier in that aspect...”*

When Kobe’s dad was asked what he thought was important to Kobe starting school, he suggested Kobe’s sibling and his ability to see her familiar face throughout his school day was beneficial;

*“...he’d probably have said his sister...so like I say, that was probably one of the biggest positives of his transition, so obviously he’d had his sister here so it sort of*

*helped, knowing that he could still see her at the lunchtime and bits and pieces and throughout the day, so yeah.”*

Despite the challenges Kobe's dad recalled above, he commented that Kobe adjusted well to his school environment, but thinks that was due to the support of his sister;

*“...he adjusted to it very, very well and I think he strived with it a bit maybe having his older sister here, I suppose because she's very protected, protective of him.”*

### **Child-Practitioner Relationships**

Kobe's dad reflected on Kobe's positive relationship with the practitioners in his setting, yet difficulties in understanding the boundaries around the child-practitioner relationship;

*“Kobe's very such a loving child anyways, but I think it was probably too much for him...I think he found the boundaries very difficult between obviously pupil and teacher... much as it's lovely, go and give the teachers a hug and whatever else, and, he's very loving in that aspect, but obviously didn't have that, didn't understand the boundaries between having being a teacher and obviously being a pupil so.”*

These proximal processes that Kobe was developing with people in his school microsystem were vital to supporting his sense of safety and belonging to his new school environment (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

### **Peer Relationships**

Kobe's dad commented on Kobe's friendships with peers in his class, where he reflected that often, Kobe likes to play on his own. His dad also observed how Kobe's ability to socialise changed due to Covid-19. Due to chronosystemic challenges of Covid-19, and exosystemic Covid-19 policy changes, these impacted Kobe's opportunity to develop social connections and proximal processes within his microsystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). This echoed Kobe's account, often

enjoying playing online games in isolation, as well as Kobe's reflections around difficulty navigating friendships;

*"He's quite happy to do his own thing, and like I say, he's in his own little world in in one aspect, and so you know, I think he sort of kept himself to himself, to be honest, he did his own thing. And to be fair the class love him...but yeah he did socialise very well and I think we lost a lot with Kobe, with like I said, with the Covid bit, but it was probably just before he actually came into school..."*

### **School Support**

Kobe's dad was asked if they felt supported by the school for Kobe's transition into school. He used positive language to describe the support received from the school and practitioners yet acknowledging the restricted environment in which they were in;

*"Yeah I think we did, I think there was probably a little bit more than could have been done from all aspects, no, to be fair, the school was very, very good, teachers were very good and the nursery was good with what we could do at the time."*

Kobe's dad recalled the support received in relation to the Covid-19 rules and restrictions, and acknowledged that even though more support could have been put in place for Kobe, he understood the difficulties schools faced due to restrictions. Here he is acknowledging the difficult chronosystemic Covid-19 challenges in Kobe's transition. Due to challenges around exosystemic support, this directly impacted Kobe's school microsystem experience (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*"I suppose it's a bit biased of me saying oh you know there could have been a lot more done, but you know we're not in a position to make those decisions than what with the ruling that was put in with Covid so...I'm always going to be a little bit biased and say probably there could have been a bit more done, but I do understand at the same time."*

### **Emotional impact**

Kobe's dad recalled the emotional challenge for Kobe dealing with the rules changing, and this is something his dad noted Kobe found very problematic;

*“Very difficult, because like I said, he is a very loving child, he’s used to being in connection with love and close with people and so probably struggled a little bit with that aspect of it, cos obviously the boundaries have to be set, but he would, he would go and sit next to somebody else and obviously at the time it couldn’t be done so.”*

Kobe’s dad reiterated the emotional challenge of Covid-19 on Kobe, due to frequent changes in his routine of being at home and then back at school throughout the year;

*“Not very well just because of like I say, he hates change and any sort of method in change you have to sort of sort of put in place well before ....so he has to have that routine, and that that thing is, so any change in routine sort of freaks him out so.”*

Kobe’s dad described Kobe’s transition to school as ‘difficult’;

*“It was probably really difficult but I understand why if I’m honest, I understand the reason it, but it was very difficult time for Kobe...”*

### **Lack of multi-agency support**

Kobe’s dad highlighted how there was a significant lack of support for Kobe with outside agencies at the exosystemic level (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) during his transition to school, especially as he didn’t have an autistic diagnosis at the time. Kobe’s dad reflected on the constant need to contact outside agencies to get support for Kobe;

*“We didn’t have a diagnosis, so it was very sort of everything was sort of really hard to sort of get things moving for Kobe and get that support in place for him.”*

When Kobe’s dad was asked about if they had outside support for Kobe, his dad suggested they didn’t have any support due to the backlog from Covid-19. He also shared his role as an advocate for getting the right support for Kobe at the time and the frustrations around this;

*“Not really, the support we did have was mainly over the phone or and probably not face-to-face and everything got back obviously back tracked and obviously backlogged. So it took a lot of fighting to get support once we came out of Covid.”*

*“The school did a fantastic job and you know recently they’ve got some extra support for Kobe, which is fantastic. But it was literally a case of jumping up and down, if I’m*

*completely honest. Every Monday, the diary in my phone would go off or I'd ring his doctor, any news?...It took a lot of fighting and a lot of jumping up and down, but yeah like I say I understand, but it just got everything got backlogged."*

Kobe's dad also highlighted the missed opportunities for supporting Kobe in his learning due to Covid-19 restrictions, specifically lack of support from outside agencies, and particularly support for speech and language;

*"...so we noticed obviously issues over the time in nursery, but we was getting things in place with the council and whatever else to help support, and with his speech and language and bits and pieces, but I think with the Covid hit, it literally sort of, ramped up very quickly. And I think Kobe, sort of started to learn a lot better, and then Covid hit and that was it then, and I feel in my opinion, he lost twelve months of learning of his ability...so coming into school, he was probably twelve months behind a normal sort of child his age I suppose."*

### **Kobe's Dispositions**

Kobe's dad reflected on the skills that Kobe has developed and used in response Covid-19 restrictions and transitioning to school during Covid-19;

*"I'd probably say it opened him out to probably the real world and what he's going to expect, it might have gave him some strengths that he probably needed to sort of move on and something that he's probably not used to...there will be some benefits out of it that he would have had to have coped with things that he probably wouldn't have normally been able to cope with, so I suppose it would teach him a bit more resilience and a bit more being able to deal with things that he would never be able to normally, so there are some positives out of it."*

Here, this finding demonstrates Kobe's force characteristics of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), such as persistence and resilience, and learning dispositions such as persisting with difficulty (Carr, 1999).

### **Home-school challenges**

Kobe's dad recalled Kobe's experience of home-school learning, highlighting the difficulty not only that Kobe faced, but also the pressures of parents supporting home-learning whilst coping with the demands of working and navigating Covid-19;

*“Struggled, he did struggle with the home learning very much, and it was difficult not just for him, but if I’m honest as a parent, we’re not trained to teach them, and at the same time you know, me and my wife were still working, you know sixty hours in retail. So it was really difficult but, like I say, I don’t think they learn as good as obviously they would in school so.”*

#### **4.5.4 Chloe and Kobe’s Practitioner’s Perspective**

Jo and Lorna, the practitioners from Silver Birch Primary School reflected on the experiences of transition to school during Covid-19 for both Kobe and Chloe together. This is due to the participants being from the same setting. To avoid repetition of the data, the following account reflects experiences for both Chloe and Kobe.

##### **Missed opportunities in transition activities**

Lorna described the differences between how transition into school would usually look pre-Covid and during Covid, emphasising the obvious lack of opportunity to become familiar with the school and classroom environment during Covid, as well as the inability to meet their peers and practitioners, emphasising challenges in developing proximal processes in their immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*“There wasn’t one. There wasn’t one really one at all for them, and it’s, it was pretty apparent I think when they started that they hadn’t had that.”*

*“So there was a meeting with parents, but it was all very socially distanced. The children didn’t come in into reception beforehand at all. Luckily we’d done the open afternoons in the like November type of time, end of October, so lots of children have been to see the school, but then they didn’t get to experience that coming into the environment and getting it done. We used to do it before Covid as well, more transition afternoons coming in, so we’d have story sessions where they would come about five times for that.”*

*“So it was a big massive difference and it literally went from about six times to coming to school to nothing at all.”*

Jo reiterated the importance of the usual transition to school practices which, prior to Covid-19, was a joined-up approach between the children, their parents and the practitioners in the school setting. Jo commented how transition for children with SEND is a “huge thing”, allowing her to gain a better understanding of the children and their specific needs, as well as providing support for parents. However, Jo stated four out of five years of teaching Reception class, transitions to school ran smoothly, until the Covid-19 pandemic, where she felt ill-prepared in supporting children with SEND, due to the inability to meet them prior to starting school;

*“...we had very little time to see the children, meet the children...I wasn't prepared, so there was obviously children with SEND coming in, but it wasn't recognised, it wasn't pinpointed either by the parents, myself or the SENCo because we've never met the child.”*

### **Practitioner- Parent Relationship**

Both Lorna and Jo reflected on the relationship and communication with parents/ caregivers during the transition to school for children with SEND in general. They specifically recalled how parent meetings had to be carried out from a distance from their usual information-sharing meeting, and acknowledged that due the restrictions at the time, it impacted the relationship-building and communication between parents of new children starting school, and their practitioners, demonstrating challenges within mesosystemic relationships (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*“When we had Covid, everything was stripped back completely. Parents who, the only, the new parents so we had about fifteen new parents that year, so we had a lot of siblings and we normally do have a lot of siblings in reception. So we had 15 new parents that year and we had basically three groups. We broke them up into having, say five parents coming in at a time and doing the meeting for them and then the next hour, we'd have another five parents. We had three meetings, so we made sure the new parents had a meeting with us, but it was very scaled back.”*

*“I think as well, it took me longer to get to know the class, that class, then it would any other class, get to know like some of those parents, I only actually saw them in summer term when we started lifting some of the restrictions, it's really strange like.”*

Despite Jo suggesting it took her longer to get to know the children and parents in the class at the time, both Jo and Lorna acknowledged they were already familiar with Kobe and his family through Kobe's sibling, which made it easier to put things in place quickly for Kobe, before he started school;

*"We've got a good, a pretty good relationship with them anyway because of the older sister being at school, and so that was good, that was helpful."*

Jo continued to reflect on the frustrations and challenges of mesosystemic relationships between themselves and parents/ caregivers (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). For example, the inability of having regular face-to face communication with parents at this time meant they couldn't gain information about their child and their needs. This is something that Chloe's mum highlighted as a challenge for Chloe's transition to school;

*"so I would usually see parents at the end of the day and have a quick chat... I had no interaction with parents at all because they were dismissed from the car park...the head teacher would take reception...staff had no interaction with parents, so everything was going through the head teacher. So any children that I had question marks raised, I couldn't even have that quick chat with them."*

Jo highlighted this frustration around a lack of face-to-face communication with parents when reflecting on carrying out parents' evenings via online platforms such as Zoom, as she suggested meeting parents in-person, and allowing them to have an opportunity to see their child's work and their classroom environment was really important for supporting their children and building a bigger picture of the child's needs. This frustration of a lack of face-to-face communication was shared by Chloe's mum regarding Chloe's observed behaviours at home;

*"...Zoom is great, but I always think parents evening face-to-face, you can never beat a face-to-face, and for parents as well to see their books, this is what they're doing in class, this is their classroom... things that I might just say that I would never pick up the phone to say to a parent because it's quite minor, but that I might say at the end of the day...and then it might pick up something else slightly, so it opens up, so I missed that completely, so that I think was a huge hindrance for parents"*

*because I'm sure they may wanted to say something small to me and they didn't have that law."*

### **Knowledge of Child and their needs**

Jo reflected on Chloe's specific needs related to her autistic diagnosis, and how what she had observed within the school setting were different to what her parents experienced at home, which made it difficult to provide the right support for Chloe at the time;

*"Mum had highlighted that there was a lot of behavioural problems at home. And mum had said that at home it was a struggle...Mum and Dad were very forthcoming that they wanted support and wanted help with that. And as a school, we were, we filled in the forms...but what was being said to us and what she was showing in school were completely different, so they didn't match up, it was very kind of like, well you're saying this, but the child in school is not displaying any of this."*

However, Lorna, who was also the SENCo at Silver Birch Primary School commented how Chloe's parents found it difficult in understanding or supporting Chloe's specific needs. Lorna suggested it was the lack of support from outside agencies at the exosystemic level (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) that also made it a challenge for parents. This echoes the challenges Chloe's mum recalled around Chloe's behaviour at home and the challenges of home-schooling and support from the school at the time of her diagnosis.

Due to Kobe having a sibling and Lorna and Jo already knowing the family, they both commented how they had some knowledge of Kobe's specific needs before he entered the setting, which wouldn't have been possible had they not known the family;

*"The other child that was identified had a sibling in school, so that was how we knew there were additional needs there. If they hadn't have had a sibling, I don't think we would have found as much out as we did...we spoke to parents beforehand...we did bring them into the classroom when there was nobody else about, so they got to come into the reception classroom...it was beneficial for staff to see how he would*

*react and it was beneficial because then when he came in on the first day, he'd already got an idea of the environment."*

Lorna displayed frustration around due to a lack of face-to-face communication, she felt she did not know about Kobe's needs fully, and therefore wasn't able to put things in place for him straight away when he started school, notably having an EHCP and support plans in place;

*"...I suppose the problem was because you couldn't do things like face-to-face meetings it was hard to get everything in place. When I think if we could have had that first year properly in school, we probably would have so much more in place for him, as time goes on there probably could have been an EHCP by now, there could have been SSPPs (SEND Support Provision Plans) but because it's been everything's been a bit probably a year or two behind it's hard to catch up on that."*

Jo reiterated this frustration of a lack of face-to-face communication with parents at this time, which often allowed the sharing of small bits of information about a child which make up the bigger picture of their particular needs;

*"...Zoom is great, but I always think parents evening face-to-face, you can never beat a face-to-face, and for parents as well to see their books, this is what they're doing in class, this is their classroom...you can never beat that face-to-face thing and things that like I might just say that I would never pick up the phone to say to a parent because it's quite minor, but that I might say at the end of the day...and then it might pick up something else slightly, so it opens up, so I missed that completely, so that I think was a huge hindrance for parents because I'm sure they may wanted to say something small to me and they didn't have that law."*

### **Parents fears and trust in practitioners**

Due to the difficulty in forming and developing relationships with parents, both Lorna and Jo observed an obvious lack of trust and unfamiliarity towards practitioners from parents of new children starting school during that time;

*"...I can remember they [parents] didn't really want to leave them at school. They didn't have that same quite of trust in us, I suppose yet because they'd not met*

*everybody properly and it was like, usually they're quite happy to just 'go on in you go' type of thing...but there were quite a lot that came into the classroom and you could see didn't want to leave them in the classroom...I do think there's more of that full stop now since Covid anyway, we've had quite a lot of new families this year and at the beginning, you could see there was a lot more nervousness about leaving them, whereas five years ago, it was like 'yeah go on into school'".*

Additionally, both Lorna and Jo observed an obvious fear of parents wanting to send their children to school, due to Covid-19 infections;

*"There was a lot of fear so parents obviously kept their children close because they didn't want their child to be infected by Covid, so these children probably had very limited uh, interaction."*

### **Emotional impact**

When Jo was asked what the biggest challenge at the time for parents was, she reflected on the emotional and mental health impact on parents in supporting their child with SEND, as well as the inability to communicate and seek help from professionals at the time;

*"I think they had a loss like, because obviously even just like getting meetings, trying to meet the practitioners face-to-face, meeting other professionals face-to-face, and having limited support because being at home with a child with special educational needs and you're on your own. And with restrictions, it's hard on their mental health, and hard on the child's mental health."*

Jo also reiterated further challenges, such as their inability to interact with others in different environments, play with their friends and experience different environments, all of which contribute to children's mental health difficulties at this time;

*"I think it was a huge impact because these children as well...they basically had a whole year of being locked up with their mums and dads, so not having the transition of nursery time, play time, being out and about, the interaction."*

Lorna reinforced the thoughts shared by Jo on the emotional impact of Covid-19, referring to the time as a trauma;

*“it was like it’s a trauma, it’s a trauma for everyone who experiences it isn’t it, going through Covid...because it was such a shock to everybody’s life, what the change was going to be, but I don’t think people realise still now when they do things that that it’s a knock on effect from it.”*

### **Children’s Resilience**

Lorna commented on the observations she made of children’s resilience and happiness of coming to school in general but didn’t comment specifically on Chloe’s resilience. However, the skills Lorna referred to mirror Chloe and her mum’s reflections of what school means to Chloe, with a focus on structure, routine and a safe space;

*“I think a positive is that actually the children are quite resilient and even though it did massively impact on their life, they will still come in every day and they genuinely love coming to school. There’s not that from any of those children a dislike of coming to school, they want to be here...school for a lot of children is a safe space where they know there’s stability and they know there’s routine.”*

### **Restricted Experiences**

Lorna and Jo both reflected on the restrictions and missed opportunities that would usually be available to children starting school in Reception, a view shared by both Chloe and her mum. Jo explained that children missed out on experiences like sports days and school trips, as well as restrictions to different spaces within their school environment. Things like assemblies and worship were an important part of Silver Birch Primary School, being a Church of England school;

*“By the time they finished their lunch, they were again into their bubbles, so they were quite isolated really. And then as the year went on, the things kind of did lift... I think only maybe summer term. There was no sports day, no school trips to the farm, nothing like that.... There was no assemblies either. They’d never been into the school hall to see an assembly, a class assembly, they never had that experience.”*

*“...They didn’t have the proper school experience, so for instance, lunchtime and playtime where they would be interacting with others within their key stage... they had to play by themselves and their playground, so they were restricted. And they missed out on trips, we would normally take them to the Lickey Hills in that October, their first trip. None of that. They started school, but it wasn’t the proper school experience. It was restricted because obviously we were protecting them and trying to keep them as safe as possible, but everything was stripped back.”*

### **‘Bubble’ system challenges**

Lorna reflected on the difficulty of following the guidelines of the ‘bubble’ system for children with SEND, especially for Kobe, who found the tight restrictions difficult to follow. This was reiterated by his dad, who commented how Kobe found the distancing element a challenge;

*“...whoever thinks you can just distance from children with SEND is just, you can’t”*

*“...his parents both work in supermarkets, so he could come in. Obviously for him to be sat at a desk on his own all day long and trying to access work, it just wasn’t, it wasn’t the right type of environment for him...and I can always remember whenever you’d walk through there, he’d be sitting at a desk with the laptop in front of him, it you’d be like you could see he’d be swinging on his chair, looking around, he needed an adult sat with him all the time, basically, to be able to access anything, or other than if you just put something on for him to watch, which obviously what was the point in that?”*

### **Outside agency support**

Both Jo and Lorna commented that during this time, the school received little outside agency support at the exosystemic level (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) for Kobe, and they had to be proactive in their approach to contact the Communication and Autism Team (CAT) to get this support. This was also noted by Kobe’s dad who commented they received little outside agency support for Kobe at the time;

*“No, nothing for the child in the September whatsoever, we had to get in contact with like the CAT team. to say we needed some additional support.”*

Jo reflected on this time as ‘restricted’, commenting on the need to wait for outside agency support from the CAT team, as they were catching up on a whole year as there was now a “backlog” and “long delays”.

### **Home-learning adaptations**

Responding to the needs of the children and parents, Jo explained how they adapted their home-school learning through using videos and online platforms to engage children. This adaptation supported parents like Kobe’s parents, where Kobe’s dad commented on the challenges of managing home-learning and being keyworkers at the time;

*“Because we had already had a previous lockdown, we had home-learning set up, but we changed our home-learning to include videos. So I would send weekly or daily videos of lessons with voice over lessons and myself going through trying to limit the impact again, there’s only so much you could do that it’s good, but it’s never good enough really, and especially with parents who are trying to juggle work and stuff...”*

Even though Jo commented online learning is never good enough, Lorna noted how these short videos and activities were effective for Kobe, who, with the support of his sibling, was able to access home-learning activities;

*“...his older sister was quite good with him at home as well, and when he was the days they were at home she would sit with him and do some work, so he did actually engage quite well because it was all short, quite good activities for him.”*

### **Developing (missed) skills and learning**

Both Lorna and Jo observed an obvious lack of skills in children’s learning from those who started school during Covid-19, specifically basic skills like problem

solving and sharing, often related to children's play and foundational skills usually developed within an early years setting;

*“They basically had a whole year of being locked up with their Mums and Dads. So not having the transition of nursery time, play time, being out and about, the interaction. ...they were spoon fed, they relied upon their Mums and Dads more than you would expect at that age. Obviously, they're four-year-olds, they're still very young, and they have a lot of support when they start school. Well, I felt, and I still do feel with this class they are a bit more younger than what you would anticipate.”*

*“...there was a lot of gaps in learning and you can still see some of that ...I think reception is probably the most important, it's critical, it's the foundation really. And you can see that they're lacking certain skills that you would pick up in reception like problem solving. In the playground, this current year...telling tales, falling out. Simple things like that. I can't put it down to Covid, but I will say I do believe that well, it has some part to play.”*

When Lorna was asked what she thought the biggest challenge was for children with SEND starting school during Covid-19, she reflected on the impact of children's social skills and their inability to play together, missing out on vital skills needed to interact with their peers and practitioners in their school environment, to develop proximal processes and reciprocal relationships (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*“It was like the social part of it... we can always work on the academic aspects of things. It doesn't matter if all thirty of them turn up and they've never looked at a book before, etc., you know within half a term you're going to start to get it, but you can still see the social needs now, that's not going, I feel like the curriculum needs stripping back so much at the moment to be able to just, they need to be taught how to play...they need to be taught how to talk to each other properly, how to respond to somebody...things like personal space...considering they're all social distancing, they just don't seem to have an awareness of it whatsoever.”*

Jo reiterated this observation by Lorna, commenting that she feels the current year three children who transitioned to school at this time feel younger than she would expect due to an obvious lack of social and emotional skills, created from the Covid-19 lockdowns;

*“...I felt, and I still do feel with this class they are a bit more younger than what you would anticipate...social skills, relying on parents for simple tasks, emotionally and just certain social situations that they can’t react in a normal way, or they have or they never have had those social interactions before...play time, parties, getting together with friends and family... play groups...they never had that.”*

Responding to the observed impact on the social and emotional skills of children who started school at this time, Jo explained how the school has adopted a whole-class and school intervention for developing the social and emotional skills of children;

*“As a school, and it’s for the whole class, we do, Chloe and Kobe do a ten-ten programme, which it is all about social and emotional...we talk about certain topics like what makes us feel sad, what makes us feel happy, how can we, a lot of play scripts”*

Additionally, Lorna reflected on another programme introduced in response to Covid-19, called ‘Adventure Grove’, which is a play-based speech and language intervention for children, as well as a programme to reflect on their worries and feelings post Covid-19;

*“So last year we mostly used it for reception because we found their speech and language wasn’t great last year, so they do things like they, she sets up little, like there might be a hairdressers and a chemist and all other things, and she gets them to speak about the things properly.”*

Lorna noted how the intervention was needed to respond to the specific needs of the children, especially the year 3 class who transitioned into school during Covid-19, perceiving their play to be underdeveloped during unstructured times;

*“...we wouldn’t have done that before Covid...but when you’ve got so many children that need it, like the playground, I’m getting fed up of being told that, like the year three are the worst class out there at playtime, and it can’t be a coincidence that they’re the ones that didn’t get proper play times at the beginning, they didn’t have that type of learning properly with everybody how to play.”*

## **Support Strategies to come out of Covid-19**

### **Changes to transition (from Covid-19)**

Both Lorna and Jo reflected on new and innovative strategies the school have adopted since Covid-19, to support children with SEND with their transition into school. This included meeting parents to share information regarding their child and their individual needs before they start school, developing relationships and communication with parents, encouraging parents to be truthful about their child's specific needs;

*“We didn't do the face-to-face parent meetings before, and it was something that we thought was quite important that getting to know that individual child, there just used to be like a form that they would fill in, but sometimes they [parents] don't always write the truth on the form, my child is fine and they come in and they're a whirlwind and you're like Ok”*

Jo explained how their usual transitions have changed since Covid-19, responding to the needs of the children and parents through being adaptable. This change reflects the concerns of Chloe's mum who commented on the fast nature of the transition into school;

*“we've changed our transition now, where we have it a bit more gradual. So I think it's spread out over two weeks rather than one week. So I think the school has gone a bit more with the times as well, so I think it's a bit more adaptable now.”*

Lorna's reflection mirrored Jo's, commenting that they had since considered their transition into school and ways to improve it, implementing things like an information sharing booklet for parents, online tours of the school, a PowerPoint to share information for parents, and sending emails to parents on a regular basis with current and up-to-date information.

#### 4.5.5 Summary

A summary of similarities and difference of perspectives with regards to Kobe's transition to school during Covid-19 are highlighted below. These have been discussed in detail within Chapter 5 'Discussion' (page 265).

- **Structure and Support:** Kobe, his dad and the practitioners all drew on the positive impact of school and the importance of school as a place of structure, routine, support and enjoyment.
- **Missed Opportunities:** Both Kobe's dad and the practitioners highlighted missed opportunities and a lack of support from outside agencies for Kobe and his autism diagnosis, such as the CAT team and speech and language therapy.
- **Relationships and Friendships:** Kobe, his dad and practitioners reflected on the difficulty of navigating and forming friendships. Sibling support offered comfort and familiarity for Kobe and his parents. Practitioners already knew the family and were aware of some of Kobe's needs before he started school.
- **Positive Dispositions:** Kobe's dad commented on Kobe's strengths and the strategies he used to support his own transition to school. This was reiterated by the practitioners, who observed resilience in children starting school at this time, an example of both force characteristics (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) and learning dispositions (Carr, 1999).
- **Familiarity of School Environment:** Both Kobe's dad and the practitioners commented on similar challenges and missed opportunities during Kobe's transition to school, including lack of familiarity with school/ class environment, lack of familiarity with practitioners and peers.
- **Emotional Impact:** Both Kobe's dad and the practitioners highlighted the emotional impact and the difficulty Kobe had with the changing rules such as distancing from peers and practitioners and accessing the 'bubble' system.
- **Home-School Challenges:** Both Kobe's dad and the practitioners' highlighted challenges around home-schooling, and pressures of being

keyworkers. The practitioners adapted their home-learning expectations, considering the challenges for parents also managing work commitments.

