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TRANSITION TO SCHOOL: LOOKING FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood professional planning transition programs for children commencing the first year of school need to be aware of factors impacting on children's early adjustment to school. Transition programs should create an appropriate degree of continuity between preschool and school experiences and develop strategies to help children adjust to school. In addressing these issues, this paper will also present findings of a recent Australian study to identify factors that influence children's transition to school. Strategies for promoting children's adjustment to school will also be addressed including the preparation of children for school, the involvement of parents in the transition, communication and collaboration between early childhood services and schools, and program continuity.

INTRODUCTION

"When a seedling is transplanted from one place to another, the transplantation may be a stimulus or a shock. The careful gardener seeks to minimize shock so that the plant is re-established as (easily) as possible"

(Cleave, Jowett & Bate, 1982, p. 195)

Just as the careful gardener seeks to minimise the shock for seedlings as they are transplanted from one place to another, so too should early childhood professionals seek to minimise the shock as young children make the transition from preschool to the first year of school.

Children commencing the first year of schooling face a school situation that is qualitatively different from their preschool experience in terms of the curriculum, the setting and the people. There is concern that these differences may impact on children's adjustment to school and disrupt their learning and development processes. When children adjust adequately in the first year of school much of the initial stress associated with transition can be overcome, and children are more likely to be successful in their future progress than a child who has difficulty adjusting to the new situation (Ladd & Price, 1987; Skarpeness & Carson, 1987).

Adjustment to school depends to a large extent on the child possessing the necessary social, behavioural and academic skills to respond to the demands of the new environment and to work independently. The absence of, or difficulty with social or cognitive skills, and the presence of problem behaviour generally impacts on children's adjustment to school and is seen to indicate maladjustment (Gresham & Elliott, 1987; Howes, 1990; Ladd & Price, 1987; Thompson, 1975).

The impacts and stresses associated with transition to school are being recognised by many teachers, and transition activities are being implemented to minimise the adjustments required for successful transition into the first year of school.

This paper will identify challenges facing children as they commence school and strategies for addressing these challenges. The findings of a recent Australian study of factors influencing children's adjustment to school will be reported. The term 'preschool' will be used to refer to the variety of services children attend before commencing school.

THE TRANSITION TO THE FIRST YEAR OF SCHOOL - CHALLENGES AND DISCONTINUITIES

The immense variety in children's development and experiences makes each child's transition to school unique. Children at this stage (five years of age) are in the process of developing self awareness, forming peer relationships, forming simple symbolic concepts, mastering increasingly complex physical skills, making moral judgements, learning independent self help skills, and in many cases accepting extended separation from parents (Love & Yelton, 1989). Thus starting school is not a standardised process, considering the range of children's individual experiences and developmental differences.

When young children commence school they must somehow make sense of discontinuities and the relatively new routines and procedures that confront them. These challenges are associated with changes in the physical environment of buildings and classrooms; differences in the curricula; differences in the teaching staff and their behaviour, attitudes and expectations; changes to the peer group; changes to the role and involvement of parents (Bredekamp, 1987; Cleave et al., 1982; Ladd & Price, 1990; Skarpness & Carson, 1987).

Critical discontinuities between the physical environments include the condition and size of the buildings, the classroom equipment, the location of the toilets, classrooms and play areas relative to each other, the number and ages of the children in the class, staff:child ratios, the size and organisation of the classroom.

Discontinuities associated with the curricula generally involve the move from a developmental approach to a cognitive curricula approach including restrictions on the use of time which emphasise the work/play distinction, confining of gross motor activities to physical education lessons and playtime, less art and tactile experiences, less opportunity for imaginative play, a curriculum focus on verbal and symbolic activities, increases in waiting times (Cleave et al., 1982; Renwick, 1987), the daily schedule being more structured, and more formal rules and routines (Fowler, 1982).

Discontinuities between teaching staff include the number, gender, and the role of the staff. As a result of differences in their training, teachers at both levels often having different expectations, attitudes and views of their own roles, often resulting in different teacher expectations and increased verbal instructions at school.

Children commencing school are faced with differences between school and previous peer groups (Ladd & Price, 1987) including a different social context, meeting people from the broader community, and the need to make new friends (Ladd, 1990).

Discontinuities in the role and involvement of parents between preschool services and school are often a result of parent involvement at schools generally being more formalised than in preschool services. At school parents are less able to come and go as they please and generally have less input into the management and delivery of services. Parents often have different expectations for their child's learning and development.

In overcoming the discontinuities and challenges facing children as they commence school it is important to have continuity between previous early childhood experiences and school experiences and expectations.

