Supporting Young People's Emotional Wellbeing During The Transition To Secondary School In Regional Australia

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Abstract

Extensive international literature is available on aspects and impacts associated with students' transition from primary to secondary school. However, in regional and rural Australia, it is challenging for educators and healthcare professionals to ensure that interventions supporting the emotional wellbeing of students transitioning to secondary school are informed by context-specific evidence. This paper presents a narrative review of research published since 2010 investigating students' emotional wellbeing and psychological impacts of the transition to secondary school, with a focus on programs implemented to support young people during this transition. Research specific to students in regional and rural areas of Australia was lacking, with a marked absence of studies in regional and rural settings outside Western Australia and Tasmania. Similarly, research evaluating programs to support the psychological wellbeing of students transitioning to secondary school was lacking. However, this review provides a comprehensive overview of factors influencing the transition to secondary school from the perspectives of young people, their parents and teachers. These Australian data capture particular concerns and features that may inform development and implementation of interventions specific to the needs of young people in regional and rural communities across Australia. In schools where no specific intervention is planned, this review provides general guidance regarding challenges faced by transitioning students and possible ways students can be supported. In particular, this review highlights the need for educators and researchers to work together to develop and evaluate programs to support young people as they transition from primary to secondary school.

Keywords: Australia, rural, regional, school transition, secondary school students, wellbeing

Introduction

Globally, there is an extensive body of literature focused on aspects and impacts associated with students' transition from primary to secondary school. For educators and healthcare professionals seeking to support the emotional wellbeing of students transitioning to secondary school in regional Australia, a particular challenge is ensuring interventions are informed by context-specific evidence. The present review focuses on recent studies investigating: students' emotional wellbeing, the psychological impacts of transition to secondary school experienced by students in regional areas of Australia, and programs designed to support the psychological wellbeing of students transitioning in regional schools.

Background

The transition from primary to secondary school is a major challenge confronting young people in the early years of adolescence. Erikson (1963, 1968) described human development as a series of stages, with adolescence defined as a time of identity formation. Extensive exploration of this

developmental stage over many decades has highlighted the complexity of the identity formation process and the multitude of factors that influence and impact on this process (Kroger, 2012). Bosacki (2016) suggested that few researchers and theorists have directed equal attention to the social and emotional developmental needs of young people transitioning from later childhood to early adolescence. She describes this period as comprising *'complex social cognitive dimensions of… both… private and public worlds'* (p. 326). Young people in Australia transition from primary to secondary school in this complex context.

For children and young people growing up in regional Australia, the 'tyranny of distance' (Edwards & Baxter, 2014) may add an additional layer of complexity. Living in a rural or regional location may provide some protective factors such as community involvement and a sense of belonging. However, a systematic evaluation of children aged 1–9 years living in urban and regional areas identified differences in cognitive outcomes. Although not limited to regional areas, the 'tyranny of disadvantage' increases the likelihood of emotional and behavioural difficulties (Edwards & Baxter, 2014). Recent reports on the extent of emotional and behavioural difficulties among children and adolescents highlight the need to address issues impacting on mental health and wellbeing. The second Australia-wide survey conducted in 2013–2014 to assess the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 4–17 years reported that 17% of this cohort had used mental health services in the previous 12 months (Johnson et al., 2016). This represented a substantial increase from the rate reported in the first national survey in 1998. Dray et al. (2016) focused on the mental health of adolescents aged 12–16 years living in regional New South Wales (NSW), and reported associations between sociodemographic factors and mental health issues. They found that 27% of adolescents rated high or very high for overall mental health problems. A recent meta-analysis of 26 community-based studies examining the relationship between mental health problems and academic achievement highlighted the importance of early identification and intervention for young people with emotional problems (Riglin, Petrides, Frederickson, & Rice, 2014).

Although there is extensive global literature on transition, most studies focus on academic performance and the difficulties and negative impacts of the transition to secondary school (Gniewosz, Eccles, & Noack, 2012; Towns, 2011). The unsettling nature of this period in a young person's educational journey has been well-described (Benner, 2011). The complexity of this transition is reflected in multiple influencing factors, including socioeconomic, demographic, school-level, individual and relational factors (Maguire & Yu, 2015; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010). Over the past decade, attention has been directed to identifying factors that support successful transition, and exploring the perspectives of students, parents and teachers.