## **4.6 Case Study Five: Basim**

### **4.6.1 Ethnographic Information**

**Age of child:** 8

**Pre-school:** Not known

**Date of Transition to School:** September 2020

**Age of child at transition:** 4

**School Names:** Evergreen Middle School.

**Area of School Setting:** The school is based within inner city Birmingham Local Authority.

**Type of School:** Maintained Primary School.

**School Context:** The school is a maintained primary school with a catholic ethos. There are approximately 380 children on roll, and the school has a combination of one and two form entries. There is no pre-school setting at Evergreen Middle School. A high proportion of children who attend Evergreen Middle School have English as an Additional Language (EAL).

**Ratio of practitioners/ children:** 1:1 (for morning sessions only).

**SEND:** Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

**SEN Support/ EHCP:** EHCP

**Family Background:** Unavailable data – parent carried out the online survey and did not participate in the interview.

**Practitioner Information:** One practitioner, Dani, was interviewed as part of the case study for Basim. Dani recently retired from teaching, but had been teaching for over 30 years, with considerable experience of teaching in Reception class at Evergreen Middle School.

Additionally, Basim's 1:1 Teaching Assistant (TA), who supports him during the morning sessions in his classroom, provided some commentary during and after the creative session with Basim.

**Creative Method:** Basim chose to play with the train set, whilst also communicating his experiences of his transition to school. Basim's TA had supported him with choosing the train using visual representation and pointing to choose his preference. Basim, his TA and I all helped construct the train set and we played together.

#### **4.6.2 Basim's Perspective**

Within his school setting, Basim uses a variety of multimodal communication techniques. This includes using Alternative and Augmentative communication [AAC] tools, such as pictorial representations and flashcards. Basim also uses echolalia, pointing and body/ hand gestures.

Currently at school, Basim has support from a one-to-one TA during the morning sessions, and uses pictures to communicate for 'yes', 'no', 'happy', 'sad', 'trains', 'toilet', 'snack', 'toys' and 'ball', and other words linked to his classroom environment. The TA adds more pictures depending on the specific topics and learning within his classroom, such as maths, physical education, geography, as well as spaces around the school, for example dinner hall and playground. The way Basim uses his multimodal communication was evident within our session, through evidence of Basim pointing at pictures and repeating the word, bodily gestures, smiling, and echolalia.

Through discussions with the TA, the school setting are encouraging Basim's mum to use AAC tools at home with Basim. However, the TA and teacher reiterated this is often difficult as Basim's mum has English as a Second Language and often uses family members to communicate with the school. However, as I didn't interview Basim's mum, it is difficult to fully comment on Basim's communication practices at home. This further demonstrates the importance of developing strong reciprocal and relational mesosystems between parents/ caregivers and practitioners in supporting the transition to school experiences for children with SEND who use diverse forms of multimodal communication, to ensure support is consistent and joined-up (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

During the creative session, Basim chose to play with the train set by pointing at the train picture using AAC. The TA and I helped Basim build the train set, before Basim pushed the trains around the train track, and Basim was smiling and enjoying this play session. Basim repeated words such as 'green train', 'red train', 'friends' and 'happy'.



*Image 1 and 2: Basim setting up the train set and playing trains.*

Basim chose to play with the trainset during our creative conversation. These photographs were chosen to demonstrate firstly the agency Basim demonstrated within the session, through choosing the trains by pointing at the train picture himself and saying the word 'train'. Secondly, the photographs show Basim demonstrating a variety of learning dispositions in his microsystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006; Carr, 1999), including taking an interest in his play, being involved, communicating with others and taking responsibility by choosing his own activities. In these photographs, Basim also demonstrated his agency and construction of proximal processes to objects and spaces within his classroom environment through his train play (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

### ***Importance of Play – “playing...trains”***

It was evident that Basim enjoyed playing with the train set, and when asked what he was playing with, Basim responded 'playing' 'train'. Basim held the train up and studied the details of the train before placing it back on the tracks.

Basim was asked if trains make him happy, to which he responded by pointing at the 'happy' flashcard and said "happy", with a big smile on his face.

### ***Social Connection and Belonging - 'Happy' (at school)***

When Basim was asked if he enjoys school, Basim used echolalic utterances including "*Basim, School*". Basim also competently pointed at the 'happy' flashcard in response to the question. Basim communicated to me that he felt happy at school, evident in his facial expressions (smiling) tied to his embodied communication of pointing to the 'happy' flashcard.

### ***Friendships – "friends...Nora"***

Basim was asked about friends, responding with further displays of echolalic utterances, repeating the word 'friend', and with support from his one-one teaching assistant, Basim communicated his friends name "*Nora*".

These findings around social connections, friendships and the importance of play emphasise Basim's desire to reach towards proximal processes and relationships in his new school environment, including objects (trains), and people, bringing a sense of belonging and familiarity to his transition to school (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

### ***Significance of School for Basim***

For Basim, school represented a place of happiness, playing and predictability, as seen through the data around him smiling, having sustained concentration and engagement in his play, repeating his friends names and having a choice of play with the train set. For Basim, these connections to peers, objects and spaces were significant in making him feel safe and a sense of belonging to his school and classroom environment.

### **4.6.3 Basim's Mum's Perspective**

Basim's mum did not participate in the interview. However, she did fill in the online survey and commented on Basim's experience of starting school during Covid-19. The data below has been extracted from the online survey.

#### **Challenges of starting school**

Basim's mum commented on the challenges that Basim faced when starting school, noting *"he was having a hard time get used to be at school"*.

#### **School support**

Basim's mum noted that the school were supportive of Basim's transition into school at this time, and adjusted support for his needs;

*"They offer for him to be picked up early from school until he settle down."*

Additionally, Basim's mum noted how practitioners at Evergreen Middle School observed the challenges that Basim faced early on in his transition into school, and provided the right support and made reasonable adjustments for him at the setting;

*"His teachers noticed right away that he needs extra support and the provide for him by the way."*

#### **Communication**

Basim's mum noted how it was quite easy to communicate with practitioners at Basim's school, and this was done via telephone and emails.

#### **Basim's happiness of starting school**

Basim's mum noted how Basim needed time to settle into his new environment, and even though he enjoyed school, he also demonstrated feelings of sadness and wanting to be at home, a familiar place he was used to;

*“Everything was new to him so it took a time to settle down. He loves going to school, but he would cry because he want to come back home.”*

#### **4.6.4 Basim’s Practitioner Perspective Relationships**

When asked about her idea of transition for children starting school, Dani discussed the importance of relationship building, becoming familiar with the environment and knowing the child’s needs well to support them. These examples demonstrate proximal processes to people, objects and spaces in children’s immediate environments (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*“Transition in a reception classroom involves children becoming familiar with their setting, and it also involves us getting to know the children, getting to know the parents. So really it means familiarity.”*

However, Dani noted that developing this relationship with parents was challenging during Covid-19 as communicating with parents was mostly done via telephone, and this was very difficult for parents who had English as a Second Language (ESL). This demonstrates challenges of mesosystemic relationships between parents/ caregivers and practitioners (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*“Because of COVID, we had to phone parents individually and try to speak to children on the phone. But when you’re talking about a four-year-old child, you don’t really get a lot. Within this school as well we have a lot of English as a second language parents and children. So obviously you’re limited in what you can get from the phone...meeting face to face, you just can’t beat the quality of that really.”*

When asked if not being able to meet the children face-to-face before they started in September impacted their transition to school, Dani replied suggesting it did impact their transition to school but they tried to support this as quickly as they could to support children with additional needs;

*“It impacted their initial transition, yes, but I think we've got systems in place. I think most settings would have systems in place where you would just catch up with yourself within that first half term..”*

### **Knowledge of Child's specific needs**

Dani highlighted how important it is to have knowledge around the child's needs before they start school in September;

*“It's very important that we know the children that that we have an idea of the children's needs so that we can set out when we come September, we're better armed to provide what the children need for their individual needs.”*

Usually, information is shared by parents on a transition day into school, where parents and teachers develop a relationship and communicate around the child's needs, but this didn't happen during their transition to school at this time;

*“We had some contact with on the phone, some contact with nurseries. But that can be a hit and miss as well because children come from such a wide range of nurseries...”*

Due to mesosystemic challenges of developing these relationships (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) and opportunities to share information, this knowledge of the children's needs was missing.

### **Emotional impact**

Dani described this time as stressful and 'being on the back foot' when planning for children with SEND at this time. This added to the emotional impact of teachers at the time wanting to do their best for the children coming into their class during that September;

*“I think as a profession, we all have our heart in it. ...the stress comes from when you've got this child and you can see they've got needs, and things aren't falling into place quickly enough for them... We were sort of on the back foot a little bit that year because we hadn't met the children face to face or spoke to the parents.”*

Dani noted to strain and difficulty it was for parents in supporting their children at the time, especially with pressures of working themselves;

*“I think if they worked it was really hard for them because they didn't know from one day to the next whether the school is going to be open or closed, what they should or shouldn't be doing with their children at home...Really, not knowing what was coming from one day to the next...It must have been really challenging for them.”*

## **Social Impact**

Dani noted it was evident that due to the lack of opportunity to socialise with other children, Basim had missed vital opportunities to socialise and play alongside other children;

*“He was very much an alongside player, so he really needed those skills, to he needed to be with other children in order to gain the skills of playing with other children. So probably he would have been affected...Because he would have been isolated from children...it wouldn't have done him any favours... at all because he really needed that time to bond with his peers really.”*

Dani reflected on the support she tried to put in place for Basim when he returned to school, supporting him with social interactions that he missed during Covid-19 school lockdowns, including playing with or alongside other children and eating with other children;

*“I think, which is probably what we would have done anyway, yeah, just making sure that he was having those social interactions like turn taking, eating with other children, but he had a lot of support. He had a one to one who were supporting him with that...It would have had an impact on him definitely...I think, he was disadvantaged.”*

These examples demonstrate the co-construction and support practitioners put in to support Basim in making connections to objects and people in his microsystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Dani noted how the importance of play and being around peers were for Basim, to develop social skills and friendships;

*“...I think he just needed that extra time to develop his social skills with children that were near his own age and to build those friendships in a play-based situation...he definitely benefited from having the slightly looser timetable....”*

## **Restrictions of Covid-19**

Dani reflected on the reality for many children starting school during this time, commenting that their transition to school was chaotic, confusing for all, and challenging to find routine and structure amongst the complexity of rules and regulations;

*“During COVID...the transition from September for those children that were coming into school was, I would say not as good as it should be...So there was actually one transition day in September...we were sent home as the children were coming to the door for their transition day, we had set up for them expecting to meet these children and literally 10 minutes before they came, we discovered that a child in the present class that we'd had contact with had got COVID. And the bubble had to close. So we had to get a new set of staff... because it was too late to cancel the transition day.”*

Dani noted how the ever-changing rules and regulations at the exosystemic level (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) impacted Basim, as well as the inconsistencies in the rules within schools;

*“there was no routine, he was just everywhere...I think the biggest barrier for children with SEND would have been the disruption to their routines, because children with SEND in particular...you have a visual timetable, they know exactly what's coming next. And children, especially on the autistic spectrum, they thrive on that and know what's coming next. And if you keep disrupting that.”*

Dani commented how the continuous disruption to children's learning and routine was the biggest challenge at this time for children;

*“And that was the biggest challenge because you'd be sitting there, they'll be all there with their little arms folded, waiting for their milk. And then suddenly it's like the bubbles closed, everybody out. And you forget how crazy that was really.”*

## **Strategies of support**

Dani commented how the school SENCo was very proactive and able to help practitioners identify children with SEND and put things in place quickly. Support from the school SENCo, as well as outside agencies demonstrates support at the micro and exosystemic level for some schools (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*“she was on the case really straight away. So any children that we were identifying she was making all the contacts that she needed to make, and getting the ball rolling. So it although it was a disadvantage, because maybe things could have been done in advance and preparations could have been made, we had a lot of time to make up, which obviously is quite stressful because we you're sort of thinking on your feet, if your child is there in front of you.”*

*“yeah, we did have outside that they're we're very good in this school. This school is very good at their relationships and links with outside agencies.”*

## **Use of technology**

The school created a video with a tour of their school for other transition opportunities, which has been used by parents who couldn't physically come and see the school, and described by the practitioner as really good;

*“I know that the website has a tour of reception...so parents can go on and use that, to familiarise children, which is really good. So we had somebody come and do a virtual tour of the classroom.”*

Dani noted other things the school has kept in place since Covid are things like telephone conversations and informal communication with parents;

*“Because parents couldn't physically come and look round so much. And I think those things will stay in place, because they are useful. And things like phoning parents. Having telephone conversations maybe if they can't make parent teacher consultations... I think all those things are really useful.”*

## Lessons learnt

Dani commented on her thoughts of developing as a school in light of Covid, especially around communicating with parents, supporting mesosystemic connections (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006);

*“We did learn a lot about different ways to communicate with parents. It's not just on parents evening. Or maybe just on Transition Day...So I think maybe calling parents became more of a habit...And not necessarily expecting them to come on parents evening face to face ...Some parents are more comfortable speaking on the phone, because they have to make the effort to come to school. So I think that that side of things was definitely good. Just being a little bit more open minded about our communication.”*

Dani noted how using technology was also beneficial for involving parents in wider school life, such as the Christmas nativity, when they couldn't access the school in person due to the restrictions around Covid-19;

*“I think the communication and the virtual side of things, for example, we did a virtual Christmas concert, and we put that on the website, which was really nice for parents that couldn't make it”,*

Additionally, Dani commented on how the school created learning packs for children instead of providing all online teaching and learning. Dani noted how this was essential given the high percentage of digital poverty within the families that attended the school;

*“We didn't go down the line of online teaching in this school...it's not an affluent area group of parents. So as a coverall, we put stuff online ... we also printed packs... And parents were coming to collect the packs. So we had physical packs and we had online work as well for access... but we didn't actually do the face-to-face online zoom calls, like a lot of schools did. Thank goodness...because it wouldn't have been fair for people that don't have access to that technology. So we tried to make it as fair as we could.”*

#### 4.6.5 Summary

A summary of similarities and difference of perspectives with regards to Basim's transition to school during Covid-19 are highlighted below. These have been discussed in detail within Chapter 5 'Discussion' (page 265).

- **Play is important:** It was observed in the creative session with Basim that play is an essential part of connection to his school setting. practitioner reiterated the importance of a play-based curriculum for Basim, having missed out on opportunities to play during the transition to school.
- **Social connections and belonging:** Basim smiled when talking about friends and said his friend's name. This demonstrates the importance of social connections at school for Basim, and his reach towards proximal processes in his school microsystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).
- **Emotional Impact:** Basim's mum and the practitioner both highlighted the emotional impact that the transition to school during Covid-19 was for Basim, as he felt unsettled and unsure leaving his mum, and entering a new and unfamiliar environment. The practitioner reiterated the lack of familiarity at the time, suggesting Covid-19 rules meant children were sent home or could not attend the setting on a regular basis.
- **Relationship and communication:** Basim's mum was happy with the methods of communication through Covid-19, which included email and telephone. Basim's mum reiterated the support she had from the school for helping Basim's transition into school, including finishing earlier to support his needs, as well as identifying his needs quickly. Dani, the practitioner suggested that they tried hard to build relationships, but this was difficult due to Covid-19 restrictions, demonstrating further mesosystemic challenges of Covid-19 (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Dani reiterated how this communication was difficult due to a high number of families with ESL.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### ***5.1 Introduction***

As discussed at the beginning of this thesis, and within the literature review and policy chapters, the transition to school is recognised as a significant and important process for all children and can be even more challenging for children with SEND, particularly in times of crisis, such as a worldwide pandemic. The inclusion and rights of children with SEND are increasingly recognised in current literature, international frameworks and UK policy. Yet, despite such recognition of the importance of transition to school for children, and the commitment to allow children to have a voice and be heard, the lived experiences and realities for children with SEND regarding their transition to school during a worldwide pandemic remain undiscovered in current research. The study's objective was to explore the lived experiences and realities of transition to school for a small group of children with SEND within English school settings, during a worldwide pandemic.

To meet the study aims and objectives, I adopted a qualitative, interpretivist, constructionist methodology to explore the lived experiences of children with SEND, their parents/ caregivers, and the practitioners that supported them during their transition to school during Covid-19. Data was generated through initial online data gathering surveys, which were used to support semi-structured interviews with practitioners and parents/ caregivers, and creative conversations with children with SEND. Data was analysed using RTA (Braun and Clarke, 2022) to draw significant meanings from the data.

Within the constructionist epistemology, analysis of the data was achieved through using different lenses to view and make-meaning from the data. This allowed for a wider account of the children's experiences in their transition to school during Covid-19. I used Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Bioecological Systems Theory as the guiding theoretical framework. This drew on the Process-Person-Context-Time framework of the BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) and offered a multidimensional lens for exploring the complex and dynamic experiences and relationships within the nested ecological systems of the child. Additionally, a rights-based and inclusive perspective (Lundy, 2007; UNCRC, 1989) was used to

consistently explore the lives experiences of the child with SEND in their transition to school at this time.

The focus of the data analysis was on the lived experiences of transitions for children with SEND, their parents/ caregivers and practitioners, and the analysis draws upon multiple data sources within each case. Subsequently, the themes drawn from the data have been compared and synthesised, identifying broader patterns in experiences of transition and inclusive school support for children with SEND. Recommendations have been made at the end of each research question, and these have been revisited in the subsequent Chapter 6 'Recommendations and Conclusion' of the thesis (page 319).

## ***5.2 Research Question 1***

### **How did children with SEND in Birmingham experience their transition to school during the Covid-19 pandemic?**

Around the central concepts of 'We are Active Agents of our own transition' and 'Beyond of tip of the iceberg: the hidden emotions of transition during a pandemic', children drew on important and significant aspects of their transition to school during a worldwide pandemic to understand and tell an insightful and complex story of their lived experiences.

The themes around the central calyx of 'We are Active Agents of our own transition' includes constructing learning identities during crisis; negotiating social connections and belonging; agency and connections through play; and agentic dispositions. The themes all place emphasis and significance on the child's microsystem, as well as the role of proximal processes within these microsystems. The theme of 'Beyond the tip of the iceberg: the hidden emotions of transition during a pandemic' includes expressing uncertainty and vulnerability children with SEND encountered at this time. This theme reflects on the includes challenges children with SEND faced, that may not be obvious on the surface but are identified as significant and important to the children themselves.

## **5.2.1 We are Active Agents of our own transitions**

### *5.2.1.1 Constructing learning identities during crisis*

One of the most significant and commonly shared perspectives within the children's data on their experiences of transition to school during Covid-19 was their reflection on their enjoyment for learning in their school environment (see children's data in Chapter 4: Case Study Findings, pages 159 - 264).

The data highlighted that children with SEND reflected on their enjoyment of specific academic lessons, such as literacy, mathematics and physical education. It is clear from these findings that children with SEND actively sought and created a routine within their changing environments, through their own dispositions (see literature on Carr, 1998a; 199b; 1998c; 1999, and Claxton and Carr, 2004) placing an emphasis on adapting their microsystems and co-constructing proximal processes and stability through routines, when wider systems around them were in a state of uncertainty. For example, routines, structures, rules and regulations in the child's exo-, macro- and chrono-systems were often changing, goalposts were continuously moving, and children were perceived as having no or little control over their situations and experiences (as demonstrated within the parents/ caregivers and practitioners' perspectives throughout this discussion chapter).

A disruption for children with SEND, from wider socio-historical and chronosystem factors such as Covid-19 (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) might be expected to generate a negative experience of starting school, causing increased anxiety and distress for children with SEND, whose routine and stability are crucial in their transition to school (Macdonald et al., 2018; Sammons, 2013; Zimmerman et al., 2017). However, the children's data suggests a more subtle depiction and demonstrated that even though there were detrimental changes and challenges happening in the children's wider systems (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), children with SEND in this study actively created and found routine and a small piece of control and comfort in their microsystems, through having their own perceptions of structure and routine in their school environment. This demonstrates that the children with SEND included in this study were demonstrating responsibility for developing reciprocal interactions between themselves and their immediate classroom environment and not being fully passive recipients of adult-led constructs within their education and classroom. The children creating their own routines, structures,

shared experiences, play opportunities and navigating friendships through repeated interactions with new spaces, peers and adults, and routines (proximal processes at play) within their microsystem and mesosystems aligns with tangible example of Carr's (1998a; 1998b; 1998c; 1999; 2001) work on children's dispositions, as well as Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) proximal processes, and Corsaro's (2005) interpretive reproduction in practice.

This finding is significant because within the BST, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) emphasise the role and importance of proximal processes between the child and context in which they develop, yet often assume these opportunities are shaped and led by adults and environments. The findings around children's routines and learning (as well as play and dispositions which will be discussed further within this chapter) challenge and extend the thinking of Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) framework. In this study, children with SEND were very much active participants in determining and shaping their own new experiences, learning environments and cultures around their transition to school, signifying they were constructors of proximal processes, rather than passive recipients of adult-led structures. This was a similar finding by Santos and Martins de Sousa (2021), where children expressed their wishes and enjoyment of learning to read, write and do homework. The children's views of learning fostered a connection to their environment, which supports further studies that suggest children's desire for learning, routine and structure often makes them feel secure, safe and develop attachment to the setting (Dockett and Perry, 2004; Peters, 2010; Sandberg et al., 2014).

However, what is different with the result from this study to other studies in the field is that here, children with SEND were creating their own routines and structure amongst the chaotic landscape of a global pandemic, and their desire to create such routine and structure became even more evident considering the issues raised during Covid-19. Here, children with SEND established new rhythms in their routines through their own dispositional characteristics, yet the school settings and practitioners often struggled to recognise or accommodate these new and different rhythms and routines that children with SEND were creating for themselves. Instead, the school settings used limited transition tools and mechanisms that were unsuitable for the children's individual needs.

This provides evidence that children with SEND were able to actively create, construct and adapt to new routines in their school environment. This finding supports a rights-based perspective (UNCRC, 1989), highlighting the children with SEND included in this study as competent of meaningful engagement in their own education and learning. This finding offers a counter-narrative to recent studies of transitions to school for children with SEND and Covid-19, which suggest that children with SEND have an increased reluctance to take risks, explore new situations and unable to follow new rules and routines within their classroom (Wythe, 2022).

The responses from children in this study related to their enjoyment of learning, and importance of routine and structure within their school environment could also have been in response to the challenges they faced within mesosystems, such as home-school challenges and parents/ caregivers managing working from home. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, home became a space of learning too, and this was significantly different to the way they had experienced their home space before (Ludgate et al., 2022). This created shifts within the children's micro-, meso- and exo- systems (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), specifically between home and school and wider influences on these relationships with parents/ caregivers and siblings. The children in this study all reflected on being at home during Covid-19 with feelings of *'boredom'*, suggesting the temporal and shifting structures and routine, using comments like *'wow I get to finally have a rest and visit somebody'* (Amna, page 187) and *'we just had to stay off at home...like I had a sort of rest and watched Mr Bean'* (Chloe, page 217). These responses demonstrate that children's routines and structures were different and changed in response to the fluctuating issues related to Covid-19, as well as having to cope with other demands within their exosystems, for example, demands of home-life, such as parents working from home, siblings being at home, having to access online learning, as well as the inability to see friends and family face-to-face.

### *Routine for children with ASD*

Whilst routine provided stability and a support mechanism for many children with SEND in their transition to school during the Covid-19 pandemic, it could be argued that the function of routine for autistic children also provides emotional and sensory regulation (Wood, 2019). The children's data in this study suggests routine and structure in the transition to school was a significant finding for all the children with SEND; it not only contributed to their emotional security, sense of safety and stability at such a turbulent time in the wider landscape of Covid-19, but it also provided them with a sense of trust, control and agency within such a restricted space and time. This indicates that for children with SEND, including autistic children in this study, they were aware of their own emotional security and sense of safety at the time, which was crucial in not only shaping their transition to school, but also the type of support they received during this time. This reflects an example of the children demonstrating their use of resource characteristics to influence their development, such as their mental or emotional qualities, past experiences and/ or their skills and intelligence, extending the work of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006). As parents/ caregivers and practitioners, supporting children with the emotional impact of a worldwide pandemic was vital, but even more significant for children with SEND who may have needed individualised and relational support and care when they started school during a worldwide pandemic.

The priorities at the time were to develop children's literacy and numeracy skills, speech and language development (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2021), rather than investing time, patience and care into supporting children's social, emotional and mental-health needs. Professionals in the Nelson et al. (2021) study suggested this was due to lack of funds, capacity and expertise within mainstream schools. This is particularly salient for the children with SEND in this study, in their transition to school during and after Covid-19, where their emotional needs evidently needed nurturing and supporting far more than their academic development. This points to a need to reconsider priorities of support within government policy agendas and school discourse both during and after a worldwide pandemic for children with SEND. For example, employing trauma-trained practitioners to work with children, families and practitioners would have been beneficial at this time, giving time and space for children to process the extent and impact of Covid-19. This was a strategy

employed in the findings of a study by Bateman and Danby (2013), who found that giving children space and time to process and discuss the impact of the New Zealand earthquakes ensured they processed and recovered from the traumatic events.

In contrast, studies with parents/ caregivers and practitioners highlighted the lack of structure and routine the children had in their transition to school at this time, due to systemic policies within the school and wider context which implicated the usual transition to school support (as discussed within section 2.5 above. For example, Kobe's dad commented on how Kobe struggles with change (page 236) and Lola's mum suggesting that '*I think she might have just got used to being at home with us...*' (page 1575. The disjuncture between the children's and adults accounts uncovers a potential misalignment within the mesosystem of the BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006); whilst parents/ caregivers and practitioners perceived routine and structure within the child's transition as systematic, yet missing, children with SEND in this study co-created routine and structure at their local, microsystemic level and in the smallest of ways, through structured lessons, play and social connections with peers and practitioners. These are examples of children developing proximal processes in action, as well as a confirmation that all children, including autistic children and children with SEND have learning dispositions that are enacted through everyday practices, such as routines, play and social connections, even if they demonstrate in non-normative ways (Carr, 1999).

This disconnection between voices is a significant finding and demonstrates a potential misunderstanding of adults that support children with SEND in their transition to school. It also reiterates the importance of including children with SEND within research about themselves (Lundy, 2007; UNCRC, 1989), emphasising their role as competent, active agents in shaping their own experiences and creating their own cultures in their transition to school, rather than adapting to adult norms (Corsaro, 2005). Here, the children with SEND are demonstrating their sense of identity and belonging to their new school and classroom environment through their own dispositional characteristics, instead of being directed by adult-driven agendas.

This is a considerable finding because from the children's findings above, the desire to be active agents in their transition to school and educational settings during Covid-

19 signifies a mattering; they are establishing themselves as competent and capable individuals in shaping their own individual experiences within disrupted learning environments. As already highlighted above, the children in this study self-created new learning opportunities, routines and structures because of developing proximal processes in their environment, which supported their development and transition into school during Covid-19. Children in this study used supporting interactions within their new class peers, objects, symbols and school environment, for example, consistently enjoying the same lesson, following a routine or structure, however small, or seeking people or favourite objects and symbols to help structure their day and support them in their adaptation to a new school context. As highlighted above, this extends existing research of the BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), recognising children with SEND as competent and capable in creating their own proximal processes, and supports the work of Carr's (1999) learning dispositions within a UK context.

The findings suggest that there should be a greater awareness, receptiveness and responsibility from adults that support children with SEND in their transition to school (both parents/ caregivers and practitioners); to recognise and respond to the routines and structures that children with SEND are creating for themselves in their transition to school, rather than presuppose and direct children's learning in ways that may not support them with their individual needs and preferences. Most practitioners and parents/ caregivers explained the child's lack of routine and structure through an adult-focussed, deficit-lens, for example, claiming the children's routine and structure was non-existent. Even though this claim could be seen as undermining children's voice, sense of agency and participation in their school transition process, the perspectives they hold are understandable, given the vulnerability of the situation they have experienced with a worldwide pandemic. From their point of view, the usual routine and structure their child had experienced had completely changed and therefore could be seen as missing. Not only does this finding demonstrate the importance of asking children their views (Lundy, 2007; UNCRC, 1989) but also raises important questions around inclusive practices within the transition to school process for children with SEND, to ensure the adults supporting transitions are aware of children's perspectives and individual dispositions and implement strategies to support these in practice.

The children's findings within this theme also demonstrate children with SEND as having agency in their own learning and transition to school, which corresponds with Article 12 and 13 of the UNCRC (1989), yet it also challenges a post-Covid-19 recovery and deficit narrative of children with SEND, demonstrated in recent policy agendas (Ofsted, 2021; Bowyer-Crane et al., 2021). These policies and recent studies speculate that children with SEND need to participate in catch-up curriculums through adult-led interventions and directives. Instead, the findings here reinforce a move towards pedagogies that consider children with SEND as competent, capable and with an ability to shape their environments to meet their needs, and adults should be respecting and trusting of their views. This provides a vital contribution to inclusive, rights-based education for children with SEND.

For practitioners supporting children with SEND in their transition to school, it would be beneficial to give time to children to recognise their strengths, values and competencies and find out what matters to them most during their transition to school. This would include identifying and starting the transition process much earlier on for children with SEND, with careful consideration given to the child's views and a more carefully supported process. Many of the practitioners within this study commented on their limited understanding of the children's needs, and Kobe's dad suggesting he had to fight for his diagnosis further illustrates this gap.

This strategy has been employed in other countries such as New Zealand, where they use a 'notice-recognise-respond' (Ministry of Education, 2004: 6) assessment and reporting system for adults working with children, developing their awareness of children's competencies in-the-moment and over time, to support children's progress. This focuses on a strengths-based model of inclusive education for children with SEND.

#### *5.2.1.2 Negotiating social connections and belonging*

Another prominent finding in the children's data was the emphasis the children placed on social connections, which were central to their feelings of belonging to their school environment during their transition to school through a worldwide pandemic (see Chapter 4: Case Study Findings, pages 159-264). However, due to disruptions in their transition processes, fragmented time at school, mask-wearing and bubble systems, as well as limited and missed opportunities for peer interaction,

children's experiences of social connection during their transition to school were also complex and fragile. Whilst some children described examples of friendships, comfort and security, such as '*I like to be with my friends*' (Lola, page 163), '*a good day looks like lots of friends*' (Amna, page 187), and Basim using facial gestures such as smiling when using the word 'friend' and repeating the word '*friends*' and '*Nora*' (his friend's name) (page 256), they also expressed feelings of exclusion and isolation from their peers. For example, Amna and Lola said they '*didn't know their names*', (referring to the children in their class) (pages 167 and 190), Kobe commented on the fragmented nature of his friendships at the time as '*...I was starting getting friends and I was like when someone has no friends*' (page 230), and Chloe demonstrated her vulnerability and difficulty in navigating friendships, commenting '*I have three bullies in this school*' (page 215).

Some children also reflected on relationships with practitioners in their transition to school. For example, Lola commented that '*Laura is the one who helped me*' (page 167), Chloe, when she was asked who helped her settle into school, stated '*my teachers*' (page 215), and Kobe reflected on all his practitioners throughout his school '*so I can actually remember Miss V was teaching us when I was in Reception...*' (page 231).

These findings indicate that social connections and friendships played a significant function in the transition to school for all children included in this study, which supported their sense of belonging to their new school environment. This finding aligns and extends existing research on the role of social connections for children in their transition to school; Dockett et al. (2019) suggested that knowing the names of peers is an important part of transition to school for children to develop trusting and reciprocal relationships; and Sandberg (2017) suggested few children in their study could name or refer to children who they like to play with. For children with SEND included in this study, knowing their friends name was a fundamental process of recognising, forming, addressing and facilitating interaction with their peers, and having an awareness of who is who in their setting and peer group dynamics. Furthermore, it demonstrates dispositions of belonging, reciprocity, resilience and perseverance (Carr and Claxton, 2004) to navigate friendships and social connections during challenging contexts. This was a fundamental part of developing

proximal processes with peers in their classroom environment (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). However, due to wider restrictions of institutional policy demands and conflicting government advice within the chronosystem of children and families, adult support and facilitation of social development for children with SEND was missing. Therefore, the importance of knowing children's names in developing social relationships may have been overlooked or deprioritised as significant for children with SEND, by adults involved in the transition to school process. This finding is significant because it suggests there was an obvious lack of meaningful engagement or importance of developing friendships and social connections within the context of the classroom for children with SEND at this time, which could impact their sense of belonging to their school environment (Carr, 1999). This was influenced both by the effects and restrictions of the pandemic, and by the transition structures currently embedded within the English education system. This extends the work of Parry (2012) who suggested the context in which friendships and relationships develop for children with SEND are influential, and the dynamics of this culture impact children's interactions with one another. My study findings here demonstrate that the restricted school environments due to Covid-19, and the restrictive culture within it impacted the children's ability to develop social connections.

Two of the children in the study (Chloe and Kobe) who discussed the challenges around developing friendships due to fallings out and bullying are both autistics. Chloe and Kobe talked about their peers yet were confused about friendships and what constituted a friend within their school environment (see pages 215 and 230). This finding indicates that often, autistic children may feel vulnerable around forming friendships, yet it suggests they did want to seek those social connections in their transition to school. However, due to systemic and structural restrictions of Covid-19, their opportunities to develop social connections were impacted even more.

This finding aligns with existing research including Chen et al. (2020) and Yu and Chen's (2024) work around social communication. Their research suggests that though children may not lack the desire for dyadic interactions with their peers, due to attributable individual needs of autistic children, for example possible sensory, perceptual, timing and motoric needs could have made it harder for these children to participate in interactions in the same way as their neurotypical or non-autistic peers.

These difficulties or challenges that autistic children may face mirror the resource characteristics of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006). This points to a need to reconsider how practitioners give time and space to understand the communicative needs of autistic children, or other children with communicative differences within their transition to school. Within this study, if the practitioners understood the child's communicative needs associated to autistic traits, for example sensory, perceptual awareness, timing and motoric needs (Yu and Chen, 2024) considerably before they entered the school setting, social interactions between autistic children and their neurotypical peers could be supported within the child's classroom and school setting, by providing opportunities for multimodal forms of communication from the outset. For example, Chloe and Kobe may have engaged more effectively in social play and development of friendships with peers through adult support, scaffolding and an awareness of peers around different communication styles.

The challenges some children faced around social connections aligns with those reported in the study by Búker and Hóke (2019), especially around how children felt when they were without friends, and Lundqvist et al. (2019), who found that some children with SEND found developing friendships difficult, which impacted their sense of belonging to their school environment. Similarly, Sandberg et al. (2017) reported children's vulnerability around establishing friendships with peers, due to either not being able to refer to children they like to play with or concerns and worries around older children bullying them within their setting. This highlights the interchangeable state of friendships during the transition to school, with some children establishing friendships in a smooth way, and some children demonstrating a vulnerability around forming these friendships. However, for children with SEND included in this study, they also had the added complexities of restricted environments and cultures in which to develop social connections and friendships, and this was often interrupted by further public health restrictions of Covid-19, like distancing and mask-wearing. This offers a unique contribution of the complexities and worries of friendships in the transition to school for children with SEND through a challenging contextual landscape of Covid-19.

The findings relating to children seeking connection with practitioners aligns with the findings from Schürer et al. (2025), around the focus of proximal processes which are essential to positive transitions to school for children, and shaping children's sense of feeling comfortable, safe, and secure during the transition to primary school, through the establishment of secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships. In my study, it was clear that children needed the support and anchoring from consistent adults within their new school environment, giving children a sense of security and safety.

However, for the children with SEND in this study, it is obvious they missed out on opportunities of social engagement and practicing social skills, such as learning from their peers and adults in their school context and incidental conflict resolution through play opportunities, for example making friends, turn-taking, negotiations, sharing and navigating group dynamics. This finding was especially significant for children with SEND, who may often rely on adults within their school environment to scaffold and model social skills and communication between peers.

There continues to be a divergence in the children's views of friendships in their transition to school, compared to the adults around them. Some practitioner's views aligned with the children's and reflected on the challenges that children with SEND faced in making social connections in their transition to school and focussed on the outcomes of the social interactions (or lack of). For example, some practitioners noted the children's inability to share, turn-take and play with friends during unstructured times throughout the day (see pages 200 and 246 for examples). This difficulty places ownership on the individual children, failing to consider the complexities of the culture, environment and understanding of the adults within it.

Other practitioners recognised the restrictive nature of play from a contextual perspective yet recognised the importance of accessing play opportunities for children with SEND to develop skills alongside their peers (see page 175 and 177). Here, this finding indicates that the practitioners recognise the importance of social connections and developing social skills through reciprocal relationships, however, they failed to offer any adaptations to the interactions between the children in the settings, demonstrating a lack of understanding about resourceful and practical ways in which to scaffold the children's communication and interaction needs to support

them in developing proximal processes. This finding mirrors the work of Chen et al. (2020) where they found that disabling environments require verbal competence to access peer relationships.

However, other practitioner views misalign with the children's views and the views of the practitioners above, commenting the children did know their friends '*she'd be really shy. Whereas she got to know us really quickly, she got to know her friends.*' (page 178).

Additionally, practitioners admitted that although they could see the benefit of spending time focussing on social development for children with SEND, there was no time to focus on developing children's social skills, due to demands of wider catch-up policies (see Lorna's account on page 247). Practitioners here observed the challenges in social skills of children at the time, for example playing, talking nicely to one another, personal space and responding to peers and adults in their environment, yet the pressure from wider systems to focus on academic skills. This further suggests that the environment could have become a disabling factor in developing social connections for some of the children with SEND who communicated and interacted in other multimodal ways, beyond the norms of the classroom (Chen et al., 2020). For example, Basim relied on using AAC and pictorial representations to develop social connections, yet school settings did not have time or space to utilise these forms of communication and interaction for everyone, which could have limited his ability to form friendships. This example could be the same for Chloe and Kobe, both autistic children, who found navigating friendships challenging.

This finding demonstrates that due to adult-led curriculums and directives within school settings, children's dispositions were invisible or misunderstood (Carr, 1999), and unable to fully develop strong relationships through play opportunities, inhibiting their development in their transition to school, due to macrosystem policies influencing the context in which development could have taken place (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

These findings around challenges of supporting the social connection and friendship development in the transition to school for children with SEND during Covid-19 is important because the priorities of starting school should be reconsidered to consider those valued by children with SEND. Furthermore, for practitioners

supporting children with SEND in forming social connections in their transition to school, practical strategies that promote social connections may prove useful. For example, Rogoff's (2003) work around guided participation suggested that children's learning and development are facilitated through their active engagement in culturally relevant activities, such as play, with the assistance of responsive social partners, which includes both adults and peers within their environment. Similarly, others recommended using strategies such as social skill stories, play resources (Peters, 2003) and integrated play group models to facilitate, guide and promote the social skills, communication, reciprocity and relationships with peers, particularly with ASD (Wolfberg et al., 2015).

Parents/ caregivers also commented on their desire for their children to make friends, as well as challenges of establishing friendships due to Covid-19, for example the inability to initially make friends, and the emotional challenges of transition to school (see pages 193, 218 and 224). However, despite the challenges, parents/ caregivers did reflect on their child's friendships; *'I think she did have... one or two friends that she's still friends with'* and *'She's quite popular in the sense of making friends...'* (Amna's mum, page 195). Other parents/ caregivers noted their effort to ensure their children started school with a familiar peer, for example, Chloe's mum commented on using Facebook as a tool to find other children attending the same school and arranging to meet up prior to starting school (page 224). The findings here indicate that parents/ caregivers were trying to develop and adapt the context to allow their children to develop social connections, but again further constrained by the lack of guidance around Covid-19.

Even though the findings suggest practitioners were aware children were facing social challenges around developing friendships at this time, it is evident that schools may have neglected social-emotional recovery when children with SEND transitioned to school during Covid-19. It was evident from this study, that children with SEND were not given the opportunities and time to practice such social interactions and connections that suited their communication needs, and their time socialising with peers was limited and restricted within their context, space and time. Children's individual needs (for example resource characteristics of the children with SEND who may need additional support to develop strong, reciprocal friendships) was

neglected at this point, and the context in which they transitioned was not adapted to support these interactions, in favour of catch-up curriculums and interventions (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2021; Ofsted, 2021). This finding challenges assumptions within the BST of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) that overlooks the emotional affect of children during a chronosystemic impact (Covid-19 pandemic), which contributed to shaping their development and experiences of starting school during a worldwide pandemic. Instead, it places emphasis on the structures, systems and adult-led processes that impact this development for children.

This finding is significant because the children's data around the importance of social relationships with their peers demonstrates Covid-19 disrupted children's early educational experiences and development of social connections with their peers in their transition to school. Children with SEND wanted to form social connections, yet faced challenges around establishing and securing them, which intensified their risk of peer exclusion and barriers to developing social connections and friendships for children with SEND. Due to the interruptions within school microsystems from wider Covid-19 policy and regulations on children's transitions to school, such as delayed and disjointed transition processes, staggered starts, bubbles, mask-wearing and social distancing measures, the foundations for developing and scaffolding the skills needed within social connection processes were destabilised or neglected in some cases.

Even though social connections were important to children with SEND, continuity in the development of relationships (proximal processes) with peers were significantly altered at this time within children's microsystems (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). For example, microsystems such as classrooms and playgrounds, where, within a usual transition to school, social development skills would take place and be supported by practitioners, through play opportunities, circle time, and shared routines such as snack time, assemblies, and a flexible play-based curriculums. These opportunities were restricted due to Covid-19 measures within multiple ecological layers that surrounded the children. For example, practices and policies within the chronosystem focussed on academic catch-up and recovery (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2021; Tracey et al., 2022), reducing contamination and the spread of

infection meant that social development for children with SEND in their transition to school was deprioritised by adults in their microsystems.

To summarise this point, it is clear from the children's findings around friendships and social connections that there were macro-systemic interruptions in the fundamental processes of children's social development in their transition to school. It also reinforces the role of social relationships, connections and belonging as vital in the transition to school for children with SEND, which should not be consequential to a child's sense of belonging in their school environment, but rather as a central feature within their microsystem and transition to school process. This reinforces Article 15 of the UNCRC (1989), which affirms the child's right to belong with friends and groups. Without ample time and consideration allocated within school spaces to allow for children with SEND to receive intentional adult support, scaffolding and facilitation, which focusses on social skills, friendships and fostering a sense of belonging, children with SEND could remain socially disconnected or detached from their peers. This disrupts the endeavours of an inclusive education for children with SEND, and raises implications and recommendations for research, policy and practice around the value of social developmental pedagogies for children with SEND within their transition to school.

#### *5.2.1.3 Agency and connection through play*

The children with SEND in this study drew on the significance of 'play' during their transition to school, which was evidenced by their commentary around different types of play that occurred in their microsystems during their transition to school. This included Lola's memories of imaginative role-play, for example playing with the dolls' house (page 165), Kobe's solitary and online play via online platforms (page 231), Chloe's physical play for example playing football outdoors using natural spaces (page 216), Amna's individual yet creative play through art and drawing and joint-play in the sandpit (page 187), and Basim's solitary play with the train set (page 256).

This finding indicates that the children with SEND included in this study evidently used various forms of play to establish small, yet no less insignificant connections, belonging, trust and adaptation with their microsystem environments. Through an ethnomethodological conversation analysis [EMCA] lens which focusses on

children's intricate and multimodal forms of communication through body posture, gesture, talk, gaze, pointing, orientations to, and the use of objects (Mondada, 2019), these examples of children's play would demonstrate their agency in socially constructing their own concept of play, categorised by the children themselves (Bateman, 2025).

The children's data shows examples of children with SEND developing and fostering proximal processes through using objects, symbols and peers within their classroom space (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Like the point made above in the theme around learning, children with SEND self and co-constructed proximal processes in their transition to school during Covid-19, developing their sense of belonging to their new environment through their play encounters either in isolation, or with and alongside their peers. Bateman (2025), when looking at the intricacies of children's play through an EMCA lens would suggest the children with SEND in this example are using play as a social networking tool, to develop connections with their peers. Through the same EMCA approach, both Bateman and Church (2017) and Karlsson and Nasi (2023) drew on children's agentic use of and orientation toward objects in their interaction within children's peer play, relationships, and development in their educational settings.

The findings here reveal children with SEND were actively constructing new, different, but equally cogent play opportunities in their transition to school, in a meaningful way to them, rather than being passive recipients of structured play by the adults around them.

This finding aligns but extends existing research around the importance of play within transition to school literature for children within an early year's environment (Einarsdottir, 2010; EYFS Curriculum, 2025; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2019; Pascal and Bertram, 2021; Vygotsky, 1978) and Article 31 'I have a right to rest, relax and play' of the UNCRC (2013). It has been agreed that play serves as more than just being done for pleasure. As discussed in the literature review in section 2.7.2.1, 'Play', it brings an abundance of skills and development for children, including engaging with the world around them; developing agency and social connections; providing a sense of comfort, belonging and security, as well as a tool used to regulate children's emotions. This was a similar finding by Bateman (2025) in

several studies from UK, Australia and New Zealand, where researchers' explored children's play through EMCA in different primary and preschool settings. Within this study, Bateman (2025) found that through using EMCA to explore and analyse the intricacies of children's play, it positions children as competent and capable, who productively employ play in the social construction of their own cultures.

The findings of my study also align with other existing research; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir (2019) suggest child-directed play opportunities allow children to feel secure in their new school environment, as well as having opportunities to learn and take risks in the outdoors, and Pascal and Bertram (2021), where children used play to make sense of Covid-19, through role-play and group games associated with death and mask-wearing. Lundqvist et al. (2019) suggests play is used by children with SEND to express their feelings through creative and playful activities in their school environment. Bateman and Church (2017) suggest children may deploy and use objects in their play to initiate interaction with other peers. This was supported by Theobald (2022), who claimed that children often use (imaginary) objects as 'tools' in their play, in relation to emerging and ongoing relationships with their peers (p. 374).

Yet, the findings from my study offer a new and original contribution as to how children with SEND used play as a tool or disposition for comfort, connection and making sense of their new school setting during Covid-19. Despite restrictive environments, children with SEND were still able to self-create relationships and proximal processes to objects, spaces and peers through their play opportunities (this was a similar finding around children's self-directed proximal processes in relation to learning, routine and structure, pages 267- 273) which signifies and further supports the claim of children with SEND playing an active role in shaping their own transitions to school. Additionally, it demonstrated the agency and freedom play gave them in being creative and agentic within their new classroom environment. This is important as it suggests that children with SEND use different play opportunities as a central component of their transition to school to establish and enact a wide range of dispositions (including trust, exploration, courage and curiosity (Claxton and Carr, 2004)), rather than a peripheral extra. In terms of pedagogical practice, this finding points to a need to reconsider the role of play in the transition process for children with SEND, as a relationally central tool, and

challenges current and dominant transition to school processes that often deprioritise play in favour of school readiness or recovery curriculums.

The adult perspective presents a further misalignment between the views of children with SEND in their transition to school. Interestingly, parents/ caregivers included in the study did not comment on their child's play, whilst the practitioners included in the study did reflect on the importance of play for children with SEND yet acknowledged that play opportunities were non-existent or very restricted within the context of the classroom and school environment. For example, some practitioners did provide online play opportunities through home-learning periods, for example Ella commented on Lola's play '*I can see that you really like your toy kitchen behind you...what if can you go make me something I would like*' (page 175), but most practitioners commented that play opportunities were missing, restricted or removed for children. For example, Amna's practitioner commented that children really struggled to play, which was surprising to her, and a lot of the intricate toys were removed from the environment. This finding suggests that the practitioners included in this study may have overlooked or misunderstood the types of play that children with SEND found engaging, supportive and developmentally significant in their transition to school during a worldwide pandemic and instead compared their experiences to the norms of play that would have been observed in pre-pandemic early years' transition to school experiences.

As highlighted above, some practitioners commented on pressures of the macrosystems, such as catch-up policies and curriculums that impacted the children's development within their microsystems. Here, the practitioner findings suggest there is a misconception of what 'play' is between the adults and children with SEND in this study. For example, even though Lola's practitioner highlights the importance of play to engage and develop relationships with Lola, it is clear to see that using online technology like Zoom changed or altered the typical nature of play (like playing alongside peers, sharing, interacting face-to-face, space-sharing, reciprocal and natural interaction), to what Lola actually enjoyed. Additionally, Amna's practitioner removed toys from the environment due to children's inability to play. This suggests that the practitioners were interpreting children's play through normative expectations and adult-centred view of the 'right way' to play. This offers a

deficit view of children's behaviours towards play, rather than it being a relational and social process that is often messy and unstructured. These examples indicate how normative expectations of play from adult viewpoints, alongside systemic pressures of Covid-19 constrained the opportunities for children with SEND to enact dispositions such as exploration, belonging and connection. This finding was particularly significant for children with SEND in their transition to school process, whose play does not often align with dominant pedagogical norms within school and classroom environments, and supports the suggestion above of reconsidering the role of play as a relationally central tool within transition to school for children with SEND.

From the parent/ caregiver perspective, their silence around their child's play could signal their own limited knowledge on the importance of play as a tool for children's learning and development in their transition to school. However, this indicates that parental/ caregiver support may be misaligned with their own children's priorities, which focussed on the emotional impact of Covid-19, and other macro-system pressures, such as their child's individual needs and development, which centred around support and being included within their school environment.

Drawing back to the point above made about a misconception between the adults understanding of play, and the children's ideas of play, it was obvious that the children included in this study wanted and/ or needed a more structured approach to their play at the time, (like their want for routine and structure in 'learning' theme). From the children's data, it was evident that children were content and aware they did play in their classroom during their transition to school, even if this consisted of playing with toys in trays, restricted spaces in their setting or playing on their own. For the children in this study, this type of play may have been essential at the time in providing more structure and routine to their environment, which was often unstable and uncertain. Practitioners' data suggests the opposite, and play opportunities were either non-existent or restricted. Here, this highlights the convergence of what constitutes as play for children and adults, as practitioners dismissed these examples as 'play'. This disjuncture between the adults and children's findings around the perceptions of play has been reinforced by Bateman (2025), who maintains that often adults have restricted and limited understandings regarding

children's perceptions of play as they explicitly orient to it, but suggests that through an EMCA approach, adults can gain an important insight into children's worlds.

It was evident from the practitioner findings however, that they mirrored evidence within Covid-19 policy and recovery plans (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2021; Ofsted 2021;), whereby play as a tool for development and social connection was deprioritised from wider 'catch-up curriculum policies', which filtered down into school environments and classrooms. Even though it was acknowledged by practitioners they observed the children's lack of skills usually developed through play, such as sharing, communication (what would be considered the outcomes of play), the societal focus and pressure by wider governmental sources to provide 'academic' catch-up, such as literacy and maths development, was deemed more important over play development for all children (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2021; Quenzer-Alfred et al., 2021). The focus and priorities of academic catch-up differed from what the children in this study deemed valuable at the time, such as opportunities to play, explore and develop friendships through their play opportunities.

From the children's perspective, play opportunities were created within the smallest of spaces and places in their transition to school, an example of self-directed proximal processes in action (see 4.2.2, 4.3.2, 4.4.2, 4.5.2 and 4.6.2 for children's reflections on play). Yet from a practitioner perspective, macro-system pressures such as catch-up curriculums and Covid-19 policy fragmented and disrupted the nature of play-based learning in an early years' environment for children in this study. This finding further challenges the thinking of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), which overemphasises the importance and influence of structural and systemic influences of development (like catch-up curriculums and policies), over the voice and agency of the children at the centre of their own development.