An Australian researcher reported a comprehensive review of research published from 2005–2011 that described young people's transition experiences from primary to secondary school (Hanewald, 2013). Key themes identified were student belonging and wellbeing, the role of support from teachers and parents, the role of peers, academic outcomes and the importance of family-school connections. However, only three of the 38 articles identified in that review were studies undertaken in an Australian setting (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Marston, 2008; Waters, Cross, & Shaw, 2010).

This review aimed to identify recent relevant empirical research and literature reviews, particularly studies undertaken in Australia. Specifically, the review focused on the primary to secondary school transition experience of young people, the perspectives of their families and teachers and existing emotional/psychological support programs targeting this population. The present authors were involved in the development of an intervention to support the emotional wellbeing of young people transitioning from primary to secondary school in regional and rural

NSW. This initial literature review yielded findings of relevance to researchers and educators working in rural and regional education.

Methods

In April 2017, a search was conducted across a number of databases: CINAHL Plus with Full-Text; ERIC (via EBSCO and ERIC website); Psych INFO 2002–present; Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection; Health Collection (Informit); Humanities and Social Sciences Collection; Australian Family and Society Abstracts Database (FAMILY); and Proquest Education Journals. The search aimed to identify research published between 2011 and April 2017 on the transition experience of young people, perspectives of their families and teachers related to mental and emotional wellbeing, and interventions designed to provide emotional support. In particular, relevant studies undertaken in Australia were sought.

Key search terms were: 'transition secondary primary', intervention, mental health, school, wellbeing, rural, social competence OR emotional competence OR interpersonal competence, NOT (university OR higher education OR autism OR disability OR college). The search was replicated by a second research assistant. Primary inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed studies that were published in English. Studies focusing on specialist areas such as young people living with chronic illness, special needs or particular areas of social disadvantage were excluded. Studies from countries in which the school system differed markedly from the Australian context were also excluded.

Results

The initial search yielded 125 papers. Fifty-six papers were excluded after review of the abstracts, the remaining 69 publications underwent full-text review. Of these, seven non-Australian studies and 14 Australian studies were included in this review. Selected studies were evaluated methodically using deductive reasoning. Studies that examined the psychological impact of the transition to secondary school or that described interventions to support this transition are considered here.

Non-Australian studies: perspectives on transition

A comprehensive evaluation of factors that predicted successful or difficult transitions to secondary school was reported in the School Transition and Adjustment Research study conducted in South East England from 2012–2013 (Rice et al., n.d.). That study indicated students need positive academic and behavioural engagement in school along with a sense of belonging for a successful transition. Specific characteristics of an individual child that were likely to predict adjustment included the child's capacity for psychological adjustment, self-control and motivation to learn. Additional factors that had a moderate effect on better academic and behavioural adjustment included: female gender, higher socioeconomic status, low parental transition concerns, high positive life events, high learning motivation, high self-control and low psychological adjustment difficulties (Rice et al., n.d.). In another UK study, Riglin et al. (2013) examined the impact of a young person's psychological functioning on their academic achievements in Year 7 (first year of secondary school). This two-phase longitudinal study found symptoms of depression, school liking and behavioural problems (identified as conduct problems) predicted lower academic achievement following transition to secondary school.

Topping (2011) identified a marked difference between teacher and student perspectives on the transition to secondary school in a narrative literature review of studies published globally before 2010. Teachers primarily focused on academic attainment, whereas students focused more on

socio-emotional issues such as peer relationships. Table 1 summarises non-Australia studies focusing on perspectives of transition included in the present review.

Authors and Year	Sample	Country	Age	Focus	Method
Rice et al. n.d. Conducted 2012–2013	2,000 pupils Collected data from students, parents and teachers	South East England (UK)	Year 6–7	Identifying factors that predict successful or difficult transitions to secondary school	Mixed methods three-phase trial: questionnaires, interviews
Riglin et al. 2013	202 students	Southern county, UK	11–12 years	Psychological functioning and academic attainment in Year 7	Two-phase longitudinal study
Topping 2011	Reporting on transition to secondary school	Global		Teacher and student perspectives on transition to secondary school	Literature review, 88 international studies

Table 1: *Summary of non-Australian studies from 2011–2017*

Non-Australian studies: interventions related to transition to secondary school
Studies reporting on interventions designed to improve wellbeing and emotional functioning during the transition to secondary school were limited, and included small sample sizes. Two studies discussed interventions targeting vulnerable students. Akister et al. (2016) evaluated a summer activity project designed to support children identified by primary school teachers as vulnerable (i.e. exhibiting emotional or behavioural problems). Follow-up at the end of Year 7 found a reduction in emotional distress in those with emotional problems; however, there was no apparent impact on children with behavioural problems. Those authors emphasised the importance of early intervention programs targeted to the specific needs of individual students.