Additionally, there is also a lack of knowledge from practitioners about the benefits of play as a therapeutic tool to help children come to terms with traumatic experiences, like those of Covid-19.

Even though practitioners suggested children missed out on play opportunities which were fundamental to their development, children with SEND in the study suggested they did have memories of playing in many ways, whether this was highly structured by adults, solitary play, imaginative play or online digital play. This suggests the

diverse nuances of play and how they are perceived by children were overlooked by practitioners within their new school environment. The proximal processes within the child's environment were evidently still at play in intricate ways, that the children in this study found meaningful and supportive.

This finding reinforces the misalignment between adult centred views around the purpose and role that play had during their transition to school, and the views of children with SEND, and the role of play during Covid-19 as a therapeutic support for children.

This finding opens further questions around the misalignment of perspectives of adults and children with SEND, and whether their experiences and views are unseen or misunderstood within their school environment, transitions and wider inclusion policies. To reiterate Bateman (2025), who suggests that to gain this important insight into a child's world of play, how they explicitly orient to it and understand how children make sense of relationships through play, adults within their immediate environments should consider using conversation analysis as a tool to explore their multimodal and intricate forms of communication, that through usual practice within school settings, may be misinterpreted or lost.

The findings within this subtheme demonstrate the importance of play for all children, including how children with SEND use and create play is essential, not only as a developmental process and tool used to develop relationships and social connections, and a fundamental right for children (UNCRC, 1989), but also as a therapeutic tool during times of crises. Yet it was deprioritised in school settings for children with SEND during the Covid-19 pandemic for other outcome driven agendas. Given its importance in supporting children with SEND in their transition to school, as evidenced through my study findings, it is clear that child-led play should be considered as a central feature not only in post-crisis curriculums and practice within English schools and wider school policy, but also essential during crises, where practitioners make time and physical space with suitable resources to support children's play.

#### *5.2.1.4 Agentic Dispositions*

The findings offered through the children's perspective above related to positive dispositions on their transition to school, for example their enjoyment and desire for

learning, social connections and play, which reflect the work of Carr (1998a; 1998b; 1999c; 1999) and Claxton and Carr (2004). This confirms that children with SEND have their own characteristics and strengths that they can bring to an environment or context, which shapes and supports their engagement and learning.

Children demonstrated dispositional characteristics through their agentic practices, including those Carr (1999) define as perseverance, trust and courage, in constructing new routines, social connections and play opportunities during challenging landscapes.

For example, Lola used words such as *'I like to learn different things'* (page 163), *'I like to be with my friends'* (page 163), and feeling *'good'* and *'happy'* (page 167). Lola also drew on memories of being able to swim even with cerebral palsy (page 170), whilst Amna, who has a physical disability, suggested she enjoyed doing physical activities, including sports day (page 191). Chloe commented on her favourite lessons being *'everything'* (page 213) and drew on positive memories of items, objects and symbols within her old reception class, for example her old coat peg, water bottle, and the fruit (page 215). Kobe commented positively on school suggesting it was the *'good part'* (page 228), and the enjoyment he could remember about reception class (page 230). Basim used smiles and facial gestures to communicate his enjoyment of school, for example showing *'happy'* on his communication cards when playing with trains and repeating *'Basim, school'* (page 256). These positive dispositions were also reinforced by the children's parents/caregivers and practitioners (see pages 172, 177, 195, 221 and 237 for examples).

The resilience and optimism that children with SEND demonstrated in their transition to school within my study findings aligns with the work of Carr (Carr, 1998a; 1998b; 1998c; 1999; 2001), on the notion of dispositions of learning pedagogies within early years environments. Even in a disrupted landscape of Covid-19, children demonstrated that they could enact agency in shaping their practices and transitions to school through adaptive, continued and positive behaviours and outlooks. Claxton and Carr (2004) draw on children's dispositions in their learning, such as reciprocity, resilience and imagination. For example; reciprocity is related to social connections and children as social beings (as found in the children's discussions on social connections and friendships (page 273 - 279) and mirrors ecological proximal

processes (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006); imagination has been connected to children's play (as discussed on pages 281-287); and the disposition of resilience related to the affordances and constraints of children's experiences and environments, within a social context.

The children with SEND in this study demonstrated their dispositions such as resilience, perseverance, courage, trust and adaptability in their transition to school through actively constructing routines, negotiation of friendships and play opportunities within transition during Covid-19. Rather than their agency being viewed through the narrow lens of their individual traits (as described by Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), they are actively making-meaning and demonstrating relational and situational behaviours of being agentic in their new classroom and school environment.

The dispositions that Carr (1999) and Claxton and Carr (2004) highlight were all evidently apparent during the transition to school for the children with SEND during a worldwide pandemic.

The findings around children's positive dispositions around their transition to school suggest that through their resilience, perseverance and courage, they were able to adapt to their new environment and use these to develop proximal processes in their environment (as evidenced above with their connection to peers, symbols and objects within their environment). These findings are imperative for supporting the transition to school process for children with SEND as they offer a different, UK perspective on dispositions for children with SEND entering the English school system, whereby children with SEND utilised these strengths during their transition to school to make sense of the social world in which they were entering (Carr, 1999). This views transition to school through a strengths-based view for children with SEND, rather than focussing on deficit assumptions and readiness norms within English school settings.

The parents/ caregivers and practitioner views support the children's perspectives on their dispositions and children's needs. For example, Lola's mum noted her determination in wanting to walk without using her sticks, saying '*she will just come out, like, out of nowhere and say I am going to walk one day, darling*' (page 173). Amna's mum also commented on Amna's strength and resilience, noting that due to

the unpredictable nature of Amna's medical needs, she had developed competencies such as coping and being open to changes in her environments, which supported her in her transition to school '*she's very resilient anyway ...I think the medical side of things actually helped, because of the unpredictable nature of her condition meant that she was more open to change.*' (page 195). This was also similar for Basim, Chloe and Kobe, who all are autistic, where they demonstrated their resilience to cope with frequent change in their environment, even though they found it difficult with fluctuating rules and routines and leaving their parent/ caregiver. For example, Chloe's mum commented '*we never thought we'd get there but she loves it, absolutely loves it.*' (page 221), and Kobe's dad said '*he would have had to have coped with things that he probably wouldn't have normally been able to cope with, so I suppose it would teach him a bit more resilience and a bit more being able to deal with things that he would never be able to normally*' (page 237). Furthermore, Basim's mum commented that '*he loves going to school, but he would cry because he want to come back home*' (page 258).

The resilience and adaptability of the children to new Covid-19 conditions was a similar finding in the study of Pascal and Bertram (2021), where they suggested that the children's transition had been well managed by the practitioners, through positive and trusting relationships. However, in my study, the practitioners noted their surprise at how well the children with SEND used their own dispositions to adapt to their new environment in such difficult circumstances of changing routines and restrictions. Here, the children displayed their courage and strength to adapt to difficult situations, presenting an openness to cope with change, a trust in their environment, and a real demonstration of their own dispositions in their transition to school. This places the child as the active agent in their transition to school and not fully directed by practitioners around them.

As evidenced above, the children in this study were able to navigate new and changing rules and routines in their transition to school, that had been disturbed by wider policies and macrosystem influences (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Children were still able to form and develop friendships with their peers, despite having to adhere to strict Covid-19 guidelines such as social distancing and learning via online platforms. The children's resilience that they demonstrated in response to

their health issues and worries around Covid-19 now crosses over into their transition to school, an example of 'dispositional breadth' that Carr (1998a) considered in children's learning dispositions. This finding also demonstrates that from the children's perspective, they coped well in their transition to school in the absence of in-person priming events, such as school visits, moving up days and settling in sessions. These findings contrast with other studies in the field of transitions for children with SEND, for example, Corsaro and Molinari (2008) who suggest that priming events often influence children's experiences and expectations of their transition to school. These findings suggest that usual transition to school processes and priming events may be more beneficial to parents/ caregivers and practitioners than the children themselves, as they are more systemic and structural in nature, whereas the children's findings in this study suggest they prefer more relational practices.

It is evident that the children's findings around their positive dispositions, notably their resilience to the challenges and demands of the landscape at the time supported their transition to school during Covid-19. This demonstrates that children were using their own person (force) characteristics (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) within the context of their new school environment to support them in adapting and developing proximal processes. It further affirms the position of children with SEND as active agents in their transition to school during Covid-19, as well as confirming children's diverse ways of being and managing with difficult and challenging situations. Not only does it demonstrate the strengths and abilities of children with SEND, for example the way they found new ways to learn and structure their routines, but they also demonstrated examples of resilience through making choices within their microsystems, expressing their preferences through play, friendships and lessons they enjoyed, and developing their own coping strategies.

Additionally, the support the children received from both parents/ caregivers and practitioners to recognise and have belief in their abilities was a positive move forward within inclusive pedagogy, recognising the child's abilities, strengths and providing them with a safe microsystem and strong mesosystem to use their force characteristics and dispositions for learning in a positive way. This reveals that children with SEND were not merely recipients of support, but also effective in

shaping their experiences of their transition to school during a worldwide pandemic. This reinforces that children with SEND may need to receive support yet also have the ability to shape their own experiences in their transition to school. This finding consequently offers an opposing viewpoint of recent post-pandemic policy and discourse (Ofsted, 2021; Tracey et al., 2022), which suggest that children with SEND were disproportionately affected by the pandemic, needed to focus on catch-up curriculums, and using language to describe children as ‘vulnerable’, portraying children with SEND as helpless at this time, relying solely on adult intervention and support (DfE, 2022b; Yoshikawa et al., 2020).

### **5.3.1 Beyond the tip of the Iceberg: The hidden emotions of transition in a pandemic**

Although it is important to acknowledge the strengths and autonomy of children with SEND in their transition to school during Covid-19, it is also important to acknowledge the vulnerability and challenges they faced starting school at this time. Gaining insight and understanding around the emotional impact of Covid-19 on children with SEND in their transition to school will allow for further relational care, support and awareness of individual needs of children with SEND in times of crises.

#### *5.3.1.1 Expressing uncertainty and vulnerability*

A prominent finding from the children’s experiences around transition to school during Covid-19 was the emotional impact and fear of the Covid-19 pandemic, which related to their own worries and concerns regarding their medical needs and attachment difficulties such as leaving their parent/ caregiver. Within the children’s findings, there was a mixture of emotional affects of their transition to school during a worldwide pandemic, simultaneously demonstrating their dispositional strength and significant resilience with their vulnerabilities. For example, Lola relayed her fears of becoming ill, the bodily aches and pains she encountered ‘*Covid was horrible...that’s when the flu started...the flu was horrible because I actually had it...And it’s horrible when your back is aching*’ (page 169), yet was determined to attend school even when she was unwell; Amna recognised her fears of injections and hospital visits during this time, and associated Covid-19 with her own health challenges ‘*Covid is like when you first like started illness...there were so many injections I started crying from them...I hate blood tests...I still cry from them*’ (page 190), yet was still determined to see people, make friends and win at sports day. Chloe drew on fears

of leaving her mum and acknowledged a difficult transition into school '*Well I was a bit upset cos, well, my, cos I didn't want to leave my mum*' (page 216) yet persisted through difficulty and now loves school. Kobe had vivid memories of blood, and talked about death and Covid-19 '*it's when you die, you like have, like skeletal fingers...what the heck, that's creepy*' (page 231), and his dad recognised how difficult Kobe found the rules and regulations of distancing, yet was able to manage these with resilience. Finally, Basim, who initially found school challenging and now communicates his happiness and friendships developed within his school environment.

Here, the children's findings offer a deep insight into their vulnerabilities and fears that Covid-19 brought to their microsystem environments and indicate the children with SEND used their strengths and dispositions within their transition to school context, but they were also aware of uncertainty and risks in their environment. This further highlights children with SEND as agentic and able to make meaning of their lived experiences, rather than being naïve of their circumstances or unaware of the context of their environment.

The emotional impact on the transition to school for children has been well-documented within current literature, yet this finding extends current literature beyond the usual emotional challenges of transition to school for children with SEND. For example, Dockett and Perry (2007) found that children were concerned about what might happen at school and what their new teacher would be like, whilst Bowlby's (1973) early work focussed on the separation of children and their key caregivers. The findings here also differ from any other literature in the field of transitions for children with SEND during Covid-19: Wythe (2022) reported emotional challenges of children with SEND in their transition into Year One, which focussed on their inability to explore new situations and unable to follow new rules.

Practitioners from the Bakopoulou (2022) study expressed a sense of relief about the fact that children's emotional wellbeing did not seem affected or as affected as they feared it might have done following a national lockdown. Quenzer-Alfred et al. (2021) highlighted children's concerns and anxieties around starting school for children in Germany, but the full impact of Covid-19 was down-played by nursery staff and parents around them. This meant the children lacked any concrete expectations

about their transition to school and were unaware of the extent of the pandemic around them.

However, this is a significant finding within the children's data of my study, as it suggests that there was an emotional impact for children with SEND, and without asking them, such nuances around their thoughts and feelings would not be known. The children's emotional responses and worries were exacerbated in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic; concrete, immediate and personal experiences were reflected upon, related to fear of being ill, death, medical interventions and a fear of leaving their safe person at an unpredictable time. Yet, the children with SEND included in this study had emotional awareness and dispositions of resilience, courage and trust at the time they started school, demonstrating both their agency in knowing what matters were worrying them, but also their vulnerability to making sense of these difficult and challenging feelings within their transition to school.

As highlighted above, the children's vulnerabilities during a traumatic time throughout their transition to school during Covid-19, as well as their agentic abilities are recognised. It was evident that the children with SEND in this study reached towards relational, proximal processes with peers, objects and spaces in their environment (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) during traumatic times. This could demonstrate examples of how children with SEND coped with the trauma of Covid-19 and made do with their transition to school, through placing an importance on reaching towards support within their relational and ecological contexts, as well as using their own strengths and prior experiences.

A useful theoretical lens to demonstrate and understand their resilience alongside their vulnerabilities prior to and within their transition to school experiences would be using Carr's (1999) learning dispositional framework, including the notion of dispositional breadth. This is where dispositions from one context, such as persisting with difficulty, taking an interest, being involved, communicating with others and taking responsibility, travel with a child into a new context and are applied to new environments and challenges.

For the children with SEND in my study, through both the simultaneous nature of their vulnerabilities brought about by Covid-19 and their resilience and agentic abilities, developed through their prior experiences and challenges of difficulty, they

all demonstrated examples of dispositional breadth in action in their transition to school. For example, Lola's resilience and determination to go to school and make friends was developed from years of navigating the physical challenges with her body; Amna's determination and resilience to want to succeed at sports day and make friends at school was developed from the courage she has developed when facing injections and hospital interventions; Chloe persisting with her fears of leaving her mum and now thriving in her school environment; Kobe using his resilience and determination of coping with changes of rules and regulations, even though these were disruptive for him; and Basim persisting with school, eventually making friends, playing with trains and feeling happy. These dispositions such as persisting with difficulty, taking an interest and communicating with others, were the existing strengths of the children that had been developed in other contexts and used within the challenging context of transition to school during a worldwide pandemic (Carr, 1999). The children's dispositions and dispositional breadth therefore, supported them in their preparation for starting school, and making the transition into their new school setting.

This finding suggests that adults within children's microsystems should acknowledge and recognise learning dispositions and dispositional breadth that children with SEND have before they start school and bring with them in their transition to school, especially in times of crisis. Adults placed within the children's microsystems in their transition to school should be aware of prior experiences of children with SEND that they bring with them into their new school environment, such as physical challenges, medical experiences and navigating communicative differences. If adults within children's microsystems at school are unaware of these, they may be missed, or unable to recognise or develop these dispositions in school environments. There is also a concern that without recognising the dispositions of children with SEND at this time, they will be viewed as passive and seen through a deficit lens, defined by what they cannot do or struggle with, rather than what they bring or reach towards in preparation for and during their transition to school.

Therefore, sharing of information like this within children's transition to school is essential between children themselves, families and school settings. This was missing for children and families within my study, and opportunities to share

children's prior experiences was limited due to a challenging context (as discussed in 5.2.2.1 Home-school entanglements, page 307).

Like the findings and discussion above on children's social connections (page 273), the emphasis that children with SEND placed on the emotional impact of starting school during Covid-19 challenges the theory of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006). It is evident that the BST model underplays the importance of children's affective experiences that shaped their development during Covid-19, focussing predominantly on the systems, contexts and adults that impact or inhibit development.

The parents/ caregivers and practitioners reported limited external support, restrictive rules and regulations around distancing, the inability to become familiar with the school environment, medical concerns and worries around leaving key caregiver (see parents/ caregiver and practitioner findings around emotional impact), which may have contributed to the children's anxieties as described above. The focus on their emotional concerns differed to the children's concerns. For example, Lola's mum noted the lack of outside agency support which was detrimental to Lola's physical needs (page 173). Amna's mum recalled memories of the emotional impact on keeping Amna safe due to her medical conditions (page 197) and reassurance from the adults around her in supporting her feeling of safety in starting school at this time. Chloe's mum reiterated Chloe's concerns about leaving her, and the emotional impact of being carried away by school staff in a state of distress around leaving her mum (page 219). Kobe's dad commented on the difficulties of boundaries for Kobe whilst making connections with others in his environment, due to needing the emotional and social connection with peers and adults (page 234). The Covid-19 social distancing restrictions meant these connections were stilted. Basim's mum commented on the challenges of his transition to school due to a change of environment from being at home, with the school offering adjustments to support Basim, such as picking him up early until he settled down (page 257).

Additionally, the practitioners all reflected on the emotional impact of starting school during Covid-19 for their children with SEND. Practitioners acknowledged the shock and mental health challenges for children starting school at this time (pages 205, 243 and 244). Another practitioner commented on the difficulty in building connections

with children due to wearing masks (page 204) which covered facial features and made communication like talking, smiling and other gestures difficult to notice. Jo reiterated points made by the practitioners, reflecting on the impact of Covid-19 had on the group of children with SEND starting school due to the inability to access play, nursery, interaction and communication with peers and new adults in their environment (page 200).

It is evident to see that the challenges children discussed around their emotional difficulties had a different focus to the parents/ caregivers and practitioners. The children focussed their thoughts and feelings around concrete, personal experiences and issues that directly impacted and affected them in their immediate environment. For example, coping with their own medical and health needs, concerns about death and fear of illness, and fears of leaving their key caregiver. These examples demonstrate their own resilience, emotional intelligence and awareness during their transition to school, yet also their vulnerability to the challenges and fears of Covid-19.

From the parent/ caregiver and practitioner perspective, emotional impact related to contextual and relational factors, such as systemic or structural influences, that children may not discuss or be aware of. For example, they noted the trauma of restrictive school and home environments, limited outside agency support, Covid-19 policies and children's medical vulnerabilities. These mesosystems and exosystem influences, derived from chronosystem changes (Covid-19) impacted children's emotional stability within their microsystems, which also shaped the children's transition to school experience at the time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

Both the children and adults' findings are like the findings of a study by Bateman and Danby (2013), who found that 'traumatic events can cause post-traumatic stress disorder due to the severity of the often-unexpected events' (p.467). As Bateman and Danby (2013) suggest, by encouraging young children to recall and tell their stories and lived experiences with early childhood practitioners, it can work as a strategy for people to come to terms with their experiences collaboratively. Brown (2012) refers to this as '*Respond, Renew and Recover*' (p.467), which helps to prevent or minimise more stress being developed in the future'. This relates to Article 39 of the UNCRC (1989) which is the child's right to recover from trauma. This is

particularly salient for children with SEND, who may need extended time within their educational setting to respond and recover from the traumatic events of Covid-19, and any other future transitions or life experiences they may face, particularly in relation to their own health needs. Bietti and Castello (2013) highlight this importance of engaging in post-trauma conversations with knowledgeable others, whilst Cordón et al. (2004) similarly recognise narrative and storytelling as fundamental tools for children when processing trauma. More recently, Pascal and Bertram (2021) recognise the significance of play opportunities and Froebelian storytelling as a therapeutic tool for children to make sense of the trauma of Covid-19 within early years settings. These approaches of supporting children through traumatic times demonstrate the importance of relational and child-led opportunities such as play, storytelling and talking with peers and practitioners, which is similar to what the children with SEND in my study were reaching towards in their transition to school. This demonstrates that through children's agency, dispositions, and opportunities to tell stories, communicate and play with others in their immediate microsystems, rather than therapeutic interventions, they have the space and freedom to make sense of such a traumatic time.

These opportunities should have been protected through the 'Personal, Social, Emotional Development' [PSED] prime area of learning within the EYFS curriculum (DfE, 2025). Yet, it is clear throughout the post-pandemic curriculum that social and emotional needs of children were acknowledged, yet still fragile, and supported through additional interventions (Ofsted Report, 2021). This suggests children's relational, social and emotional needs were still not at the core of the recovery and catch-up curriculum. This coincides with the misalignment of children and adult findings around play (section 5.2.1.3), as well as the PSED prime area of the EYFS curriculum. This has been discussed further in section 6.3 'Social and Emotional Priorities' (page 329).

The children's findings around the emotional impact of Covid-19 on their transition to school signifies that children with SEND can be both active agents in their own experiences of transition to school, have positive dispositions and characteristics and display examples of resilience, yet still face significantly challenging experiences and hidden worries, with a reliance on adult support and facilitation to make meaning

from traumatic events. This was especially revealing in their responses to the emotional fears and challenges brought about by Covid-19, which needed careful and considered approaches of support to have time to process the enormity of the situation they had faced.

Crucially, the concerns raised by children with SEND in response to the Covid-19 pandemic further supports the need to include children's voices in their transition to school planning, (due to the misalignment in children's and parent/ caregiver and practitioner viewpoints), ensuring they are given opportunities to express their concerns and fears, and adults put the necessary support in for the child and their family. This approach to supporting the transition to school during the Covid-19 pandemic would have been useful for the children included in this study, but also important to consider when supporting children with SEND through any future worldwide pandemics or crises.

#### **5.4.1 Research Question 1: Conclusion**

Within the children's themes, it is evident there is an interplay between children as both active agents in shaping their own transition to school, and their susceptibility to exclusion and adversities in their transition to school, without enabling relational care and support that focusses on social and emotional development. For example, children with SEND actively shaped and created their own routine, structure and play opportunities, and recognised their own strengths and abilities, yet they also faced challenges including social connections and friendships, emotional impact of a worldwide pandemic, and the risk of being misunderstood by the adults in supporting their transition to school. This demonstrates that for children with SEND in their transition to school during Covid-19, they made sense of starting school within the relational systems available to them at the time. For example, their experiences related to learning, routines, friendships and emotional challenges were shaped by interactions and structures available in their school setting. Their accounts demonstrate how their rights to enjoy school, opportunities to play and participate in school life were enacted or constrained through these proximal processes.

Furthermore, to conclude, the children's findings demonstrate that their agency and susceptibility can co-exist; they should not be viewed as incapable and only passive recipients of adult-directed policies and transition programmes but recognised as

active agents that can shape their own experiences, but also may need adult support, facilitation and scaffolding in their transition to school, in matters that are important and recognised by the children themselves. This recognises a desire for relational co-construction of the transition to school for children with SEND.

To conclude, the following points summarise the findings in relation to RQ1:

- Children with SEND were evidently active agents in shaping their transition to school in disrupted environments, in small and intricate ways. For example, through their learning, structure and routine, their desire for friendships and social connections, their ability to create different types of play, and their displays of dispositional qualities during this time. These findings demonstrate that children with SEND demonstrated their ability to develop proximal processes within their microsystems in their transition to school, and the systems in which they functioned and developed supported or restricted this experience. Even though evidence shows the proximal processes were fragmented and disturbed by the exo- and chrono- system, they were evident in their transition to school.
- The findings demonstrate that children with SEND have dispositional qualities, strengths and resilience to transition to school during a worldwide pandemic; they should not be underestimated in their ability to articulate their lived experiences and preferences for what supports them during challenging times, as well as their ability to form their own understandings of matters that are important to them in their transition to school
- Children did experience challenges during their transition to school, such as developing relationships, for example, support to find out their friends' names, and challenges in making social connections. It was also evident that Covid-19 impacted children's emotional stability when starting school, due to the fear that the Covid-19 pandemic brought with it. This finding suggests that even though most children with SEND were capable and competent in forming their own understandings of illness and danger of a worldwide pandemic, they faced challenges around the emotional impact of starting school during Covid-19, and the usual worries and concerns that children with SEND may have when starting school were amplified due to their own

individual needs and the challenges that Covid-19 brought with it. These findings demonstrate firstly that children with SEND were able to form their own understandings and emotional concerns, and the relational role of adults in supporting, facilitating and scaffolding aspects of transition that are important to children with SEND.

## **5.5 Research Question 2**

### **How did the parents/ caregivers and practitioners interpret the transition to primary school experiences for their child with SEND during the Covid-19 pandemic?**

Within RQ1, parent/ caregiver and practitioner perspectives related to children's views have been reported to provide contextual explanations and used to add appropriate depth and analysis to the children's findings as a primary concern of this thesis.

RQ2 is complimentary to RQ1, as it focusses on adult-centred contextual and systemic perceptions of transitions to school for children with SEND during Covid-19. These insights often diverge from children's voices and experiences, as already evidenced above, and so therefore, the children's data has also been weaved into the adults' perspective where suitable, offering complimentary or disparate viewpoints. The main themes that were established from the parent/ caregivers and practitioners' data centred around: 'Relational anchors in unsettling circumstances' (section 5.5.1, page 301), relating to the quality of relationships between the child-practitioner; and 'Covid pressures: Navigating systemic and structural instability' (section 5.5.2, page 307), unfolding wider contextual, systemic and structural barriers of Covid-19 that directly and indirectly impacted the children's experiences in their transition to school.

#### **5.5.1 Relational anchors in unsettling circumstances**

The most evident finding to emerge from both the parent/ caregiver and practitioner data was a focus on the importance of relationships when discussing the experiences of their children's transition to school during Covid-19. Both parents/ caregivers and practitioners situated the child-practitioner relationship as a central

feature of the child's transition to school yet also recognised the fragility of this relationship due to restrictions of Covid-19. Even though both parents/ caregivers and practitioners highlighted challenges in communication and inability to develop relationships with each other (as discussed later in this chapter, section 5.5.2.1, page 307), they both stated how supportive they each were for the child's transition to school. This acknowledges the importance and role of support from a trusted adult in their child's transition to school.

#### *5.5.1.1 Positives for Parents/ Caregivers and Practitioners*

The parent/ caregivers' findings suggest that relationships between practitioners and their children with SEND were key to their transition at the time of Covid-19. From the parent/ caregivers findings, it was evident that even under systemic and structural constraints within wider systems around the child (as evidenced in 5.5.2 'Covid pressures: Navigating systemic and structural instability', page 306), that deprioritised social and emotional priorities for children, positive microsystem-level relationships with practitioners enabled children with SEND to navigate their transition to school in a positive way. From a parent/ caregiver perspective, the warmth, relational care and proximal processes (the reciprocal and complex interactions between children and other people, objects, and symbols in their immediate external environment, as well as the contextual and individual bioecological characteristics) (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) between their children and their practitioners played a central role in supporting their child's transition to school. For example, parents/ caregivers commented on the competence, caring nature and characteristics of the practitioners (pages 171, 196, 220 and 234), the benefits of smaller group/ 'bubble' interaction (page 196), their child's love and enjoyment of school (pages 171, 193 and 221), highlighting the supportive nature of the school environment and practitioners at the time.

These positive viewpoints from parents/ caregivers suggest that children with SEND felt comfortable and happy with the practitioners in their transition to school, and the parents/ caregivers appreciated the supportive relationships that the practitioners demonstrated at the time in their child's transition. Parents/ caregivers suggested this made it much easier for their children to start school due to positive attributes and support, given the challenging restrictions at the time. The parent/ caregivers'

comments on how their child felt towards school as more than a place for learning, but as a place of security and safety, reflects the relationships between children and practitioners, and supported the trust that parents/ caregivers had for the practitioners in their child's transition to school. The parent/ caregiver accounts align with some of the children's own accounts in RQ1, where several children described enjoying school, their feelings of school as a safe place and interactions and relationships with their practitioners.

The parent/ caregiver findings here offer similar insight to the study by Schürer et al. (2025), who found that reciprocal and sustained interactions with and between adults and peers (proximal processes as suggested by Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), was central to shaping the child's transition outcomes and experiences in their transition to school. Furthermore, the findings extend existing research of Visković and Višnjić-Jevtić (2020), who found that when children start school, families are primarily concerned with emotional relationships between key people, but schools were more focussed on educational outcomes and the social development of children transitioning into their setting.

The findings from my study offer unique insight by demonstrating the importance of these proximal processes within the fragile context of a pandemic for both parents/ caregivers and practitioners; from the parent/ caregiver perspective, relationships between their child and practitioners were key in supporting their children's transition to school at the time. Similarly, the practitioner findings also suggested that the relationships between practitioners themselves and children were central to their support in the transition to school process, even though they were often restricted within recovery priorities of wider school systems and policies. In the data, practitioners noted how they implemented creative, context-specific practices to support children with SEND and develop relationships early within the transition process. For example, some practitioners used online tools to familiarise themselves with the children (pages 179, 207 and 246), offering opportunities to build relationships through play (page 179). This finding is significant because it suggests that even within pandemic and recovery conditions, developing and adapting relationships with children themselves were central to adults' concerns, and this was a view that was also shared and important to the children. In this instance, the

relationships between children with SEND and their practitioners became protective structures and responses, to reassure children and provide a sense of safety and continuity in their fragmented transition to school experiences. This is particularly important to bring to light for children with SEND, where this relational care and support provided by practitioners is invisible in transition to school policies, often prioritising other outcome or readiness agendas. This creates a tension between practitioners' relational values and structurally restricted transition to school processes. These challenges are discussed next.

#### *5.5.1.2 Challenges for Parents/ Caregivers and Practitioners*

Even though positive relational support was reflected on above, there were some challenges faced for parents/ caregiver and practitioners. Most practitioners expressed feelings of limited confidence and vulnerability at this time, and an absence of preparedness to meet the needs of the children with SEND, for example several practitioners described the time as 'being on the back foot' (pages 239 and 259). Here, this finding suggests that practitioner self-efficacy in supporting the transition for children with SEND at the time was shaped by macrosystem pressures, policy and regulations of Covid-19. From the practitioner perspective, it could be maintained that wider Covid-19 pressures, such as the priority to focus on academic recovery, alongside inconsistent governmental support and advice, as highlighted within the literature (section 2.4.5) impacted the inclusivity of relational processes for children with SEND. This was a similar finding in a study by Starr et al. (2016), who found that practitioners were lacking knowledge and skills to support autistic children in their transition to school, which impacted the transition to school experience from the outset for children and families. Similarly, findings of the Yildirim-Hacıbrahimoğlu and Kargın (2017) study highlighted teachers' limited knowledge about individual educational needs of children before and during their transition to school, due to limited time, lack of knowledge about the child and their needs, insufficient training in SEND and inadequate support. Even though the findings from my study are like the findings of Starr et al. (2016) and Yildirim-Hacıbrahimoğlu and Kargın (2017) around lack of knowledge about the child's specific needs, limited time and inadequate support, the context for my findings differ. It is evident that practitioners did support children with SEND through developing relationships, warmth and caring dispositions

they offered, but wider systemic influences of Covid-19 impacted the confidence of practitioner's ability to provide the individualised support for children with SEND, rather than their own lack of skills.

The findings above regarding the relationships between practitioners and children with SEND were different to that of other studies carried out during Covid-19. Both Bakopoulou (2022) and Wythe (2022) explored the impact of Covid-19 on transition experiences of children with SEND, through professional and parental viewpoints. Both studies suggested that relationship-building between children with SEND, families and practitioners was significantly impacted by Covid-19, due to a lack of familiarity with practitioners and peers. Parent/ caregiver and practitioner findings in my study highlight challenges around mesosystemic relationships, like Wythe (2022) and Bakopoulou (2022), yet also suggest that child-practitioner relationships were a supportive factor in the transition to school at this time.

The findings of the role of relationships also challenges the views within the findings of Visković and Višnjic-Jevtić (2020) study, who found that practitioners and educational communities are usually focussed more on educational development and outcomes for children, rather than on emotional relationships, like families. The practitioners in my study demonstrated opportunities for emotional and relational support for children with SEND during their transition to school. Nevertheless, these acts of relational care from practitioners were often delivered within broader contexts, which at the time was dominated by wider policy directives for recovery and 'catch-up' curriculums. These findings of relational care and support between practitioners and the children reinforce the collaboration, mutual understandings and intersubjectivity that Rogoff (2003) highlights, around the importance of shared meanings and understanding between the child and the practitioner. Additionally, this finding supports the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), who reiterate that the effect of proximal processes is more influential than the context in which the processes occur. This claim suggests that positive, nurturing and encouraging relationships could overcome the impact of the most problematic and detrimental environments, such as the disrupted landscape of Covid-19. Without genuine, considerate, and compassionate relationships being established between

the child and others, even the most positive of environments may not support the development of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Furthermore, this finding reinforces the ongoing debate throughout the discussion regarding systemic priorities at the time, such as 'catch-up' and 'recovery' curriculums, and the social and emotional support offered to children with SEND in their transition to school. Even though it is evident the relational care shown by practitioners to the children with SEND at the time offered pockets of opportunities for stabilising proximal processes between children and practitioners, it also illustrates how macrosystem pressures for 'recovery' and 'catch-up' shaped these microsystem interactions between the children with SEND and their practitioners. Macrosystem pressures increased confusion for practitioners around rules and regulations and exposed them to a vulnerability and feelings of being ill-prepared, contributing to low practitioner confidence in meeting the needs of children with SEND. This is an important finding, as whilst the relational support evidenced above between the practitioners and children with SEND eased some of the effects of transitioning to school in a worldwide pandemic, it was evident from the data that practitioners within this study had little capacity to promote or uphold the rights of children with SEND, such as equitable support, planning and participation in their transition to school, as highlighted in Article 12 and 23 of the UNCRC (1989). As already evidenced within the children's findings, the children demonstrated feelings of agency, security and belonging to their school environment through proximal processes such as their relationships, routines, structure and play. Here, it could be suggested that even if practitioners have low self-efficacy in supporting children with SEND in their transition to school, being aware and responsive to children's emotions can be a supportive and protective factor for them when they start school.

Within future transition processes to school for children with SEND, practitioners should prioritise developing social and emotional relationships with children with SEND, giving them an innate sense of agency and sense of belonging in their new environment. Wider systemic support through policies, training and resources would benefit practitioners in developing their self-efficacy and belief in supporting and

building relationships with children with SEND in any future crises. These have been discussed further in 'Chapter 6: Recommendations and Conclusion' (page 319).

### **5.5.2 Covid pressures: Navigating systemic and structural instability**

As already highlighted above, parents/ caregiver and practitioner findings evidence several broader systemic and structural challenges in relation to their child's transition to school, due to the impact of Covid-19. This includes challenges in developing relationships with one another (parent/ caregiver and practitioner). For example, findings demonstrate challenges around face-to-face communication; an absence of outside agency support; delayed or absent diagnosis for their child; and challenges of accessing and supporting online learning (see parent/ caregiver perspectives within Chapter 4, page 159). These wide-ranging and fundamental support systems within the transition to school for children with SEND in this study were either non-existent or fragile, highlighting the influences of challenges within the context of the child's transition, including the exosystem and macrosystem, caused by shifts in the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

#### *5.5.2.1 Home-school entanglements*

A key finding within the parents/ caregivers and practitioners' data was the difficulties and challenges of forming and establishing trusting and reciprocal relationships between one another. Even though some parents/ caregivers noted positive examples of communicating with practitioners at the time (page 171 and 257), other parents/ caregivers reflected on their limited and challenging relationships with practitioners, due to a lack of face-to-face communication (pages 196, 219 and 236). Due to Covid-19 restrictions, communication between parents/ caregivers and practitioners was often through formal email channels, and it was found that this method of communication was often ineffective for relational and nuanced forms of communication and interaction. This in turn led to reduced trust from parents/ caregivers in school settings for their children with health concerns, as well as a reduction in sharing important information regarding their child's specific needs (pages 197, 219 and 235).

Similarly, practitioners shared concerns around a disconnection between themselves and the parents/ caregivers, and reflected on similar challenges, including receiving

a lack of information of the child's specific needs, a lack of trust from parents/ caregivers in sharing their child's specific needs (pages 202 and 239) parent/ caregivers lack of trust in practitioners meeting their child's needs (page 202), and difficulty in conveying messages via online and email platforms (pages 239 and 259). For example, one practitioner commented how she didn't know the specific needs of the child entering her class and the reasonable adjustments that would need to be made (page 239). Furthermore, practitioners noted that some relationships were difficult to establish using online or alternative forms of communication, which was especially challenging for families who had English as an additional language (page 258). The challenges of online communication were reiterated by another practitioner, who suggested it was difficult to develop mesosystemic support for children via online systems, due to missing intricate nuances in communication (page 240). This was also highlighted by the parents/ caregivers (pages 196, 220).

These findings suggest the mesosystemic disconnections between parents/ caregivers and practitioners indirectly shaped the children's transition experiences to school, as a destabilised mesosystem reduces the consistency of proximal processes around the child (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) early work claims the relationships between home and school, described as a mesosystem, is of paramount importance to a child's development in their transition to school. Here, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) suggested that 'developmental potential of a setting is increased as a function of the number of supportive links existing between the setting and other settings (such as family and home)' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 215). Moreover, the mesosystem should be built on 'reciprocal and trusty relationships between parents and teachers is considered to be crucial for the positive outcome of children's settling in into the new environment' (Balduzzi et al., 2019: 14). Here, the disconnection between the mesosystems indicate that this may have had an impact on the children's experiences and development in their transition to school, exacerbated by Covid-19 restrictions.

The findings here both correlate and contrast with existing studies in the field of transitions to school for children with SEND. Connelly and Gersch (2016) found that relationships between parents and professionals were impacted in the transition to school for autistic children, due to a lack of trust between both parties. This was a

similar finding within the practitioners' data of my study. However, in my study findings, parents/ caregivers demonstrated their trust for practitioners in building relationships with their children (as discussed in theme 'relational anchors in unsettling circumstances' above) but reported a lack of trust around the modes of communication with practitioners, and sharing information related to their children's particular needs. This demonstrates that there were small pockets of trust at play within children's microsystems, that co-existed with challenges within the child's mesosystems, specifically between parents/ caregivers and practitioners.

Similarly, Balduzzi et al. (2019) highlighted how challenges around establishing trusting and reciprocal relationships seemed particularly significant and noticeable when children and families from vulnerable groups were involved. Like my study findings, Balduzzi et al. (2019) suggests communication is often formal, unidirectional and often transactional in nature when children from vulnerable groups start school, which limits parents' opportunities to exchange information, views or seek advice from practitioners. This finding aligns with the work of Chen et al. (2020) and Yu and Chen (2024), who explored communication beyond language, usually observed in autistic children. Their findings suggest that communication is not limited to spoken verbal language, but includes embodied, relational and affective modes of communication, such as facial expressions, body language, intonation, touch, distance, timing, silences, formalities, extending beyond literal meanings of language, such as small talk and implied meanings, which are a vital part of communication. For parents/ caregivers of children with SEND, these forms of communication in my study were missing.

Furthermore, the findings of my study extend those of studies that have recently been carried out on the impact of Covid-19. Bakopoulou (2022) found that relationship-building between parents and practitioners was significantly impacted during Covid-19, due to a reduction and disappearance of face-to-face communication. Wythe (2022) found challenges and nuances of online platforms instead of in-person interactions needed for relationship-building and communicating with children and families. Within my study findings, the move to predominantly digital forms of communication between practitioners and parents/ caregivers, as well as mask-wearing, bubbles and restricted access for children and parents/

caregivers exacerbated challenges of using nuanced, embodied, relational and affective modes of communication (see pages 196 and 220 for examples of both parents/ caregivers and practitioners' challenges of communication). This finding is meaningful because it demonstrates how pandemic-related restrictions exposed and exacerbated mesosystemic vulnerabilities for children with SEND during their transition to school and restricted the opportunities for nuanced and informal conversations and sharing of information of children's specific needs. Sharing personal and rich information between parents/ caregivers and practitioners was reduced, as well as transition to school practices, emotional security, support and continuity for the children with SEND reduced. Instead, privileging written and formal modes of communication between adults, marginalising and challenging relational and embodied ways of knowing and supporting children well during this time.

From the evidence above, it is apparent that limited, formal and often transactional communication between parents/ caregivers and practitioners during Covid-19 significantly disrupted mesosystemic connections. This reduced the trust and exchange of vital information between key partners that is essential in supporting children's individual needs in their transition to school, particularly for those children with SEND and specific health needs. Due to the parents/ caregivers and practitioners' inability to collaborate and communicate in ways that specifically represented and supported the children's individual needs, children with SEND were disadvantaged in their transition to school as their support depended on an accurate and shared understanding of their needs. This not only impacted their rights to effective support and participation in their transition to school (UNCRC, 1989), but due to systemic and structural conditions, prevented a strong home-school partnership developing appropriately.

Inclusive transition policies and practice should recognise the importance of child-centred relational practice in the transition process to school for children with SEND as key to developing warm and trusting relationships with practitioners (as already highlighted above), as well as focussing on wider mesosystem influences such as parent/ caregiver-practitioner relationships, and strategies for reciprocal, genuine communication. These recommendations have been discussed further in 'Chapter 6: Recommendations and Conclusions' (page 319).

### *5.5.2.3 Systemic silence: the absence of professional support*

Another systemic and structural challenge highlighted by both parents/ caregivers and practitioners was the uneven and varying support offered by outside agencies for their child with SEND during their transition to school. Parents/ caregivers reflected on an absence of specialist support from outside agencies already involved with their child during Covid-19 (page 179 and 237) and longer waiting times for assessment and external outside agency support due to a Covid-19 lag (page 237). Structural support issues such as outside external agencies are recognised as an ongoing issue with the system for children with SEND (Ofsted, 2021). However, findings from this study extend and support other studies such as Ofsted (2021) and Bakopoulou (2022) in determining how systemic and structural challenges, such as reduced outside agency support has been further exacerbated by restrictions of Covid-19 (Ofsted, 2021).

Practitioners also reflected on varying support from multi-agency support for children with SEND, such as speech and language therapists and educational psychologists. Some practitioners noted their school had developed good links and relationships with outside agencies, and therefore, still received this support for children with SEND during Covid-19 (pages 207 and 262), whilst other practitioners reflected on the lack of outside support for children and themselves as practitioners in supporting the transition to school of children with SEND (page 246). From the parent/ caregiver and practitioner findings, it is evident that there was inconsistent involvement of outside agency support for their children during Covid-19, which emphasises systemic inequalities and disparities for children with SEND. Here, it can be suggested that children's access to outside agency support during their transition to school during Covid-19 depended significantly on the functioning of wider systems around them, rather than the efforts of their parents/ caregivers or practitioners. These findings indicate that children with SEND missed out on early, specialist support and expertise to meet their individual needs, early diagnosis, and an inevitable lack of provision and support from wider systems when they started school. These challenges could have directly influenced their experiences of transition to school.

The findings in the parents/ caregivers and practitioners' data are similar to key findings in a recent CQC Report on transition to school for children with SEND (Ofsted, 2021), which indicated families' experiences of transition were undesirable due to a lack of outside agency support and services, including difficulty accessing physiotherapists, speech and language therapists and long waiting times for children's assessments. Similarly, findings from the practitioners in the study by Bakopoulou (2022) evidenced difficulties in accessing specialist services and support to meet the needs of the children with SEND during Covid-19 as one of the greatest challenges.

The findings from my study extend the knowledge and understanding of the fragility of mesosystemic breakdowns in the exosystems around the children with SEND during their transition to school. Due to limited involvement in outside agency support during the Covid-19 pandemic, the joined-up support structures that underpin transitions to school for children with SEND were disrupted, and in some cases, absent. This further highlights the fragility of the mesosystems around the child, providing additional evidence of the fragility in mesosystemic interactions and support, particularly between the child's home, their school and external outside support services. For some children in this study, local authority services, such as physiotherapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, speech and language therapists and health visitors failed to adequately support the child's microsystem and provide the individual support they needed at the time of their transition to school, whilst others continued to receive support. This confirms children's rights in line with the UNCRC (1989) and UNCRPD (2006) to appropriate support were inconsistent and often absent during their transition to school during Covid-19 and suggests a postcode lottery effect to extra support for children with SEND.

For this study, the findings here could also draw back to the discussion around practitioner self-efficacy and lacking confidence to support children with SEND (section 5.5.1 'Relational anchors in unsettling circumstances', page 301). Having access to outside agency specialists to support children with SEND in their transition to school could have given practitioners the confidence to support children with

specific individual needs related to their SEND. This suggests that practitioner self-efficacy may not just be an individual trait or characteristic of practitioners included in this study but could also be determined in their access to external agencies, which reinforces or destabilises their confidence in providing support for children with SEND in their transition to school. However, evidence from the parent/ caregiver findings in the 'relational anchors' theme above suggest practitioners within this study should not underestimate the support they gave to children with SEND in their transition to school, in the absence of outside agency support, as for some children, this was the only support they received within their new school environment.

Ultimately, the findings around a lack of outside agency support for children in their transition to school demonstrate that Covid-19 exacerbated existing inequalities for children with SEND. It exposed the fragility of wider support systems in the transition to school for children with SEND, suggesting that children's transitions and rights to support within this transition to school are not only shaped by their microsystems (as highlighted in the evidence in RQ1) but also interwoven and highly influenced within complex mesosystemic, exosystemic and macrosystemic structures (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Inclusive transition policies should consider the role and functionality of outside external agencies in the transition to school for children with SEND, including the support it offers for the child with SEND, their families and practitioners, especially during times of crises. Often transition to school policies interpreted at local levels imply a seamless and joined-up approach between parents/ caregivers and multi-agency professionals, for example the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) or the EYFS (DfE, 2025). In reality, navigating support from outside agencies is a complex, interwoven system that needs careful support from professionals within school settings, and families of children with SEND.

### *5.5.2.3 Digital spaces, disrupted boundaries*

Another prominent systemic challenge acknowledged by both parents/ caregivers and practitioners in their child's transition to school was the move from an in-person, physical transition, to using online spaces as an alternative support for transition. Some parents/ caregivers and practitioners discussed using online spaces as relationally supportive in providing continuity and a sense of belonging for their

children, through learning, relationship-building and play opportunities (pages 174-175). Whereas other parents/ caregivers and practitioners experienced online spaces and learning as restrictive, challenging for children with SEND and a space that is unable to replace relational interaction and connections essential for transition for children with SEND. Some parents/ caregivers commented on the difficulty they faced in supporting home-learning, including the challenges of engaging with online learning and activities (pages 174, 237 and 237) and the difficulty in juggling other commitments, such as working from home, sibling support or key worker responsibilities (pages 175, 198, 224 and 237). Furthermore, some parents/ caregivers reflected on their parental role at home, rather than a teacher role, as this often-caused confusion for autistic children (pages 224 and 237). Some children experienced exclusion from online learning at the time of their transition to school, as it was not offered by their school (page 262), whilst other children experienced exclusion from learning due to their own health and physical needs (page 198).

The parent/ caregiver and practitioner findings from my study support and add to the small body of limited literature on the impact of systemic challenges for children with SEND during Covid-19, including Ludgate et al. (2022), Canning and Robinson (2021) and Skipp et al. (2021). Like the findings within the Ludgate et al. (2022) study, the inaccessibility of online learning for some families of children with SEND was highlighted. This included children's increased frustrations around the unsuitability of learning resources to support individual needs, and the blurring of normative borders, for example, home and school, teacher and parent. This was a similar finding to that of Canning and Robinson (2021), who concluded that home as a safe space for children with SEND was invaded by external expectations. This was also evident within my study findings, whereby the autistic children found it difficult to access online learning spaces as a replacement for in-person learning. Furthermore, the parent/ caregiver findings from my study around difficulties in supporting online learning are similar to the findings by Skipp et al. (2021). In this study with professionals and parents/ caregivers of children with SEND, they found that families perceived home-schooling their children as difficult, and they faced struggles around working and supporting their children, with some children with SEND not being able to access online learning due to their individual needs.

The findings from my study support and add to the findings of other studies highlighted above and demonstrate that online learning spaces were not conducive to supporting children with SEND in their transition to school during Covid-19. The findings from both parent/ caregiver and practitioners within my study indicate a structural inequality in children's exosystem, which in turn influenced their inclusion and opportunities in their transition to school (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Here, using standardised, 'one-size-fits-all' remote learning techniques for children with SEND failed to meet their individual needs. The use of technology as used in these examples was also not conducive to supporting the intimate and sensitive nature of children's social and emotional needs in their transition to school, which, as already discussed in RQ1, was an important aspect of transition for children with SEND in this study.

Even though practitioners in my study recognised that using online spaces could not replace the intricate nuances that face-to-face transition offered for children with SEND, some practitioners still used them in a creative way. For example, some practitioners created virtual tours of the school environment, took photographs of important people, and online spaces to play (pages 175, 206 and 246). These tools offered children familiarity with their new school environment and surroundings, including the staff and daily routines they may expect to experience before they started school.

The practitioner findings around the use of online learning spaces are similar to the literature in this area. Practitioner findings from the study by Bakopoulou (2022) suggested virtual meetings and access to online resources was useful, and often was the only way to communicate with children and families at this time. However, findings in my study suggested that not all practitioners found the online learning space useful but recognised that alternative methods of communication were needed to keep in touch with families. For my study, even though online learning was used by some settings to replace in-person transition support for children with SEND, it was not a positive, engaging replacement of a physical transition to school. The virtual strategies used by some practitioners in my study mirror transition to school

priming events (Corsaro and Molinari, 2008) with an aim to provide some children with SEND a sense of familiarity, certainty and relationship-building, when face-to-face transition support wasn't accessible.

What was noticeable about these findings was that children included in the study did not discuss online and home-learning experiences, apart from one child (Kobe) who often used online platforms to play games (page 231). This suggests that virtual priming events were very much an adult-led strategy, suggesting that children didn't see online spaces and learning as part of their transition to school experience. This was discussed in RQ1 around the role of priming events and children's dispositions (section 5.2.1.4, page 287). In the research by Ludgate et al., (2022), the findings suggest 'playfulness' as an approach to co-creating learning at home during times of crises, between parents/ caregivers and children with SEND. This approach focusses on creative opportunities for learning life skills, and in turn increases children's confidence, allowing them to relax and motivate positive behaviours. This 'playfulness' approach may have been more beneficial to children with SEND at the time, than feeling excluded from an online learning environment. This misalignment between child-centred and adult-centred views further emphasises the claim throughout this thesis, that adults should actively seek to ask children what is important and useful to them (UNCRC, 1989; Lundy, 2007) in their transition to school, rather than just assume they know. This should form the heart of transition to school policy and practice, with an emphasis on child-led, relational transition to school support for children with SEND in times of crises.

### **5.5.3 Research Question 2: Conclusion**

Within the parent/ caregiver and practitioner findings, the children's transitions to school were centred around relational anchors in the form of relationships with their practitioners, as well as contextual and systemic challenges of Covid-19 that impacted these proximal processes. Although it is evident in the findings that practitioners demonstrated warmth, relational care and support towards children with SEND during their transition to school during Covid-19, wider structural and systemic pressures of recovery curriculums and discourses restricted the extent to which the children's social and emotional needs could be fully prioritised. This suggests that

enacting children's rights (UNCRC, 1989) is highly dependent on wider ecological systems and pressures at play (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), and not solely on individual practitioner objectives or endeavours. Returning to Corsaro et al. (2002) and Vogler et al.'s (2008) claims the microsystem in a child's ecosystem fail to prioritise the individual child and locating them at the centre of this system does not inevitably echo priorities of the system or the context in which they are located, inhabit or develop. It is evident from the findings in RQ1 and RQ2 that, given the chance, children with SEND could be placed at the centre of their ecosystems, with the agentic dispositions to shape their own transition to school experiences, and it is evident their priorities do very much differ from the wider systems in which they are located. These wider systemic and structural priorities for transition to school are currently central to policy and practice within English school settings. The recommendations in this study call for a more relational, child-centred stance on transition to school for children with SEND, that not only positions them at the centre of their ecosystem, but their experiences are shaped and influenced by their values, needs and strengths.