In Scotland, nurture groups were established in primary schools to support vulnerable students (Boxall & Lucas, 2010). Nurture groups (usually 10–12 students) provide additional support for students and assist the development of social, emotional, communication and academic skills necessary for integration into the broader school environment. Nurture groups have been identified as effective for students with emotional difficulties and behaviours that place them at high risk of exclusion from school. Kourmoulaki (2013) conducted a qualitative study investigating factors that contribute to optimal functioning of nurture groups in the secondary school setting, and identified possible areas for improvement of this type of intervention, such as ensuring effective communication between staff, students and parents and regular monitoring of students' progress.

Disruption to social networks was identified as an unsettling component of the transition to secondary school for the majority of students (Topping, 2011). Some UK secondary schools have implemented measures to support and strengthen peer relationships in the first year of secondary school. Keay, Lang and Frederickson (2015) conducted a small-scale qualitative study exploring staff perspectives on active measures to support peer relationships, and found widespread support for such measures. They identified four themes specific to ensuring success: care and supportive relationships; understanding peer groups; active management and understanding; and working with parents.

Australian researchers conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of international studies published between 1985 and 2014 that evaluated school-based preventative programs targeting anxiety and/or depression in young people aged 5–19 years (Werner-Seidler, Perry, Calear, Newby, & Christensen, 2017). The 81 studies included in that review were drawn from diverse locations including American, Canada, Europe, Asia and Australia. The overall quality and rigour of included studies was poor, but the results (especially in regard to programs targeting depression) indicated large-scale studies of refined school-based prevention programs may produce positive public health outcomes. Table 2 summarises non-Australian studies that reported interventions to assist students during the transition from primary to secondary school.

Authors and Year	Sample	Country	Age	Focus	Method
Akister et al. 2016	39 students	South East England (UK)	10–12 years	Impact of physical activity on wellbeing during transition to secondary school	Questionnaire (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire)
Keay, Lang and Frederickson 2015	Nine staff	UK	First year secondary school	Perspectives on function of peer relationships in supporting transition to secondary school	Qualitative: semi-structured interviews
Kourmoulaki 2013	16 Nurture Group staff, 25 additional staff, six parents	Scotland	First year of secondary school	Nurture groups' role in supporting transition to secondary school	Qualitative: semi-structured interviews
Werner-Seilder et al. 2017	81 studies 31,974 students	Global (Australian authors)	5–19 years Sub-group 10–14 years	School-based depression and anxiety prevention programs for young people	Systematic review and meta-analysis

Table 2: *Summary of non-Australian intervention studies from 2011–2017*

Australian studies
This review identified 14 studies published between 2011 and 2017 reporting on relevant research conducted in Australia. Nine studies were conducted in urban settings in Western Australia (WA), with five of these conducted solely in urban-based Catholic schools in that state. Two studies were conducted in Tasmania and included both regional and urban participants. Nine of the 14 studies used quantitative methodology, four used mixed methods designs and one used qualitative interpretivist methodology.

A comprehensive analysis of data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children specific to the experiences of children transitioning to secondary school (Maguire & Yu, 2015) aimed to identify characteristics of the most vulnerable children. That study examined contributors to post-transition student and parent reports of poor transition against pre-transition socio-emotional wellbeing, temperament, academic performance, experiences in primary school,

parenting style and parental investment. Factors that were independently related to child- or parent-reported difficulties (after adjusting for other factors known to influence children's school transition) included emotional and behavioural difficulties, children's experiences in primary school and participation in extracurricular activities.

The potential for difficult transitions to secondary school was identified by Waters, Lester, Wenden and Cross (2012) in a 1-year prospective study involving transition experiences of Year 8 students (first year of secondary school in WA). They reported that 31% of students described the experience as 'somewhat difficult' or 'difficult' and many reported emotional and social health challenges as they continued in secondary school. The continuation of difficulties as students approached the end of their first secondary school year suggests that the psychological impact of a difficult transition persists beyond the initial months. However, the impact of this transition is not limited to social and emotional wellbeing. Consistent with previous reports of a negative impact on academic achievement following transition to secondary school, Hopwood, Hay and Dyment (2017) reported that a cohort of 244 students in Tasmania transitioning from Year 6 to Year 7 (typically aged 11–13 years) showed a decline in reading achievement. However, a school-by-school analysis identified students in one of the seven locations surveyed as showing an overall increase in reading attainment (Hopwood et al., 2017).