Considering the adult perspectives in RQ1, and their interpretations of their children's transition to school in RQ2, the following points summarise the findings and demonstrate how parents/ caregivers and practitioners conveyed the transition to school experiences for children with SEND during Covid-19:

- Parents/ caregivers and practitioners recognised the children's strengths and dispositions, including resilience as supportive factors in their transition to school, recognising the children as agentic and capable in their microsystems (as discussed in RQ1).
- Parents/ caregivers and practitioners also recognised the social and emotional impact of Covid-19 on their child's transition, albeit less personal and more contextual in response to their transitions to school (as discussed in RQ1).
- Central to the adults' interpretations in RQ2 was the importance of relationships and proximal processes between the child and the practitioner. It was recognised that although practitioners felt 'on the back foot', ill-prepared and had low self-efficacy, they created opportunities for children with SEND to

build and develop relationships with them. This was of utmost important to parents/ caregivers at the time, creating a safe space for their children with SEND in starting school.

- Adults drew attention to systemic and structural barriers that shaped their child's transition to school. This included mesosystem challenges between parents/ caregivers and practitioners, exosystem difficulties such as difficulties in accessing outside agency support, delays in diagnosis and support, as well as inequalities and difficulties in navigating online learning. Even though attempts were made by parents/ caregivers and practitioners to support the children with SEND in their transition, wider systemic and structural discourses of Covid-19 shaped their experiences and exacerbated challenges already faced by children with SEND, such as access to outside agency support and assessment.

## **CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter drew together the study findings, literature and theoretical underpinning of the data from the children with SEND, parents/ caregivers and practitioners. Following on from the in-depth discussion and conclusions made within RQ1 and RQ2, this chapter consolidates the conclusions by drawing together recommendations for future research, policy and pedagogical practice, which supports RQ3.

In line with a relativist ontology, and an interpretivist, constructionist epistemology, the recommendations here are not intended to generalise by applying the study findings to the wider population of children with SEND in their transition to school during Covid-19. Instead, the rich insights from the children with SEND, parents/ caregivers and practitioners in this study can be considered as contextually grounded, and their meaning-making may offer opportunities for reflection, discussion and pedagogical practice and policy in different and varying contexts.

The following section below turns to RQ3: ‘What recommendations for pedagogical practice, policy and future research can be established for supporting children with SEND in their transition to school during times of crises on a local and global platform?’

### **6.2 Voices of Children with SEND**

As highlighted as a dominant thread throughout this study, and one of the most prominent and original findings of the study is the importance of the voices of children with SEND in matters that matter to them in their microsystems (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Yet it must be acknowledged that within current studies and literature, these voices of children with SEND are often missing, with an obvious disjuncture between the experiences of adults, including parents/ caregivers and practitioners, and children with SEND, regarding their experiences more broadly within their transition to school.

This marginalisation of the voices of children with SEND reflect the work of Piepzna-Samarasinha’s (2018) ‘care webs’ framework. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) created ‘care webs’ within a disability justice framework as a direct response to the

marginalisation of disabled people, including those marginalised by gender, race, class, and disability. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) describes these as an approach to developing communities of support, where like-minded people build communities together through relational connections, mutual interdependence and collective support for one another.

It should be acknowledged that Piepzna-Samarasinha's (2018) care webs framework extends way beyond the scope of this study to engage with in full detail. But recognition of her care webs framework within the field of inclusion and disability justice, and the relevance to my study findings and recommendations is crucial, especially around the voices of children with SEND, and the importance they place on relational care and support with their peers in their transition to school during times of crisis.

Within this study, giving children with SEND quality time, space and opportunities to share their lived experiences of matters that affect them, rich, deep and meaningful insights were shared. This ensures that children with SEND are given an opportunity to have a voice, and listened to, being active members and co-constructors of their society and school environment, rather than passive recipients. Given the disjuncture of the experiences of children with SEND compared to the parents/ caregivers and practitioners, it was evident that the adults around the children were unaware of the importances children placed on informal relational networks within their transition to school, and therefore, was not able to respond or provide opportunities to centre these preferences and what children really valued in their transition to school support. For example, the children with SEND in this study reflected on the importances of seeking friendships and social connections with their peers, reaching towards a sense of belonging and connection to their new classroom and school environment, and creating play opportunities in the smallest of spaces and places, in a challenging context of Covid-19. This is an example of them creating their own 'care webs' (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018), through building and reaching towards relational support with their peers, in the absence of transition to school provision at the time.

To be attuned to the care webs children with SEND are creating for themselves in their transition to school and encourage community building and support within their

school experiences, it is essential that adults around them, including parents/ caregivers and practitioners' give time to listen to the voices and experiences of children themselves. Recommendations for pedagogical practice, policy and research have been suggested below to develop the opportunities of listening and acting upon the voices of children with SEND in their transitions to school and beyond, supporting them in creating their webs of care in their transition to school experiences (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018).

### **6.2.1 Pedagogical Practice**

Transition to school has been recognised as a 'critical life junction' for children and their families, and therefore, it is essential to involve children in decisions and actions around their transition to school and listen to their perspectives regarding their own lived experiences (Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2019).

It is recommended that practitioners within school settings give quality time, space and opportunities for children with SEND to voice their thoughts, feelings, insights and experiences early in their transition to school process. This includes engaging with children with SEND in a meaningful and genuine way and asking them what is important to them when they start school, acting on those insights, which takes children's voices beyond tokenistic consultation (Lundy, 2007).

As the literature suggests, transitions to school happen as a process over time, rather than as a one-off event (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dockett and Perry, 2007; Dunlop, 2018; Jindal-Snape, 2010). Therefore, the opportunity for including children with SEND in their transition to school journey should be built into transition to school support from early in the child's life, including various points prior to and throughout the Reception year at school, as recommended below:

#### *Before starting school*

It would be beneficial for practitioners within school settings to begin to provide opportunities for children with SEND to voice their preferences and things that are important to them before they start school, to ensure the right support and interest of the child is considered prior to them starting school. This is where children with SEND may start to create their own 'care webs' (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018) and

therefore is a critical time for adults to support children in developing their new community around them.

Schools and practitioners should prioritise pre-transition exploration days and opportunities, where children with SEND can explore, play, engage and start to become familiar with their new microsystem, including spaces, peers and objects within it (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Within my study, children with SEND focussed on the importance of relationships with their peers, playing in the smallest of spaces and places, and valuing a sense of belonging to their new environment. Therefore, rather than practitioners within school settings focusing on what children need to know before they start school, and using priming events (Corsaro, 2005) as a tool for practitioners to observe and assess children with SEND entering their school setting, practitioners should rethink how they use this time and space for centring the voices of children with SEND.

This could include designing pre-transition activities around children's own curiosities, questions and communicative styles, through child-led exploration and open-ended creative activities, alongside their new peers and practitioners. Reframing opportunities like priming events but constructed by children with SEND themselves would centre the interests and agency of children with SEND in their classroom space, allowing practitioners to observe, listen and communicate fully with children in the moment. These observations and listening opportunities pre-transition can become meaningful data that informs how transition to school support is personalised for children with SEND, through observing what spaces children are drawn to, what objects they reach towards and what connections they seek in their new environment. This data allows practitioners to then provide transition to school support that genuinely accounts for the views and experiences of children with SEND.

#### *First several weeks of school*

Following the pre-transition exploration days, practitioners could use data they have observed and gathered within these pre-transition sessions, to plan engaging opportunities for children with SEND when they enter their new school and classroom in September. Practitioners should use the first several weeks of starting school to spend genuine time and relationship building with children with SEND,

through their own play opportunities. Practitioners could follow the '*notice-recognise-respond*' elements from the New Zealand curriculum, ensuring practitioners notice what children are reaching towards in their new environment, and responding to them in the moment. Through investing and centralising child-led play opportunities within the curriculum for children with SEND, and time and patience in playing with or alongside children, practitioners and other staff within the reception classroom are building their relational care and knowledge of the child and responding to what they want or need in that moment.

In practice, this could encompass practitioners becoming regularly involved in children's play or creative activities throughout their week, entering the children's world, led and directed by the child themselves, rather than through adult-directed questioning and predetermined topics. If practitioners invested time and opportunities in weekly activities for children with SEND to voice matters that matter to them in their transition to school, they would create spaces where children with SEND would feel comfortable and confident to share their experiences regularly, and things that genuinely matter to them, including their emotional fears, concerns and things like enjoy and reach towards (Carr, 1999).

For practitioners, they also need to be attuned to how children with SEND communicate their voices in that space, including non-verbal forms of communication, for example being aware of children's body language, talk, gestures and alternative forms of multimodal communication (Church and Bateman, 2022; Yu and Chen, 2024), as well as through their play and drawings. Through applying something like multimodal conversation analysis within current practice would ensure practitioners are genuinely attuned, aware and listening to all voices of children, not just privileging verbal capabilities. This supports the work of Lundy (2007), who reiterates, 'there is a growing recognition of the fact that children express their views in a variety of ways, not all which are verbal' (p.937).

During these moments of '*notice-recognise-respond*', practitioners within school settings could follow Carr's (1999) learning disposition framework to create narrative observations and life stories of children with SEND, reflecting and building on what they are bringing to their new microsystem, and the objects, spaces and places they are reaching towards at that time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

These early play opportunities would further develop relationship-building between children, their peers and practitioners in their new school setting, something that the children in my study considered as vital within their transition to school. Using a framework like Carr's (1999) learning dispositions would allow practitioners to listen meaningfully to children with SEND and what matters to them, and the strengths and opportunities they bring to their new environment, rather than assessing them against adult-derived outcomes.

Practitioners could also benefit from including guided participation (Rogoff, 2003) in transition processes for children with SEND, whereby their learning and development are facilitated through their active engagement in culturally relevant activities, such as play, with the assistance of responsive social partners. This would include both adults and peers within their environment, supporting the finding around the co-construction of transition to school support between adults and children with SEND. Additionally, strategies such as social skill stories, play resources (Peters, 2003) and integrated play group models would benefit children with SEND, particularly autistic children, in their transition to school, facilitating, guiding and promoting the social skills, communication, reciprocity and relationships with peers (Wolfberg et al., 2015).

### *EHCP Reviews and Individual Support Plans*

For children with SEND, there is a significant statutory opportunity within school settings to represent genuine child-centred participation in transition to school planning, through meaningful engagement within regular EHCP meetings and the creation of Individual Support Plans. Currently, within many school settings, children with SEND are often consulted with prior to these meetings. Their 'voices' are gathered second-hand, usually by a practitioner or the school SENCo, and reported back within the meeting on their behalf. However, including children with SEND in these meetings themselves would ensure they are genuinely active participants within their transition to school planning. In practice, this could mean redesigning how EHCP and support plan meetings are delivered, prioritising children's communicative needs and preferences, rather than following professional norms. This could be done through child-led, play based sessions, and the co-construction with the child's family, practitioner and outside agencies contributing together,

ensuring the child's voice remains central and not supplementary to this process. The school SENCo and practitioner could act as facilitator within these sessions, ensuring they are attuned to the diverse communicative preferences of the child. This approach is consistent with the government's new White Paper (DfE, 2026), and the emphasis on co-construction of Individual Support Plans with children with SEND and their families. This recommendation supports Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) and the legal and ethical obligation of including children in matters that impact them, that current practice often fails to prioritise.

Genuine inclusion of children with SEND in their transition to school must go beyond just listening to their views and experiences, however attentive in practice that might be. Lundy (2007) argues that to avoid considering the voices of children in a tokenistic way, their views should be considered through an element of 'influence'. This means children's views are listened to in a serious way and then acted upon to genuinely shape their experiences in their environment.

In the context of transition to school during a worldwide pandemic, my study findings demonstrate this 'influence' that Lundy (2007) stresses, when listening should become acting for children with SEND. Below demonstrates several examples within my research findings when listening could have become acting for children with SEND: When a child with SEND explores their new classroom environment in their transition to school, and they are drawn to particular spaces, objects, activities and people within their environment, acting on those preferences should be reflected in how their classroom day is organised and arranged around these relational interests and opportunities to engage with different spaces, objects and peers, and how their time at school is structured around these priorities; When a practitioner notices a child with SEND is reaching towards social connections and friendships but faces challenges within their context, like not knowing their names. Acting on these voices would be to prioritise opportunities for friendship-building and adult support of acknowledging differences in their social connections (Milton, 2012) within their microsystem; When children with SEND seek connections, belonging and creating routines in the smallest of spaces and places through their play, acting on what matters to children with SEND would ensure play is protected and prioritised within the curriculum rather than deprioritised for academic catch-up and recovery

agendas. Children with SEND in my study were reaching towards play when the system around them didn't support it, and acting on this would have ensured play was prioritised and ring-fenced in the first few weeks of school, not as a peripheral activity, but as a central support mechanism within their transition to school, responding directly to what the children identified themselves as important in that moment.

These examples above demonstrate the '*notice-recognise-respond*' approach as discussed above, as a practical model for 'influence', as every time a practitioner notices what a child reaches towards in their microsystem, and responds by creating conditions that support that reach, they are genuinely listening and acting in the same moment.

Practitioners in current practice could consider these examples above from my study findings, ensuring children's voices are taken beyond a tokenistic gesture, and listened and acted upon in pre-transition activities, the first several weeks of school and beyond, and within EHCP and Individual Support Plan meetings. Using an in-the-moment tool like this allows for practitioners working with children with SEND to develop an awareness of the children's competencies and communication styles, supporting their progress and ensure these are responded or acted upon in their school environment.

These recommendations for pedagogical practice in response to my study's findings coincide with recent government announcements for supporting children with SEND in English school settings (DfE, 2026). This comprises a £200 million training package to develop the skills and knowledge of all practitioners in supporting children with SEND and inclusion, including building their awareness of children's specific needs and using different forms of communication like assistive technology. Overall, the evidence provided in this study suggests that English school settings need to rethink transition as a personalised, relational process for children with SEND, rather than a standardised approach that focusses on school readiness and developmental outcomes.

### **6.2.2 Policy**

To take the views of children with SEND seriously and act upon them would be to co-construct local level school policies with children themselves, their families and practitioners. For example, consulting and involving children with SEND in transitions and early years policies would ensure that matters that affect or impact their experiences will be at the centre and forefront of policy and practice. This would shift current discourses in adult-driven agendas such as transitions to school, as well as discourses around inclusion, recovery and catch-up curriculums post Covid-19.

To change the transition process for children with SEND, making it more relational and based on children's individual dispositions, inclusion and transition policy should be revised within it. It should ensure children with SEND have a well-considered transition in which they are involved from an early stage. Through policy change, considering the relational care of transition to school for children with SEND would provide a notion of ethical responsibility within school settings, which is essential in the context of transition, where the entanglements between children, families, professionals, and systems demand a more responsive and relational approach.

Inclusive policies should also hold schools and local authorities to account by ensuring full transparency on how the views and voices of children with SEND have shaped their transition to school experience. This accountability could be through Ofsted Inspection Frameworks, which could validate whether the voices and views of children with SEND have been an integral part of the transition to school process. This would further align with requirements under Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989).

### **6.2.3 Research**

As evidenced within this study, most literature and research around transitions to school for children with SEND rely on adult interpretations of transition to school experiences of children with SEND. To further explore the nuances of how children with SEND communicate in their everyday lives, and what they mean, say, feel and experience in their transition to school, it would be beneficial to explore the interactions of children with SEND within their new school environment in more intricate detail. This opens an opportunity to use EMCA, to explore the intricacies of multimodal interactions for children to gain tacit knowledge of the interactions of children with SEND during their transition to school.

Through such methodologies, there is potential to capture the full breadth of communicative styles of children with SEND in their transition to school, including important non-verbal, gestures and body language (Bateman, 2025; Yu and Chen, 2024). This would enable researchers to explore how children with SEND actively communicate, signal and demonstrate their choices and preferences, agency, play, anxieties, worries and challenges in their transition to school. As Bateman (2017) confirms, this approach allows researchers to document and 'hear' children's voices, especially those children with SEND who may use multimodal communication. This would not only reduce reliance on adult interpretations and understandings, but it would also advance rights-based approaches to inclusive transitions to school for children with SEND.

### **6.3 Social and Emotional Priorities**

#### **6.3.1 Pedagogical Practice**

It is evident from the findings of children, parents/ caregivers and practitioners there was a significant social and emotional impact in their transition to school during Covid-19. It was clear that parents/ caregivers and practitioners supported children as best they could yet were also facing challenging emotional difficulties of their own at this time. The findings suggest that when the children with SEND started school, giving priority to supporting children, parents/ caregivers and practitioners with opportunities to talk about the emotional impact of Covid-19 was not central to educational settings. The 'catch-up' curriculum after Covid-19 was a government incentive to ensure children who missed out on their school education caught up on literacy and mathematical development. Social and emotional development of children was supported through add-on interventions or mentoring within school settings. These government priorities suggest that social and emotional support was supplementary to academic priorities. However, findings from my study suggest that social and emotional support and development for children with SEND should be at the heart of pedagogical practice in a post-crisis era. As previous studies have suggested, giving children with SEND (and adults) an opportunity to process traumatic events that have happened and opportunities to talk through them with trusted adults around them is vital to a child's social and emotional development (Bateman and Danby, 2013).

Carr's (1999) learning dispositions offer an effective reframing of social and emotional priorities and academic development here for pedagogical practice. Rather than measuring children's recovery attainment and catch-up curriculums that focussed on children's reading, writing and academic skills, and closing gaps of academic attainment after a pandemic (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2021), a dispositional approach would look at the whole child, and ask things like what strengths are they bringing to their new school environment, what are they reaching towards, and what engages them in their school environment.

Carr (1999) suggests that learning dispositions support children with both social and emotional development and their academic learning simultaneously, but social and emotional support is foundational. For example, through Carr's (1999) dispositional breadth lens, children who feel a sense of belonging to their learning environment, and have their social and emotional needs met through being involved and connecting with others, will naturally bring dispositions such as persisting, taking an interest and being involved within their learning, whereas children who may not have the social connections or fragile relationships within their environment may struggle to engage academically despite interventions.

The simultaneous overlap of children's social and emotional development with academic learning that Carr's (1999) learning dispositions highlight is like the PSED prime area of learning within the EYFS curriculum (DfE, 2025). PSED is considered a prime area of learning within the EYFS curriculum as it underpins and forms a basis for all other learning in other areas, and is fundamental to children's cognitive development (DfE, 2025). Within the PSED strand, the EYFS (DfE, 2025) suggests that children should be supported to manage emotions, practitioners should prioritise developing strong, warm and reciprocal relationships to support children in understanding their own feelings and those of others, support children to develop their sense of self, confidence and persist with difficulties and challenges in their early years' environment.

Notably, the findings from the children with SEND in my study highlighted these importances, like their reach and desire to have social connections and develop their learning identities within their new school environment, the importance of playing to support the development of relationships with peers and having an awareness of

their own bodies. Yet, due to catch-up agendas, specific areas of learning like literacy and mathematics were prioritised over PSED, a prime area, that the EYFS (DfE, 2025) itself recognises as foundational. Within the transition to school during a pandemic and beyond, practitioners must prioritise PSED as a foundation for all children, rather than supplementary to the EYFS curriculum, as children's ability to engage with learning in all other areas depends on their social and emotional development.

Within the PSED strand of the EYFS curriculum, one way that practitioners could prioritise the social and emotional needs of children with SEND in their transition to school could be to focus on the importance of play in early years settings. For example, in the Pascal and Bertram (2021) study, practitioners used play and Froebelian storytelling as a tool to make sense of Covid-19 for children within a nursery setting and respond to their social and emotional development. For the purposes of my study, practitioners could use techniques like this in response to crises conditions and as part of recovery curriculums for children's social and emotional needs, supporting them in making sense of traumatic and challenging experiences.

'Playfulness' also is an effective approach that could be implemented by practitioners and parents of children with SEND in a home-learning capacity, to encourage playing and learning at home for children during times of crisis. Using an approach like this for children with SEND would have supported their challenges of online and formal home-learning. This approach offers divergence, opportunities of discovery, creativity and care for the 'moment at hand' (Ludgate et al., 2022: 73). This approach demonstrates how it is 'conditional to its own rhythms', and often includes family situations, motivated by choice of children and families and shared interests (Ludgate et al., 2022: 73).

Underpinning the pedagogical practice recommendations in this section is a notion that extends across all participants within this study, and that is the concept of the importance of healing, in response to a worldwide pandemic. Castellón et al. (2021) in their study position schools as sites of collective healing in the era of Covid-19 and highlight how there is little doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath will leave a lasting impression on schools, families, and communities that will last for

many years to come. In their study, Castellón et al. (2021) reiterate how schools understand and respond to these collective losses and traumas of Covid-19 is critical, particularly as they move toward healing, under a new normal.

My study findings demonstrate exactly this. The Covid-19 pandemic was not only a disruption to the transition to school experiences for children with SEND, families and schools in my study, but it was a time of trauma that affected everyone within the ecological systems of the child (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). My study suggests that all participants would benefit from healing mechanisms in response to Covid-19, and through talking and play opportunities suggested above, would support everyone within children's ecosystems. This is evidenced through the children's data, significantly the emotional affects of transition to school during Covid-19, parents/ caregivers data, who described mesosystemic breakdowns, challenges of systemic and structural support from outside agencies, and challenges of home-schooling, and practitioners' data, where they always felt on the back foot and lacked self-efficacy in their own ability to support children with SEND, grieving 'normal' practices of transition to school and relationship-building with children.

As evidenced, all the participants in my study were facing their own fears, worries, losses, uncertainties and challenges simultaneously at this time, and all needed a space to process the enormity of what had happened, as well as reflecting on what was important, such as reconnecting and forming relationships, and finding a new rhythm within home and school microsystems, in its aftermath.

The UK government's message for educational settings to return to normal was unresponsive of the emotional turmoil of Covid-19 and my study findings show that everyone, including children, parents/ caregivers and practitioners needed (and still need) time and space to heal from such traumatic experiences. To reiterate the key points from the Bateman and Danby (2013) study, children need structures, space and time to process significant crisis events, like the New Zealand earthquakes, or the Covid-19 pandemic, or they risk carrying trauma with them throughout their childhood. Bateman and Danby (2013) reiterate the importance of a 'Recovery Strategy' through the '*Respond, Renew, and Recover*' approach of Brown (2012), which is 'designed to encourage recalling and telling of stories about the event as a way to come to terms with the experience' (p.468). Cordon et al. (2004) reinforces

this strategy and suggests that children who are faced with traumatic events and experiences often benefit from talking about the event with a supportive adult through storytelling or narrative accounts, where they can have opportunities to make sense of the experience, and share recall with others who may help to piece together the event.

Castrellón et al. (2021) offers a further (re)imagination the role schools play in not only acknowledging trauma, but also intentionally creating space for healing for everyone impacted by traumatic events such as Covid-19. Here, the authors suggest that it is not enough for schools to provide a trauma-informed approach, which often tries to 'treat' the trauma of an individual, but rather a healing-centred approach, which looks at the collective experiences of people, families and the wider community. This is centred around community connections and shared meaning-making, similar approaches to Brown's (2012) Recovery Strategy and Córdón et al. (2004) narrative and storytelling. Likewise, this resonates with the 'care webs' work of Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018), building communities and collective support for healing after Covid-19.

Castrellón et al. (2021) go on to suggest that given the context of Covid-19 and the significant sense of loss, grief and emotional affects experienced by children, teachers, families and communities, centring collective healing rather than responding to individual trauma is of critical importance within school settings. This collective approach to healing was reinforced by bell hooks (2001) where she noted 'rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion' (p.215). The principles that hooks (2001) and Castrellón et al. (2021) highlight around collective healing resonate closely with my study, for example, children with SEND, their families and practitioners not having to heal in isolation, but together through their shared meaning-making, and this could be supported within school settings through the relational and play-based practices recommended within this section.

Policy and practice should acknowledge the importance of healing for everyone in the child's microsystems, through opportunities to talk with others to make sense of their experiences and play opportunities for children with SEND. These commitments should be prioritised within recovery curriculums within school settings, for both

children's enjoyment and skills, but also as a therapeutic, healing strategy used by practitioners to ensure children with SEND process traumatic experiences, like those of Covid-19.

### **6.3.2 Policy**

To ensure that social and emotional priorities are at the centre of school curriculums after worldwide pandemics, trauma-informed educational policy should be the forefront of wider government level policy, to ensure that school settings are accountable for supporting children, families and practitioners through challenging circumstances. Including children with SEND and their families in creating wider government policies would support local level policy within schools, as it would demonstrate lived experiences from children with SEND themselves.

This in turn would ensure children, families and professionals have the right support, space and time they need to make sense of traumatic events and be able to develop the skills they need to move forward and be in a better position to learn. Policy should acknowledge the challenges of seeking outside agency support in a child's transition to school. Post-crises policies should also reflect this, ensuring children with SEND can access the support they need, regardless of a diagnosis.

As discussed within this study, the DfE catch-up policies centred around academic recovery. Therefore, there were missed opportunities to focus on interpersonal and emotional challenges of children with SEND in their transition to school during a worldwide pandemic, a critical finding of my study. Recovery policy should ring-fence funding for the social and emotional development of children with SEND, not just focus on their academic attainment. Further accountability and impact of this focus should be measured by schools and local authorities.

### **6.3.3 Research**

Exploring the longer-term social and emotional impact of Covid-19 for children with SEND, their families and practitioners would be highly beneficial and insightful through a longitudinal, participatory and exploratory piece of research. It would allow a deeper insight into the social and emotional needs of children with SEND and how this may impact their longer-term transitions throughout their school life.

Furthermore, it would be beneficial to carry out a comparative study to explore the social and emotional impact of a worldwide pandemic of children with SEND and their typically developing peers. This would demonstrate the social and emotional needs of all children post-pandemic, and whether they differ in type of need, consistency or intensity.

#### **6.4 Support within Mesosystems**

The mesosystem between the child, their parents/ caregivers, practitioners, peers and outside agencies were significantly one of the most important aspects of the findings in this study from all participants, focusing on both the inter-relationships between the microsystems of the child's transition to school, but also the obvious disconnections and fragmented practices at this time. For children with SEND, this was friendships with peers, for parents/ caregivers and practitioners, this was the relationships with one another and with outside agencies. This reiterates Bronfenbrenner's (1986) early ideas that events in one microsystem can affect and alter what happens in another, as well as the influences from wider exosystems and macrosystems around the child, such as Covid-19 policies, community rules and restrictions and practices that were limited at this time.

##### **6.4.1 Pedagogical Practice**

There should be a focus on social developmental pedagogies for children with SEND within their transition to school. It is essential these relationships between children, parents/ caregivers, practitioners, peers and siblings (everyone inside the child's microsystem) are prioritised in the transition to school during significant times like a worldwide pandemic. Practitioner professional development and training should include opportunities around developing strong and reciprocal relationships with parents/ caregivers within the transition to school experience. Schools could also offer this support and training for parents/ caregivers, ensuring all key people involved in the transition to school support are aware of the importance of open, honest, genuine and supportive relationships for their child's transition to school. Schools should give time and space for practitioners and parents/ caregivers to develop relationships post-pandemic. These relationships are also fundamental in indirectly impacting children's transitions to school, and strategies to develop these relationships should be fostered within school settings. Practical tools to build quality

connections and relationships between children, families and practitioners within the transition to school could include opportunities for informal play sessions and team-building activities prior to and throughout their Reception year and beyond.

#### **6.4.2 Policy**

At school level, leaders should ensure there are opportunities for joint transition to school planning, that includes co-construction with children with SEND, their families, practitioners and other outside agency support around the child. This way, all key people involved in the transition to school support have opportunities to view their ideas and experiences and develop reciprocal relationships in a supportive way. At wider policy level, there should be a co-construction of statutory transition to school policy for children with SEND, that sets out the requirements for a joined-up approach to transition planning at a local level. There should be accountability within policies for good-quality multi-agency meetings in the transition process for children with SEND, which encompass effective collaboration between children with SEND, parents/ caregivers, practitioners and schools, and multi-agency support. This should also include meetings between Early Childhood Education (ECE) practitioners and school setting practitioners, to regularly discuss and share information about the transitioning children in their care. ECE policies and school settings should set out regular time and space for these connections to be made. This would ensure that vital information around the child and their needs is shared, and the right support is put in place for the child and their family. This would support continuity between settings, and allow relationships between the child, families and practitioners to be fostered.

Inclusive, transition to school policy should acknowledge the challenges of seeking outside agency support in a child's transition to school. Practitioners should work carefully with parents/ caregivers in times of crises to acknowledge their child's specific needs, regardless of whether they have a diagnosed SEND. Post-crisis policies should also reflect this, ensuring children with SEND can access the support they need, regardless of a diagnosis.

Furthermore, from the study findings, inclusive transition to school policy should place an emphasis on the importance of the child-practitioner and parent/ caregiver-

practitioner relationship in the transition to school process, centring this relationship as a fundamental aspect of transition. This would ensure the transition to school for children with SEND is perceived and recognised as a coordinated and collaborative policy expectation, rather than an optional, non-statutory, extra. This further supports the recommendations made in RQ1 around the importance of adults in supporting the social and emotional development of children with SEND in their transition to school during times of crises. These recommendations are simultaneous to developing strong, reciprocal proximal processes.

### **6.4.3 Research**

At a national level, there is potential scope for research between local authorities in the UK in terms of comparing, contrasting and exploring collaborative transition to school planning for children with SEND. This would reduce the variability across regions and support further the need for statutory transition to school policy that sets out the minimum requirements for including children with SEND and their families in this process across schools within the UK.

At an international level, future comparative research could explore how different educational systems conceptualise and execute collaboration of key people within transitions for children with SEND. This would offer a wider perspective and insight that could further inform UK practice.

## ***6.5 Reflections on the Research Design***

### **6.5.1 Bioecological Systems Theory**

Using Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) Bioecological Systems Theory as a framework of analysis enabled the exploration of lived experiences of the transition to school for children with SEND during the Covid-19 pandemic, through an exploration of multi-layered contextual factors that supported or challenged their experiences.

The research study was not seeking to update or revise the BST model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) but demonstrate its usefulness for exploring the multifaceted complexities of transition to school for children with SEND. The Person-

Process-Context-Time elements of the BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) enabled the complexities of the lived experiences of children with SEND to be explored within their transition to school.

Considering the 'person' element of the PPCT ensured that the research focussed on the child's individual characteristics and dispositions in their transition to school, and through this lens, as well as a child's rights lens (UNCRC, 1989; Lundy, 2007), and others' work such as Carr (1998a; 1998b; 1998c; 1999), it explored the role of the children themselves in their own transition to school experience. This highlighted children with SEND as active participants in their own cultures and environments, rather than passive recipients of adult-directed agendas.

The 'processes' of the BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) demonstrated the importance yet the complexities of the relationships between children with SEND, their parents/ caregivers and practitioners in the transition to school process. The transition to school for children with SEND is influenced by these mesosystem linkages yet exacerbated further by the constraints of chronosystem influences such as Covid-19, that made these relationships difficult to establish. Online spaces were used sporadically to develop relationships with children with SEND, parents/ caregivers' and practitioners, yet proved challenging for all children with SEND included in this study. The BST (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) could be extended further beyond the scope of this study to explore the complexities of processes and establishing relationships for children with SEND via digital and virtual spaces.

Within the 'context' of the BST, influences such as education systems and political landscapes around the children with SEND at the time indirectly impacted the transition of children with SEND. Due to Covid-19, government restrictions in children's macrosystems, local school policies and restricted access into school settings shaped their experiences of access into their new school environments.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) also included 'time' as an element of their BST. Even though this study was not longitudinal which could measure the impact of Covid-19 on the transition to school for children with SEND over time, it did look back at children's experiences at a moment (or in the case of Covid-19, much longer) in time. It was evident that Covid-19 disrupted the transition to school for children with

SEND and greatly impacted their social and emotional needs. The impact of Covid-19 within children's chronosystems provokes the need for pedagogical practice and early years policy to ensure the social and emotional needs of children with SEND are central to their transition to school, especially in times of crises.

However, even though the BST situates the child at the centre of their ecosystems, what it fails to consider is the voice and agency of the child experiencing development within their systems. In this instance, and if used in isolation, children would be viewed as passive recipients of and within adult-directed systems and structures, being responsive to environmental and ecological systems around them, rather than playing an active role in shaping their experiences and cultures in which they live and experience.

### **6.5.2 Children's Rights Lens**

Utilising the UNCRC (1989) and Lundy's (2007) model of children's participation was appropriate and essential in this research study as it ensured the voices of children with SEND were central to the research focus. This affordance allowed opportunities of gaining deep and insightful understandings and meaning making of what transition to school was like from the lived experiences of children with SEND. Their voices, accompanied by the supportive adults around them, was an essential part of the nested systems of Bronfenbrenner (1979), and reflected the SEND CoP (DfE & DoH, 2015) and the EYFS (DfE, 2025).

Using these child's rights lenses shaped the methodological stance of my study, positioning children with SEND as active rights-holders, with the ability to have a voice in matters that affect them. This challenged deficit-narratives within current studies of children with SEND. Furthermore, utilising a child's rights lens also justified the use of creative methods to elicit the voices of children with SEND, some of which used different communication styles to verbal communication, for example flash cards, gestures and pictorial representations.

### **6.5.3 Reflections on my Positionality and Reflexivity**

Reflecting on my positionality at the end of this project, I am struck by the deeply profound and reflective insights and experiences of my participants, and this has shaped and moved me immensely. I feel a deep sense of pride for all my

participants, but mostly the children with SEND. The children, who probably have never participated in a project where their voices were central, yet who imparted eloquently, their raw, emotional and vivid insights into their transition to school experiences and were willing to share these with me. I felt (and still feel) very privileged. The real fear they felt, their courage, persistence and resilience, even in the most challenging times.

I felt it intensely, and I left every session with the children with tears in my eyes. Their stories reminded me that I was not alone in my healing journey, making sense of having a baby during this time, going through a cancer diagnosis alone, and returning to 'normal' did not exist. Yet they did allow me to reflect and see that everyone at this time was facing their own challenges and different or difficult experiences, and their determination made me see these children differently.

This reflexive element was a key and vital part of my work, allowing me to bring an empathic understanding of my participants' different experiences, yet explore the shared meaning making within it, that myself included was part of. Without using my own subjective knowledge and my personal and professional positionality, I would never have been able to make sense of my participants lived experiences of transition to school during a worldwide pandemic.

The families who participated, many of whom expressed their thanks for being able to share their experiences and frustrations of an extraordinary time in history and be listened too. For families with SEND who often carry a burden of being misunderstood or needing to shout out loud for their child, having this space to chat and unload some of their experiences with outside agency support and challenges of communication with school was valued by them, and myself. This was also felt by the practitioners, who often felt confused and torn between wanting to support children with SEND in any way they could, yet constrained to the rules and regulations of Covid-19.

The children, families and practitioners who all participated in my research and shared their vivid experiences not only shaped my analysis and understanding,

challenged my professional assumptions and intensified my empathic understanding, but it reinforced my belief that children with SEND deserve to be heard as a fundamental right and practical requirement within their transition to school, in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989).

## **6.6 Research Approach**

### *Case studies*

Adopting multiple, embedded and retrospective case studies (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018) were effective for exploring the lived experiences of children with SEND, as well as the views and experiences of their parents/ caregivers and practitioners. Within the multiple case study design, each case consisted of the child's transition to school, as experienced by the child themselves, their parent/ caregiver and their practitioners, to provide a holistic view of the children's experiences at the time of Covid-19. The embedded case study focussed on the transition experiences of children with SEND in their school environment, through a multiple and retrospective case study design. This allowed for the exploration of children's experiences of their transition to school during Covid-19, bounded by one local authority, and exploring multiple sites (schools) in more than one context. The retrospective element related to past phenomena, for example, looking back at experiences of transition to school during Covid-19.

Focusing on each case in turn ensured I thoroughly explored the participant experiences, and as the researcher, this meant I could immerse myself into the experiences of the child, parent/ caregiver and practitioner at one setting, focusing on one site at a time. Whilst organising data generation this way did require time commitments and organisation between myself, the school and parents/ caregivers, I believe this approach to the research was effective and robust for exploring the lived experiences of children with SEND in their current settings.

Using a multiple case study approach to the research also allowed for theoretical and methodological application of reproducing the data generation methods at each school setting (site) (Yin, 2018). This approach ensured robustness of the data generation tools and supported my choice of reflexive thematic analysis, drawing out similar codes and themes amongst the participants.

### *Creative Approaches*

Using a creative approach to data collection through creative conversations with children with SEND, inspired by the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2011), was a valuable and methodological contribution to this study. Using creative methods, chosen by the children themselves, reinforced both a children's rights stance (UNCRC, 1989) and a strengths-based approach (Carr, 1999) within this study, and ensured children's agency and decision-making were a central feature.

Using a data collection method like creative conversations allowed for children with SEND to have agency in the research, as well as demonstrating through their own ways what they valued and prioritised in their school environment. Through different approaches chosen by the children themselves, for example, using an iPad and walking and talking within their school environment, drawing, role-play and imaginative play with dolls and trains, children were showing me what mattered in their school environments. This included objects, spaces, relationships and routines that they reached towards (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006; Carr, 1999).

Within these creative sessions, children were agentic, engaged, relaxed and had fun, and allowed myself as an adult and a researcher to enter their world. This redistributed power dynamics between me as the researcher and the children, creating relational spaces as we played and communicated together in their chosen activity (Bertram et al., 2025). Using this approach ensured the children shared their experiences from their own perspectives, rather than through systematic, adult-directed, interview-style questions. It is evident from the richness of the data around the children's lived experiences, including their reflections on their play, friendships, and emotional affects of Covid-19, that they felt comfortable and open within the creative sessions, sharing powerful and vivid insights into their lived experiences of transition to school during Covid-19.

Using creative methods in my study also demonstrated inclusive opportunities for children with diverse SEND profiles and different communicative styles, who often are excluded from sharing their voices and lived experiences. For example, through using creative methods such as train play, Basim, who is non-verbal and uses pictorial representation, echolalia, pointing and gestures to communicate, was able to participate in sharing his experiences of his transition to school, as the creative

methods allowed him to express his agency, interests, what he valued and reached towards in his school environment. Through responsive adult engagement and my professional experience and attentiveness to multimodal forms of communication, Basim was able to distinctly share meaningful and rich data about his own experiences of starting school during Covid-19, and the agency he had within it. This was further demonstrated through Basim taking himself to the door to communicate he had finished the creative session.

Using creative methods with children with SEND to give them a voice in matters that are important to them sets a precedent for future creative methodologies and research studies, demonstrating the possibilities and opportunities to expand their voices and experiences within inclusion, disability and education studies through methods that are child-led and designed around their modes of communication, rather than directed by adults around them. These considerations and creative approaches to research and data collection with children with SEND should be pivotal, recognising the richness of what children with SEND can communicate when given the opportunity.

### ***6.7 Limitations of the study***

This study has highlighted the importance of exploring the views of children with SEND in their transition to school during Covid-19. It provides a robust insight into research with children with SEND, and the need for including children with SEND in future research, pedagogical practice and policy, regarding matters that impact their lives. Furthermore, it presents a deep insight into what was important to the children with SEND included in this study in their transition to school, such as social connections and friendships, learning and routines, a sense of belonging, and an awareness of their social and emotional needs.

Nonetheless, there are several shortcomings of the study. The study was a small-scale research project, which means due to the small nature of the research, there was limited scope, for example practical implications, time and financial support.

Due to the sensitive nature of working with children with SEND in school settings, there were initial difficulties in recruiting and accessing schools within the area of study. Recruitment was constrained by gatekeeping structures, to keep children safe

at school. As a result, initial opportunities for participation were limited, and very few schools responded to my initial email or telephone call. The eventual recruitment of schools was facilitated through a local head teacher network meeting. This method of recruitment was encouraging, as it increased trust in the research project by the school leaders, through providing opportunities to ask questions and consider any potential participants in their setting.

It is important to note a further methodological limitation to this study. As already stated, the head teachers acted as gatekeepers within each setting, and they determined which members of staff, parents/ caregivers and children with SEND would be invited to participate within the research. Accordingly, decisions around participation were facilitated by adults in positions of authority, which may have shaped the structure of the participant groups, as well as the nature of data generated. This approach may have unconsciously restricted children's rights to be consulted about their participation in the research, as highlighted in Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989). This limitation draws attention to access arrangements and protocols of working with children in research, as well as a rights-based belief of enabling children as active agents to express their own views in matters that may impact or affect them. In future research, I would explore opportunities to strengthen direct involvement for children with SEND in the recruitment process, by accessing and engaging with community organisations and parent-child networks. This may reduce a reliance on institutional gatekeepers and allow for a broader range of children with SEND the opportunity to participate in research around matters that affect them. This would provide a more inclusive and representative sample of the experiences of children with SEND.

Disruptions during data generation highlighted another limitation of this study. Three out of five creative sessions with children were interrupted by the practitioners in the setting. The interruptions during these sessions reflected the practical constraints of conducting research with children in school settings, where classroom routines, learning priorities and an adult-directed environment often take precedence. Regular interruptions by practitioners could have therefore influenced the data generated, causing children's concentration to be impacted, disturbing their trail of thought, or not wanting to be honest about their experiences. This demonstrated that the

'space' given to ensure the children's voices were heard was interrupted by adults in their environment (Lundy, 2007). In future research, discussion and collaboration with practitioners prior to working with children could ensure this 'space' is protected for children, which allows them to engage openly, meaningfully and without interruption.

### ***6.8 Contribution to Knowledge***

This thesis contributes to discourses on the lived experiences of children with SEND, particularly around their transition into primary school during a worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, and what this experience looked like for children with SEND.

I have claimed that it is essential that we engage in discussions with children with SEND and listen carefully to their articulation of what is important to them in their transition to school. Below highlights the study contributions, including empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions:

#### ***Empirical contribution to knowledge:***

- ❖ Capturing the voices of children with SEND and their own perspectives on their transition to school during Covid-19.
- ❖ Children with SEND as active and competent participants in their own transition to school during Covid-19 who shaped their routines and learning, navigated friendships and relationships and articulated their fears and specific needs during Covid-19. This challenges deficit-based narratives of children with SEND as passive recipients of adult-driven directives and agendas.

#### ***Theoretical contribution:***

- ❖ Advancing the understandings of the importance of the voice of children with SEND in research and early childhood studies, demonstrating the essentiality of listening and genuinely acting upon the views of children with SEND.
- ❖ Drawing together the Bioecological Systems Theory and Human Rights lenses of children with SEND and their transition to school during a worldwide pandemic.
- ❖ These findings offer a different, UK perspective on dispositions for children with SEND entering the English school system, whereby they were utilised

during their transition to school to make sense of the social world in which they were entering (Carr, 1999; Claxton and Carr, 2004). This finding also challenges and extends Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) premise of 'force characteristics' of children as abstract, innate and static concepts within children's ecological systems, and provides evidence to suggest they are visible and shaped by the children themselves, within real-life contexts such as a child's transition to school. This extension of theory positions children with SEND as central and active contributors of their development in their transition to school.

***Methodological contribution:***

- Integration of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) Bioecological Systems Theory with a UNCRC (1989) child's rights approach, providing both a systemic and structural understanding of transition to school for children with SEND, and foregrounding their agency and voice in this experience.
- The use of creative conversations with children with SEND as a method of data collection was a methodological contribution to this study. Using creative methods that reinforced a children's rights and UNCRC (1989) stance, influenced by the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2011), and Carr's (1999) learning dispositions ensured children's strengths, agency and decision-making were central to the study.

***6.9 Impact of my study and COVID-19 on children with SEND***

The impact of Covid-19 on children with SEND included in this study was profound and insightful. As highlighted in the children's findings around the emotional affect of Covid-19 and their transition to school, children were still carrying memories and unprocessed emotions of what Covid-19 was like for them, still within Year 1 and 2 of their school life. For example, children shared their memories of the aches and pains they experienced within in their body, anxieties around death and illness, the emotional toll of starting school without friendships and social connections, and fears and challenges of leaving parents/ caregivers. These experiences were very real, and children were evidently still making sense of this time. Consistent with the Bateman and Danby (2013) study, giving children with SEND opportunities and time

to reflect and process significant events like Covid-19 was vitally important, given that catch-up and recovery agendas failed to prioritise foundational social and emotional support for children at this time.

My research offered children with SEND a genuine safe space to reflect on and communicate these experiences, process and make sense of this time of starting school, through fun, agentic and engaging activities, in a safe and calm environment. For the children included in my study, this may have been the first time someone has asked them what their experiences were like at this time and been given an opportunity to talk about it. Bateman and Danby (2013) highlight this as an opportunity to make sense of crisis events, which is essential to their long-term wellbeing and emotional development.

The lasting impact of my research study extends further than the participants' within my study. My study not only challenges how transition to school is carried out with children with SEND, arguing for a relational, slower and child-led approach, but it demonstrates the possibilities of including children with SEND in matters that impact them, and fully recognises children with SEND as agentic, active participants in their own transition to school experiences. Children with different SEND profiles, and children with diverse multimodal forms of communication are agentic and capable of articulating their experiences, interests, importances, priorities and fears, when given the chance, the right environment and communicative freedoms to do so. This study proves that, and as highlighted throughout the recommendations chapter, it has implications for how transition to school should be designed for children with SEND, centring their voices and participation, and how adults around them should listen and act on what children tell them.

The children included in this study deserve to know their voices mattered significantly, and that what they shared, such as their memories of friendships and social connections, the importance of routine and play, the emotive affect and fears, and their persistence and resilience in their transition to school during a worldwide pandemic contributed to a claim for fundamental change in how children with SEND are supported in their transitions to school. Their experiences and voices are documented and will not be ignored. My hope going forward is that future children with SEND will transition to school in a system that has genuinely learned to ask

them what is important to them and what matters, and to listen and genuinely act upon this when they answer. The recommendations and impact of this study for children with SEND are more critical now than ever, given the increasing prevalence of children with SEND in English school settings, and recent government proposals for a £200 million training package for SEND training (DfE, 2026).

### **6.10 Conclusions and Final Remarks**

The thesis has been guided by an overarching aim of exploring the lived experiences of children with SEND in their transition to school during the Covid-19 worldwide pandemic. To support this, three research questions were explored, including the lived experiences of the children with SEND themselves, the views and interpretations of their parents/ caregivers and practitioners, and recommendations for future pedagogical practice, policy and research.

The study has increased knowledge and understanding of transition to school experiences during a worldwide pandemic from the perspective of children with SEND, their parents/ caregivers and practitioners. This thesis adds to the small body of transition to school literature for children with SEND, suggesting that transition to school for children with SEND are shaped by their agentic dispositions within their microsystems, but also interwoven and shaped within complex proximal processes, contexts and across time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

Since this thesis was completed, there has been a UK inquiry into the Covid-19 pandemic (Varian, 2025), exploring the lived experiences of children and young people, and the impact of Covid-19 on their everyday lives. The study highlights children's heightened anxieties and fears, significant disruption to their education and support, and social isolation.

Whilst this report did not inform the design or analysis of my study, it presents a wider national context within which my study findings sit, highlighting the significance and importance of children's lived experiences during a worldwide pandemic, emphasising my original contribution to the field.

From my research, I came to several conclusions regarding the lived experiences of transition to school for children with SEND during Covid-19:

- Children with SEND were active, agentic participants and co-constructors in shaping their transition to school experiences during Covid-19, and not fully passive recipients of adult-directed systems and agendas. This was demonstrated within the children's findings, where they confirmed their preferences and needs such as learning, routines, connections, friendships and play, as well as being aware of their own anxieties, fears and worries of starting school during a worldwide pandemic. As discussed throughout this study, these views are often overlooked within schools and wider inclusion policies. This study contributes to the body of work on transitions to school, as well as the obligation of Article 12 (UNCRC, 1989) to include children with SEND in future decision-making processes, policies and research.
- There is often a disjuncture or misunderstanding between adult-directed views and agendas, and the experiences and views of children with SEND regarding their transition to school experiences, such as the importance of play, social connections, learning and routine that children with SEND valued as important to them at the time. This is significant for both inclusion policy and pedagogical practice, which often favours their opinions and experiences, over children themselves.
- The role of the adult (both parents/ caregivers and practitioners) in supporting and co-constructing transitions for children with SEND is vital, as evidenced in the children's findings around the support and relational care needed to support the impact of the social and emotional challenges of Covid-19.
- Reciprocal relationships between children with SEND, their parents/ caregivers and practitioners are essential in the transition to school yet disrupted due to Covid-19 restrictions, with a reduction and disappearance of face-to-face communication. Practitioners prioritised their relationships with children, and parents/ caregivers acknowledged and supported this.
- Systemic and structural constraints of Covid-19 impacted and exacerbated the support for children with SEND, such as development of relationships and communication between parents/ caregivers and practitioners, lack of outside agency support, digital divides and wider catch-up and recovery curriculums, that often prioritised academic development over social and emotional needs of children with SEND.

Overall, this study has shown the importance of listening and including children with SEND in research of matters that impact and affect them. As Haraway (2016) said, ‘it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with...’ (p.12), and this thesis has told the important stories of children with SEND who started school during a poignant time in history.

To end the poignant adventure (Braun, Clarke and Hayfield, 2019), I wish to conclude with a final thought:

*“Children are not things to be moulded, but are people to be unfolded”*

(Jess Lair, 2018).

This PhD has allowed me to put the children with SEND at the very heart of the research. By giving them space and time to listen to their lived experiences of starting school during a worldwide pandemic, it has allowed me to really consider what is important to children with SEND. Giving children with SEND this possibility helps to make a difference in their lives. It is wished that future research will develop this study to further explore the lived experiences of children with SEND and consider their voices in transitions to school practices and policy, and throughout their future lives.

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# Appendices

## 1: Ethical Approval



Faculty of Health, Education & Life Sciences Research Office  
Seacole Building, 8 Westbourne Road  
Birmingham  
B15 3TN  
25/Aug/2022

Mrs Emma Kettle

[EMMA.KETTLE@MAIL.BCU.AC.UK](mailto:EMMA.KETTLE@MAIL.BCU.AC.UK)

Dear Emma,

**Re: Kettle /#10681 /sub2 /R(B) /2022 /Aug /HELS FAEC - STARTING SCHOOL DURING COVID (A PANDEMIC!): EXPLORING THE TRANSITION EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES**

Thank you for your application and documentation regarding the above activity. I am pleased to take Chair's Action and approve this activity.

Provided that you are granted Permission of Access by relevant parties (meeting requirements as laid out by them), you may begin your activity.

I can also confirm that any person participating in the project is covered under the University's insurance arrangements.

Please note that ethics approval only covers your activity as it has been detailed in your ethics application. If you wish to make any changes to the activity, then you must submit an Amendment application for approval of the proposed changes.

Examples of changes include (but are not limited to) adding a new study site, a new method of participant recruitment, adding a new method of data collection and/or change of Project Lead.

Please also note that the Health, Education and Life Sciences Faculty Academic Ethics Committee should be notified of any serious adverse effects arising as a result of this activity.

If for any reason the Committee feels that the activity is no longer ethically sound, it reserves the right to withdraw its approval. In the unlikely event of issues arising which would lead to this, you will be consulted.

**Keep a copy of this letter along with the corresponding application for your records as evidence of approval.**

If you have any queries, please contact [HELS\\_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:HELS_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk)

If you would like to provide feedback on the ethics process, please complete the feedback form using [this link](#).

I wish you every success with your activity.

Yours Sincerely,

Professor Joanne Brooke

On behalf of the Health, Education and Life Sciences Faculty Academic Ethics Committee.