Some studies revealed an ongoing focus on determining indicators that may signal a young person at risk of difficulties during the transition to secondary school, or factors that support a successful transition. Vaz, Parsons, Falmer, Passmore and Falkmer (2014) examined a cohort of students transitioning to secondary school in WA. They focused on the impact of students' personal background and school factors on their academic competence and mental health functioning. Personal background factors (including household socioeconomic status and disability) had a consistent impact on academic and mental health functioning across the transition period, whereas school context had a limited impact on mental health functioning. In contrast, research conducted in the Catholic school system in WA identified a positive relationship between school climate (i.e. quality and character of school life) and mental health and emotional wellbeing for young people when transitioning to secondary school (Lester & Cross, 2015). Factors such as a sense of being safe at school, feeling connected to school and having peer support were protective of mental health and emotional wellbeing, and feeling connected to teachers contributed to emotional wellbeing.

Lester, Waters and Cross (2013) reported an association between low level of school connectedness and a negative impact on students' mental health during the transition period, which continued into the second year of secondary school. The large cohort of students from Catholic schools in WA (N = 3,459; aged 11–14 years) in that study displayed increased levels of depression and anxiety associated with low levels of school connectedness. School connectedness (a factor associated with a positive school climate) is also described as 'school belongingness'. Goodenow (1993) defined this as *'the psychological membership in the school or classroom, that is, the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment'* (p. 80). Consistent with these findings (Lester et al., 2013), Vaz et al. (2014) found that the positive impacts on mental health functioning associated with a sense of belonging to school persisted across the transition to secondary school, as measured 6 months before and 6 months after starting secondary school. Further analysis identified stability relating to school belonging across the transition period, as well as personal factors known to influence school belonging in primary school (e.g. competence, coping skills) as positively influencing belonging in secondary school (Vaz et al., 2015).

The Greek philosopher Epictetus (55–135 CE) suggested that *'Men are disturbed not by things, but by the view which they take of them'* (Seddon, n.d.). For a young person contemplating the move from primary school, the view they take (e.g. concern, worry and fear) or alternatively, the positive anticipation of the move to secondary school may impact on their transition experience. Mackenzie, McMaugh and O'Sullivan (2012) conducted a cross-sectional survey of 75 female students in a private school in Sydney, NSW. Students in Years 6 and 7 completed the survey in Term 4, and a small cohort (n = 6) of Year 6 students participated in a focus group interview. Pre-transition students viewed the coming move as likely to be a positive experience overall. Although concerns related to increased homework, moving to another context and developing new friendships were noted, these were outweighed by anticipation of the positive aspects of the change. Overall perceptions remained positive post-transition; however, they were less positive than those recorded in Year 6. Interestingly, that study also found that students who had an older sibling already in secondary school had lower social threat scores. The generalisability of MacKenzie and colleagues' (2012) findings to other educational contexts is limited by the small sample size, female-only sample and the cohort drawn from a specific context (i.e. an independent school where students are primarily from middle to upper socioeconomic backgrounds).

A two-phase longitudinal qualitative study by Waters, Lester and Cross (2014b) examined the impact of positive expectation on the experience of transition to secondary school for 2,078 Catholic school students in WA. Notably, they found that *'students who expected a positive transition were more than three times more likely to report an actual positive transition experience'* (p. 153). In addition, female students were more likely to report that expectations of new friendships and continuation of existing friendships contributed to their anticipation of a positive transition. However, a significant number of students were worried about the transition while still in primary school, suggesting that supportive interventions during this period may be warranted. Waters and colleagues (2014a) examined these findings in greater depth, and reported that continuity of support from peers, school and family was pivotal to a positive transition experience. Before transition, the strongest predictor of a positive transition experience was the perception of support from peers; post-transition, the most significant predictor of students' actual transition experience in Grade 8 was parental presence in Grade 7 (at home before and after school and at meal times).

Coffey (2013), investigated the perspectives of Year 7 students, parents and teachers in WA about the upcoming transition to secondary school. She highlighted the crucial role relationships play in enabling successful transitions, and recommended careful consideration of student and parental concerns when developing transition programs. In contrast to this emphasis on relationships as crucial to successful transitions, Hopwood, Hay and Dyment (2016) emphasised curriculum continuity and awareness, communication between primary and secondary schools, and adequate teacher support. They interviewed 12 Tasmanian teachers about their views on ensuring successful transition to secondary school. Although teachers' central role in both social and academic support was acknowledged, the findings focused on the academic component of the transition process. The significant gap between the primary and secondary systems was highlighted, along with ways in which this may adversely impact students' transition experience and academic progress.

Australian studies evaluating interventions designed to address the challenges known to impact on successful transition to secondary school were almost completely absent in this review. Neal and Yelland (2014) reported on an intervention delivered in four schools in two Australian states that targeted students in low socioeconomic areas. That intervention aimed to increase levels of engagement in schooling for students in the first year of secondary school who were at risk of

disengagement. The program comprised supportive activities including weekly clubs, inspirational speakers, leadership camps and social gatherings, and provided affordable computers and training. However, the findings indicated little, if any, improvement in students' level of engagement in schooling. Those researchers highlighted the importance of ensuring that intervention programs are strongly linked to school curricula and real-life experiences to ensure they are relevant to students' lives and build meaning for the future. Table 3 presents a summary of the Australian studies included in this review.

Authors and Year	Sample	State	Age	Focus	Method
Coffey 2013	506 students, 334 parents, 86 Teachers	Western Australia	Year 7	Ensure student and parent concerns are acknowledged and accounted for in planning transition	Mixed methods survey: semi-structured interviews, focus groups
Hopwood, Hay and Dyment 2016	12 teachers: five primary (Yr 6), seven secondary (Yr 7)	Urban and regional Tasmania	11–13 years	Methods for facilitating successful transition	Qualitative interpretivist: semi-structured interviews
Hopwood, Hay and Dyment 2017	244 students	Urban and regional Tasmania	11–13 years	Impact of transition on literacy	Two-phase longitudinal quantitative study: Progressive Achievement Test in Reading
Lester, Waters and Cross 2013	3,459 students from Catholic schools	Western Australia	11–14	Reciprocal relationship between school connectedness and mental health	Four-phase longitudinal quantitative study: self-report measures, connectedness to school (Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21)
Lester and Cross 2015	3,462 students from Catholic schools	Western Australia	11–14 years	School climate factors and relationships to mental and emotional wellbeing	Four-phase longitudinal quantitative study: Self-report measures
Mackenzie, McMaugh and O'Sullivan 2012	75 female students (Independent Girls' School)	Sydney, New South Wales	Years 6 and 7	Students perception of transition	Mixed methods: focus groups, The Impending Transition to Secondary School Perceived as a Challenge and Threat questionnaire

Authors and Year	Sample	State	Age	Focus	Method
Maguire and Yu, 2015 (Chapter 5)	2,299 students	Australia-wide	11–13 years	Individual characteristics and experiences of children associated with successful and unsuccessful transitions to secondary school	Accelerated cross-sequential design: mixed methods including face-to-face interviews and self-report questionnaires
Neal and Yelland, 2014	54 students	Two major cities in Australia	12–13 years	Evaluate intervention to support a group of disadvantaged students in their first year in secondary school	Mixed methods: student surveys and focus groups; teacher surveys and interviews; parent phone interviews; welfare staff
Vaz et al. 2014	255 students	Western Australia	11–13 years	Beneficial longitudinal effects of school belongingness on mental health functioning	Cohort study: prospective, longitudinal design with two data collection points
Vaz et al. 2014	266 students	Western Australia	11–13 years	Impact of personal background and school contextual factors on academic competence and mental health functioning	Cohort study: prospective, longitudinal design with two data collection points
Vaz et al. 2015	266 students	Western Australia	11–13 years	Belongingness in early secondary school, stability over transition	Cohort study: prospective, longitudinal design two data collection points
Waters, Lester, Wenden and Cross, 2012	1,500 students from Catholic schools	Western Australia	12–13 years	Social and emotional outcomes of transition to secondary school	Two-phase longitudinal quantitative study: self-report measures
Waters, Lester and Cross, 2014	2,078 students from Catholic schools	Western Australia	12–13 years	Impact of a positive expectation of transition to secondary school	Two-phase longitudinal quantitative study
Waters, Lester and Cross, 2014	1,974 students from Catholic schools	Western Australia	12–13 years	Impact of peer and parental support on expectation and experience of transition to	Two-phase longitudinal quantitative study

Authors and Year	Sample	State	Age	Focus	Method
				secondary school	

Table 3: *Summary of Australian studies from 2011–2017*

Discussion

In 2014, Vaz and colleagues noted the limited deductive studies and small sample sizes of available studies that examined the impact of the transition to secondary school on students' academic competence and mental health. Although an increased number of Australian publications reporting on the transition from primary to secondary school were published between 2011 and 2017, research conducted in the eastern states of Australia is extremely limited. Studies specific to the experiences and needs of young people in regional and remote areas of NSW were notably absent. Although many of the studies identified in this review were conducted in Australia, state-to-state differences in the staging of the transition to secondary school impacts on the generalisability of the findings to NSW. For example, students transitioning to secondary school in NSW are 1 year younger than those in WA.