## 2: Permission of Access Letter



### **Invitation: Starting school in a Covid era: Exploring the lived experiences of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.**

Dear Primary School,

I am Emma Kettle, and I'm writing to you as a PhD student at Birmingham City University (BCU) and a previous primary school teacher and SENCo, to ask for your help with my current research.

As part of my research, I am exploring the lived experiences of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) starting their primary school journey after the Covid-19 school closures. As we continue to live in this Covid-era, it is essential to explore what it was like for children with SEND starting school in a worldwide pandemic and navigating a changed landscape. It is hoped the study will allow children to reflect and recognise what was important to them when they started their primary education, as well as how parents/ carers and teachers can best support future transitions throughout their primary education. It is also hoped this study will contribute to an improved understanding of children's transition experiences within the early years sector, and ensure policy-makers, educators, and governments consider what is important to children with SEND when starting school.

#### **Who is involved?**

The research would involve children with SEND in Year 2 (who transitioned into school during the Covid-19 school closures), their parents/ carers, and teachers who taught in Reception class during the Covid-19 school closures.

#### **What would the participants be asked to do?**

- Teachers and parents/ carers – a short, online questionnaire (approximately **10 minutes** to complete in their own time) and a semi-structured interview (approximately **30 minutes**).
- Children - a short **30-minute** creative activity such as child-led photography, drawing, walking tours, collaging, Lego etc. (the activity will be guided by the child's interests), followed by a **20-minute** conversation to discuss the data generated in the activity, via the child's preferred method of communication.

#### **How long for?**

It is hoped that I would be able to spend an extended amount of time in your school (1/2 weeks) to build relationships with teachers, parents/ carers, and children. I have a full DBS and would be more than willing to support the class teacher/ children taking part in the study throughout the week, as well as have opportunities to carry out data collection.

***How will the data be kept safe?***

It should be highlighted that **no information identifying schools or individual children, teachers, or parents/ carers will be reported or published**. I have attached a participation information letter that further explains the research and how I intend to keep the information confidential during this study. Additionally, this study has been approved by the ethics committee at BCU. I very much hope you can help me with my work, and I will be in touch by phone or email shortly.

Yours sincerely,  
**Emma Kettle**

Birmingham City University [Emma.kettle@mail.bcu.ac.uk](mailto:Emma.kettle@mail.bcu.ac.uk)

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For any queries pertaining to the research, please contact the above email.

### 3: Vetting Letter for Schools



Birmingham City University  
School of Education and Social Work  
Faculty of Health Education and Life Sciences  
City South Campus B14 3TN

To whomever it may concern

**RE: Emma Kettle, Graduate Research and Teaching Assistant**

Emma is employed a doctoral researcher and part-time assistant lecturer in the School of Education and Social Work at Birmingham City University. Her employment period is February 2022 to February 2026.

Her research aims to explore the transition experiences of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in the Birmingham/West Midlands area. Her study was granted full ethical approval by the Faculty Academic Ethics Committee in August 2022 reference Kettle /#10681 /sub2 /R(B) /2022 /Aug /HELS FAEC.

Her study is supervised by three experienced academics:

- Dr. Carolyn Blackburn, Director of Studies, Reader in Interdisciplinary Practice and Research with Families, Birmingham City University
- Dr. Colin Watt, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, Birmingham City University
- Dr. Elaine Matchett, Associate Professor, Coventry University

We meet regularly (at least once a month) to discuss Emma's study and Emma and myself are in weekly email contact to ensure that any concerns or issues are addressed early. In addition, doctoral researchers are subject to annual reviews by our Doctoral College which involves a panel review of their progress and requires a report on any ethical issues arising. You can contact me on [Carolyn.blackburn@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:Carolyn.blackburn@bcu.ac.uk) to discuss any concerns regarding the research itself. I have previously supervised eight doctoral students to successful completion and examined over a dozen.

Recruitment of GRTA staff undergoes the same vetting procedures as all other staff within the University and Emma holds a CRB certificate in order to carry out her research. Best wishes

Dr. Carolyn Blackburn  
Reader in Interdisciplinary Practice and Research with Families  
Birmingham City University

#### **4: Parent/ Caregiver Participation Information Sheet**

### **INFORMATION LEAFLET FOR PARENTS/ CARERS**

**Starting school during Covid (a pandemic!): Exploring the transition experiences of children with special educational needs and/ or disabilities**

**A PhD Research Project undertaken at Birmingham City University**  
February 2022 – February 2026

I'm Emma, a PhD student at Birmingham City University (BCU) and a previous primary school teacher. As part of my research project, I am exploring the experiences of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) starting primary school during the Covid-19 school closures.

You have been invited to participate in the research project because you are the parent of a child with SEND who started primary school during the Covid-19 school closures (March 2020-September 2020). Please take time to read the following information about the project. Before you decide whether you wish to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being carried out and what it would involve for you.

#### **What does the research involve?**

This research involves finding out about the different experiences of starting school for children with SEND during government-directed school closures, as well as gaining the experiences of their parents/ carers, and their teachers.

#### **Who will be involved in the project?**

Parents, carers, teachers, and children with SEND will participate in the project.

#### **What if I do not want to take part?**

If you do not want to take part in the research that is no problem as participation is entirely voluntary. Additionally, you have the right to withdraw your permission at any point during the project without prejudice.

#### **What will taking part involve?**

If you agree to take part, it will involve a short survey (10 minutes) to gain your initial thoughts and views, and a follow-up interview/discussion with me (approximately 30 minutes), where we can explore some of the themes from your survey in more depth. We will discuss your experiences of your child starting primary school during the Covid-19 school closures. The interview/ discussion will be transcribed and recorded using a digital recorder. You can see the transcript if you wish to verify the contents for accuracy. The interview/ discussion can be stopped at any point, should you not wish to continue.

#### **What are the benefits of taking part?**

Parents often find it beneficial to talk about their child's experiences of starting school, including positive aspects of their development and learning. Parents often find it valuable to voice what is important to their children. It is also hoped the study will contribute to an improved understanding of the varying experiences that children with SEND had whilst starting school during a worldwide pandemic.

**What are the risks of taking part?**

It is not expected that the research will pose any risks. However, it is accepted that discussing Covid-19 and the school closures could bring back distressing memories or experiences for you. Please note that if this happens, the discussion can be stopped anytime.

**How will my information be kept confidential?**

All information collected by the researcher will be confidential to the researcher and the University. Nothing will be disclosed outside of the project in any way that will identify any individual, without permission. All information, whether electronic or physical, will be held securely on a password-protected computer, and a secure BCU OneDrive account. Copies of written and recorded information relating to you will be available to you upon request.

**What happens if any sensitive issues are raised during the course of the research study?**

If any sensitive issues are raised, these will be discussed with you and a mutual decision made to include such issues in the research data. Any data collected that is considered too sensitive or to portray negative images/perceptions of you will be disregarded in agreement with you. If any information is disclosed during the discussion that suggests a child or member of the public is at risk of harm, I will follow the safeguarding procedures at the school.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

At the end of the research, the findings will be shared in a written report called a thesis. They will also be shared through articles and presentations with:

- Students and researchers at universities and schools in England
- Other stakeholders interested in the transition experiences of children with SEND, such as charities and policymakers.

**What if I have more questions or do not understand something?**

You may contact the researcher at any time [Emma.Kettle@mail.bcu.ac.uk](mailto:Emma.Kettle@mail.bcu.ac.uk). If you do not receive satisfactory answers to your questions, you can contact Emma's Director of Studies, Dr. Carolyn Blackburn, Birmingham City University at [Carolyn.Blackburn@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:Carolyn.Blackburn@bcu.ac.uk).

## 5 : Parent/ Caregiver Consent Form

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

#### Starting school during Covid (a pandemic!): Exploring the transition experiences of children with special educational needs and/ or disabilities

Name of Researcher: Emma Kettle

Director of Studies: Dr Carolyn Blackburn

Project Code:

Participant identification number:

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Initial

1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet (Version dated 08/05/2024) for this study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and they have been answered satisfactorily.	
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, and without my legal rights being affected.	
3. I will be interviewed to discuss my child's transition experiences during the Covid-19 lockdown.	
4. I agree to audio recording and the use of anonymised quotes in research reports and publications. This will be kept on a secure OneDrive device and data deleted at the end of the researcher's doctoral studies (February 2026).	
5. Pseudonyms will be used throughout data collection to protect the identify of all participants.	
6. I can see the transcription of the interview if I so wish, and know I can have a copy of the findings once the data has been analysed and written up as part of the main thesis.	
7. I give permission for the findings to be used in conference presentations and academic journals.	
8. I can withdraw consent at any point throughout the process of data collection phase, which will be until July 2024.	
9. I agree to take part in this study.	
10. I agree for my child to take part in this study, if they give permission too.	
<p>Name: _____ Date _____ Signature: _____</p> <p>Name of person taking consent: _____ Date: _____ Signature: _____</p> <p><i>*1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher site file; 1 (original) to be kept in medical notes (if participant is a patient)</i></p>	

## 6: Practitioner Participation Information Sheet

### INFORMATION LEAFLET FOR PRACTITIONERS

**Starting school during Covid (a pandemic!): Exploring the transition experiences of children with special educational needs and/ or disabilities**

**A PhD Research Project undertaken at Birmingham City University**

February 2022 – February 2026

I'm Emma, a PhD student at Birmingham City University (BCU) and a previous primary school teacher. As part of my research project, I am exploring the transition experiences of children with special educational needs and/ or disabilities (SEND) into their primary school setting during the Covid-19 school closures.

You have been invited to participate in the research project because **you are/ were a teacher of a child with SEND who transitioned into their primary school setting during this time (March 2020- September 2020)**. Please take time to read the following information about the project. Before you decide whether you wish to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being carried out and what it would involve for you.

#### **What does the research involve?**

This research involves finding out about the different lived experiences of starting school for children with special educational needs and/ or disabilities during government-directed school closures and gaining the experiences of this transition from their parents/ carers, and teachers.

#### **Who will be involved in the project?**

Parents, teachers, and children with SEND will participate in the project.

#### **What if I do not want to take part?**

If you do not want to participate in the research, that is no problem, as participation is voluntary. Additionally, you have the right to withdraw your permission at any time during the project without prejudice.

#### **What will taking part involve?**

If you agree to take part, it will involve a short survey (10 minutes) to gain your initial thoughts and views, and a follow-up interview/discussion with me (approximately 30 minutes), where we can explore some of the themes from your survey in more depth. We will discuss your experiences of children transitioning to their primary school during the Covid-19 school closures. The interview/ discussion will be transcribed and recorded using a digital recorder. You can see the transcript if you wish to verify the contents for accuracy. The interview/ discussion can be stopped at any point, should you not wish to continue.

#### **What are the benefits of taking part?**

By exploring a range of transition experiences, it is hoped this study will allow teachers to share best practice ideas for supporting schools, families, and children with SEND in their transition to school in the future. It is also hoped the study will contribute to an improved understanding of the varying experiences that children with SEND had whilst starting school during a worldwide pandemic.

### **What are the risks of taking part?**

It is not expected that the research will pose any risks. However, it is accepted that discussing Covid-19 and the school closures could bring back distressing memories or experiences for you. Please note that if this happens, the discussion can be stopped anytime.

### **How will my information be kept confidential?**

All information collected by the researcher will be confidential to the researcher and the University. Nothing will be disclosed outside of the project in any way that will identify any individual, without permission. All information, whether electronic or physical, will be held securely on a password-protected computer, and a secure BCU OneDrive account. Copies of written and recorded information relating to you will be available to you upon request.

### **What happens if any sensitive issues are raised during the course of the research study?**

If any sensitive issues are raised during interviews these will be discussed with you and a mutual decision made as to the inclusion of such issues in the research data. Any data collected that is considered too sensitive or to portray negative images/perceptions of you will be disregarded in agreement with you. If any information is disclosed during the discussion that suggests a child or member of the public is at risk of harm, I will follow the safeguarding procedures at the school.

### **What will happen to the results of the research study?**

At the end of the research, the findings will be shared in a written report called a thesis. They will also be shared through articles and presentations with:

- Students and researchers at universities and schools in England
- Other stakeholders interested in the transition experiences of children with SEND, such as charities, policymakers, and funders.

### **What if I have more questions or do not understand something?**

You may contact the researcher at any time [Emma.Kettle@mail.bcu.ac.uk](mailto:Emma.Kettle@mail.bcu.ac.uk). If you do not receive satisfactory answers to your questions, you can contact Emma's Director of Studies, Dr. Carolyn Blackburn, Birmingham City University at [Carolyn.Blackburn@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:Carolyn.Blackburn@bcu.ac.uk)

## 7: Practitioner Consent Form

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

#### Starting school during Covid: Exploring the lived experiences of children with special educational needs and/ or disabilities (SEND)

Name of Researcher: Emma Kettle

Director of Studies: Dr Carolyn Blackburn

Project Code:

Participant identification number:

1068110681

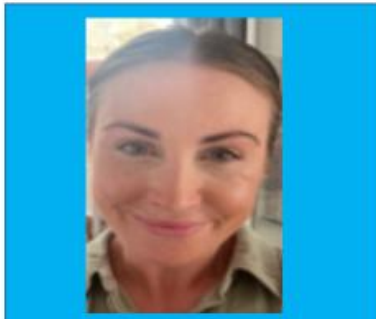
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Initial box

1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet (Version dated 08/05/2024) for this study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and they have been answered satisfactorily.	
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, and without my legal rights being affected.	
3. I will be interviewed to discuss the transition experiences of children with SEND during the Covid-19 lockdown.	
4. I agree to audio recording and the use of anonymised quotes in research reports and publications. This will be kept on a secure OneDrive device and data deleted at the end of the researcher's doctoral studies (February 2026).	
5. Pseudonyms will be used throughout data collection to protect the identify of all participants.	
6. I can see the transcription of the interview if I so wish, and know I can have a copy of the findings once the data has been analysed and written up as part of the main thesis.	
7. I give permission for the findings to be used in conference presentations and academic journals.	
8. I can withdraw consent at any point throughout the process of data collection phase, which will be until July 2024.	
9. I agree to take part in this study.	
<p>Name: _____ Date _____ Signature: _____</p> <p>Name of person taking consent: _____ Date: _____ Signature: _____</p> <p><i>*1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher site file; 1 (original) to be kept in medical notes (if participant is a patient)</i></p>	

## 8: Children's Participation Information Sheet and Consent Form

Children's Participation Information Sheet and Consent Form 13/06/2024



Hi, my name is Emma.



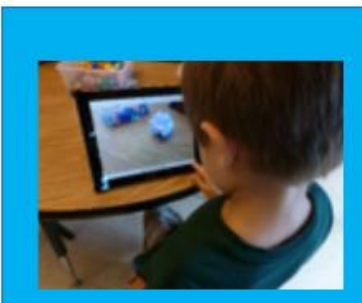
I am going to visit you in your school.



You can show and tell me all the things you liked or did when you started school.



We can draw pictures of the things you remember about starting school.



We can use iPads to take pictures of the things or places you like in your school.



You can choose if you would like to join in, it's up to you.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Any artefacts (drawings, photographs, modelling created can be included in the study: YES/ NO

## **9: Online Survey Example – Parents/ Caregivers**



# **Exploring the experiences of children with Special Educational Needs and/ or Disabilities starting school during Covid-19 - Parents**

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## **Research Information**

Please ensure you have read the Participant Information Sheet before you begin this survey. This will give you details regarding the purpose of the research, the safety, and storage of any personal information collected during the survey, and the confidentiality of participants. By clicking next, you agree to take part in the study.

# Background Information

This questionnaire is designed to learn about your child's experiences starting their primary education during the COVID-19 school closures, and what was important to both you and them during this time. Please give as much information as possible to help establish your child's experiences when they started school during a worldwide pandemic. The first section is designed to gather general information to gain an understanding of the situation for you and your child during the COVID-19 school closures.

1. Please enter your child's setting/ school name

0/32,000 characters

2. Please select your status through lockdown \*

- Single
- Married
- Living with Partner
- Divorced
- Seperated
- Other

3. If you selected Other, please specify:

0/32,000 characters

4. During the school closures, did you work? Please include all parents/ carers in the household during this time. \*

- I continued to go to work
- We continued to go to work
- I worked from home
- We worked from home
- I didn't work
- We didn't work
- Other

5. If you selected Other, please specify:

0/32,000 characters

6. Approximately how many hours did you work per week? (Please tick the hours that apply for all parents/ carers in the household) \*

- 0 - 5
- 6 - 10
- 11 - 15
- 16 - 20
- 21 - 25
- 26 - 30
- 31 - 35
- 35+
- Other

# Children's experiences during Covid-19

7. If you selected Other, please specify:

0/32,000 characters

The next section is about your child/ children, their special educational needs and/ or disabilities, and their experiences of starting school during COVID-19 lockdown.

8. What are your child's specific need(s)? \*

- Specific Learning Difficulties e.g. dyslexia, dyscalculia
- Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD)
- Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD)
- Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD)
- Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs
- Speech, Language and Communication Needs
- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Multisensory Impairment (MI)
- Visual Impairment (VI)
- Physical Disability (PD)
- Hearing Impairment (HI)
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Down's Syndrome
- Other


9. If you selected Other, please specify:

0/32,000 characters

10. What level of support was your child receiving on entering their primary education? \*

- Education, Health and Care Plan (in place)
- Education, Health and Care Plan (in application/ process)
- SEN Support
- Other


11. If you selected Other, please specify:

0/32 000 characters 

12. Please list all the professionals who supported your child starting school during COVID-19? \*

- Teacher
- Early Years Practitioner/ Key Worker
- Speech and Language Therapist
- SENCo
- Other

13. If you selected Other, please specify:

0/32,000 characters 

14. In your opinion, how would you rate your child's overall experience of starting school during the COVID-19 school closures? (1 being poor and 5 being excellent) \*


- Poor
- 1
  - 2
  - 3
  - 4
  - 5

15. On a scale of 1-10, how happy was your child starting school?

Not happy

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10


16. Please give reasons for your answer above.

0/32,000 characters 

17. Did you or your child face any challenges/ barriers or difficulties of starting school during the school closures? \*

- Yes
- No

18. What challenges, barriers and/ or difficulties did you or your child face?

0/32,000 characters 

20. Was anything implemented by the teacher that worked well to support your child starting school? \*

0/32,000 characters



19. How do you think these challenges, barriers and/ or difficulties could have been overcome or avoided?

0/32,000 characters




21. How easy did you find it to communicate with your child's school or teacher regarding them starting school during the school closures? (1 being very difficult, and 5 being very easy). \*

Very Difficult

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

22. In what way(s) did you communicate with your child's teacher? (e.g. online, telephone, face-to-face) \*

0/32,000 characters 

0/32,000 characters

23. Was your expertise, opinions, or views regarding your child's individual needs considered and listened to when your child started school during the school closures? \*

- Yes, always
- Yes, sometimes
- No, not at all
- Other

24. If you selected Other, please specify:


0/32,000 characters

25. Please expand your answer


26. Were your child's opinions and views regarding their own needs or feelings about starting school considered or listened to during this time? \*

- Yes, always
- Yes, sometimes
- No, not at all
- Other


27. If you selected Other, please specify:

0/32,000 characters 

28. In what ways were your child's opinions and views considered?

0/32,000 characters 

29. Why do you think your child's feelings or opinions were not considered when they started school?


0/32,000 characters 

30. Did your child's school offer a range of support for you and your child during the starting school process? \*


Yes

No


31. 18. What type of support was offered?

0/32,000 characters 

32. What do you think enabled or allowed your child's school to offer this support when your child started school?

0/32,000 characters 

33. What do you think prevented your child's school from offering support when your child started school?


0/32,000 characters 

34. Reflecting on this time, use one word to describe the experience your child had of starting school during COVID-19. \*

0/32,000 characters

You have now come to the end of the questionnaire. Thank you for taking part. If you are prepared to take part in a short discussion/ interview with the Researcher, and/ or prepared for your child to take part in a short discussion regarding their experiences of starting school during the COVID-19 school closures, please provide details in the box below.

35. Please provide your name and an email address:

0/32,000 characters 

## **10: Online Survey Example – Practitioners**



# **Exploring transition to school experiences of children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) - Teachers**

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## **Research Information**

Please ensure you have read the Participant Information Sheet before you begin this survey. This will give you details regarding the purpose of the research, the safety, and storage of any personal information collected during the survey, and the confidentiality of participants. By clicking next, you agree to take part in the study.

This questionnaire is designed to find out about the transition experiences of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) starting their primary education during the COVID-19 school closures. Please give as much information as possible to help establish what transition experiences were like for children with SEND during this time. Background – please can you give a brief overview of your teaching career.

1. Name of setting/ school

0/32,000 characters

2. Type of setting \*

- Maintained Primary School
- Academy Primary School
- Special Education School
- Conductive Education Setting
- Private/ Independent School
- Other

3. If you selected Other, please specify:

0/32,000 characters

4. How many years have you been teaching? \*

- 0 - 3
- 4 - 6
- 7 - 9
- 10 +

5. What is your current teaching position? \*

- Class teacher
- Class teacher with extra responsibility
- Senior Leadership Team
- SENCo
- Other

6. If you selected Other, please specify:

0/32,000 characters

7. How did you obtain your teaching qualification? \*

- Education Degree with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS)
- Initial Teacher Education
- Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)
- Other

8. If you selected Other, please specify:

0/32,000 characters

9. How many children did you have entering Reception with special educational needs and disabilities during the Covid-19 school closures (September 2020)? \*

- 0 - 2
- 3 - 5
- 6 - 8
- 9 - 11
- 12 +

The next few questions are related to transition and COVID-19 school closures. Please can you reflect on this time and your experiences by expanding on your answers.

10. Pre-Covid-19 school closures, how would you normally carry out transition for pupils with SEND entering your setting? Please tick all that apply. \*

- School visits
- Teacher visits
- Moving up day
- Visit to child's pre-school or nursery
- Visit to child's home
- Communication/ Meeting with child's key workers
- Communication/ Meeting with child's parents/ carers
- Communication/ Meeting with outside agencies
- Other

11. If you selected Outside agencies, please specify:

0/32,000 characters


12. If you selected Other, please specify:

0/32,000 characters


13. What transition activities did you use to support children entering your class with SEND during the Covid-19 school closures? \*

- Virtual/ online meeting with child
- Virtual/ online meeting with parents/ carers
- Virtual/ online tour of the school (including dinner hall, toilets and playground)
- Virtual/ online tour of the classroom
- Distanced school visit
- Distanced teacher visit
- Pre-recorded teacher introduction
- Communication/ meeting with child's previous key worker
- Communication/ meeting with parents/ carers
- Virtual/ online activities
- Other

14. If you selected Other, please specify:

0/32,000 characters 

15. If you selected Virtual/ online activities, please specify:

0/32,000 characters 

16. Did you face any significant challenges/ barriers or difficulties during this transition experience? \*

- Yes
- No

0/32,000 characters

17. Please expand on any challenges, barriers and/ or difficulties you faced:

0/32,000 characters

18. How did you overcome these challenges, barriers and/ or difficulties?

19. What support did you offer to parents/ carers and children with SEND who were due to enter your class? \*

0/32,000 characters

20. How did you communicate with children with SEND and their parents/ carers during this time? \*

0/32,000 characters

0/32,000 characters

21. Was there any part of the transition process that worked well for you and the children entering your class with SEND? \*

0/32,000 characters


22. Was there anything that didn't work so well during this transition process for you and the children entering your class with SEND? \*

23. Reflecting on this time, use one word to describe the transition experience for children entering your class with SEND. \*

0/32,000 characters

If you are prepared to participate in a short discussion with the Researcher to further discuss your experiences with children with SEND starting school during Covid-19 school closures, please leave your name and contact details below. These will remain confidential, and names will not be disclosed throughout the research.

24. Please provide your name and email address:

0/32,000 characters 

## **11: Semi-structured Interview Schedule – Practitioners**

### **Semi-structured interview themes (Practitioners)**

**Themes** – use these themes/ topic areas to initiate conversations with practitioners.

#### ***Transition in general***

**For example –**

- meanings of transition
- what does it look like in the setting
- changes due to Covid-19

#### ***Children's experiences***

**For example –**

- preparing and supporting children's specific needs
- getting to know the children with SEND
- what supported/ challenged individual children

#### ***Affordances***

**For example –**

- was there anything that supported or helped children in their transition to school
- what worked well for children/ parents/ practitioners

#### ***Barriers/ Challenges***

**For example -**

- Challenges or barriers to children's transition due to Covid-19
- Change of practice/ support for children with SEND
- Reflections of Covid-19

## **12: Semi-structured Interview Schedule – Parents/ Caregivers**

### **Semi-structured interview question schedule (Parents/ caregivers)**

#### **Themes**

##### ***Transition in general***

###### **For example –**

- meanings of transition
- what does it mean for you and your child/ family
- changes due to Covid-19

##### ***Children's experiences***

###### **For example –**

- preparing and supporting children's specific needs
- getting to know the children with SEND
- what supported/ challenged individual children

##### ***Affordances***

###### **For example –**

- was there anything that supported or helped children in their transition to school
- what worked well for children/ parents/ caregivers

##### ***Barriers/ Challenges***

###### **For example -**

- Challenges or barriers to children's transition due to Covid-19
- Support for children with SEND
- Reflections of Covid-19

## **13: Creative Conversation Schedule – Children**

### **Creative Conversation Schedule**

These will take place during/ after we have carried out creative activity of the child's choice e.g. drawing/ taking photographs around school/ class, Lego-building, painting etc. (The activity will depend on the child's preferences and communication methods, directed by the child themselves and knowledge of the child from parents/ carers and teachers).

### **General questions to start conversation about school**

- Good/ bad day
- 
- Memories of starting school
- 
- Likes/ dislikes of school
- 
- Safe places, people in school
- 
- Important things when starting school
- 

### **Covid-19 questions**

- Memories of Covid-19
- General discussion of Covid-19
- Starting school during Covid-19 – what was that like
- Challenges/ support at this time

These questions are flexible and may change depending on the child's ability to communicate/ understand the question. These questions will act only as a guide, and the conversation will flow in line with the children's responses.