While not specific to regional contexts, Australian research suggests the characteristics of children at increased risk of experiencing a difficult transition to secondary school include emotional and behavioural difficulties, prior difficult experiences in primary school and limited engagement in extracurricular activities; these signal characteristics require the attention of educators and researchers (Maguire & Yu, 2015). Similarly, the potential for a decrease in academic attainment following transition to secondary school was highlighted by Tasmanian researchers Hopwood et al. (2017), whereas UK researchers (Riglin et al., 2014) identified a reciprocal association between emotional problems (in particular depression and school attainment) across the entirety of a young person's educational experience (Gniewosz et al., 2012). A closer examination of the transition to secondary school emphasised the adverse impact of depressive symptoms, behavioural issues and school liking on academic attainment (Riglin et al., 2013). The close association between student reports of a difficult transition and persisting emotional and social difficulties identified by Waters et al. (2012) provides evidence of the need for further attention to this phase of a young person's educational journey.

It is helpful to move from the perspective of exploring difficulty in transition to considering predictors of success. Several studies identified a potential positive impact of school climate, strong connectedness to school or school belongingness on a young person's emotional wellbeing and successful transition to secondary school (Lester et al., 2013; Vaz et al., 2015; Vaz, Falkmer, et al., 2014). Particular attention was directed to *'the need for primary schools to foster belongingness among students at an early age and transfer students' belongingness profiles as part of the handover profile'* (Vaz et al., 2015, p. 1).

Fifteen years ago, Australian researchers, Williams and Boman (2002), challenged the prevailing perspective of the primary-secondary school transition as 'transition shock', and sought to examine primary-secondary transfer issues in the context of the 'voices' of Australian students. One of the two student cohorts in that study were from regional NSW. Rather than seeing this transition as difficult, students saw themselves as ready for change and wished to be seen as 'grown-up', with the majority anticipating and experiencing the transition as a positive experience.

The studies identified in this review also revealed students' perspectives and experiences related to the transition to secondary school. Positive expectations of secondary school influenced students' experiences, and students who identified limited concerns in relation to this transition

were less likely to report emotional and social difficulties post-transition (Mackenzie et al., 2012; Waters et al., 2014b). Waters and colleagues (2012) suggested that directly asking students about their thoughts regarding this transition while in the final year of primary school and asking students in the first year of secondary school about their transition experience may inform future development of effective support strategies.

Conclusion and recommendations

The transition from primary to secondary school is especially challenging as it coincides with adolescence; a developmental stage characterised by rapid change and upheaval. It also occurs during the stage of a young person's life in which the risk of developing a mental illness is increased. This review of recent research reporting on emotional wellbeing and the psychological impact of transition from primary to secondary school highlighted the paucity of research specific to students in regional areas of Australia. In particular, there is a total absence of research conducted in regional NSW. Similarly, research evaluating Australian developed programs to support the psychological wellbeing of students as they transition to secondary school is lacking.

The potential for negative impacts on academic attainment and future well-being associated with the social and emotional upheaval that a young person may experience during this challenging period of their education necessitates focused attention from rural educators and researchers. Given the findings reported in this review, research that gives careful attention to identifying young people at risk of difficulties during this challenging period is warranted. Research exploring the journeys of rural young people who negotiated the transition to secondary school with ease compared and contrasted with those who struggled would provide a deeper understanding of factors that assist or hinder in this transition. This will enable the development of more focused programs targeting areas identified as strongly impacting on transition. Educators in rural schools where transition programs are already in place could collaborate with academic researchers and use this review to identify markers of positive impact additional to academic attainment as possible measures of the efficacy of transition to secondary school programs. The emerging Australian data identified in this review can provide a starting point for educators and researchers based in regional and rural communities as they design, implement and evaluate programs specific to the needs of young people transitioning to high school in their region.

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