The amount of stress and the time taken to adjust successfully to the first year of school can be reduced if teachers plan and implement a sensitive program designed to ease the transition to school by making the environment more familiar and in minimising the changes and discontinuities between the school and previous experiences (Skarphness & Carson, 1987).

EFFECTIVE TRANSITION PROGRAMS

Transition programs are variously identified as strategies and procedures for ensuring the smooth placement and adjustment of children to school and involving activities initiated by schools or preschools to bridge the gap between preschool and school experiences.

With this in mind, effective transition programs should be concerned with retaining the benefits of preschool programs, reducing the stress children might experience commencing school, creating an appropriate degree of continuity as children move into school, responding to the variety of children's backgrounds and experiences, acknowledging that four to five years of age is a critical period of development for children, and providing positive experiences (Love, Logue, Trudeau & Thayer, 1992).

Transition strategies can then be designed to overcome the discontinuities that may disrupt children's learning and development based on a philosophy that children's adjustment to school should be easier when children are familiar with the new situation, parents are informed about the new school, and teachers have information about children's development and previous experiences (Bredenkamp, 1987; Cleave et al., 1982; Conn-Powers, Ross-Allen & Holburn, 1990; Love et al., 1992). In this way transition programs promote the speedy adjustment of the child and the family to the new situation, enhance the child's independence and successful functioning in the new environment, support and empower the family in the process, and provide collaboration between family, preschool services and school (Conn-Powers et al., 1990).

Elements for successful transition

In planning transition programs, four critical elements need to be incorporated; program continuity through developmentally appropriate curricula, maintenance of ongoing communication between staff at preschool and school levels, preparing children for transition, and involving parents in the transition (Bredekamp, 1987).

Program Continuity: In acknowledging the qualitative differences between programs at preschool and school that may disrupt the learning process, there has been growing consensus that program continuity with similar activities, materials and philosophy through developmentally appropriate curricula, will lessen the transition adjustments and consequential problems for young children (Bredekamp, 1987; Lombardi, 1992). Continuity of services and programs, and the strengthening of knowledge and expertise about developmentally appropriate curricula between teachers, can be facilitated through the establishment of partnerships between school and preschool staff. Strategies include the exchange of newsletters, joint inservicing of staff at both levels, staff visiting each other's programs with the aim of increasing their understanding of the particular learning situation, and transition networks for planning transition program cooperatively. During these exchanges with primary school staff it is imperative that staff in preschool services articulate the developmental and educational value and benefits of their programs.

Communication Between Staff: In developing smooth transitions, there should be ongoing communication and sharing of information between preschool and school staff (Barbour & Seefeldt, 1993). The sharing of information and collaborative planning for children's transition to school can be facilitated through inter-staff communication before and after transition; the transfer of records with information including children's levels of social, physical and intellectual development and an estimate of their needs; staff visiting each other's programs to discuss children; collaborative planning of transition programs; early childhood or transition networks; and other strategies as previously mentioned for supporting program continuity. This area of communication between staff has been acknowledged as difficult and requiring improved collaboration (Love et al., 1992; Renwick, 1984). The importance of the interconnectedness of preschool and school experiences needs to be acknowledged, coupled with increased professional respect between the preschool and school sectors (Edgar, 1986; Renwick, 1984).

Preparation of Children: One of the most important influences on learning is the setting in which it occurs. If the setting is familiar, children are more likely to adjust to new demands and expectations. When children are prepared for making the transition to school they gain self confidence and are more likely to succeed. Transition programs need to include the gradual preparation of preschoolers for the challenges and demands of school and should be prior to and during transition periods (Fowler, 1982; Ladd & Price, 1987).

First hand experiences of the new situation prior to commencement allows children time to talk about their feelings with sensitive adults in preparing them for the challenges and positive changes they face (Bredekamp, 1987; Itskowitz, Strauss & Fruchter, 1987). A school visit or series of visits provides children with: opportunities to know what teachers expect of them; opportunities to familiarise themselves with the new environment including toilets, buildings and playareas; opportunities to receive information on differences between preschool and school; opportunities to participate in classroom activities; opportunities to practice skills

necessary for school and; opportunities to meet new friends and develop support systems. Preschools can arrange visits to schools to use school facilities and to participate in classrooms and play-times. These visits should not exclude children who will not be attending the particular school but may be seen in the context of an excursion - a valuable learning experience. In this way children can be provided with important school experiences whilst in the security of familiar playmates and staff.

The preparation of children for transition to school can also occur at preschool with staff delaying and decreasing their attention and praise, reducing instructions and prompts, increasing independence, assigning roles and responsibilities, and including school uniforms and bags in dramatic play areas (Fowler, 1982). However, Bredekamp (1987) cautions that a developmentally appropriate preschool program should not change to be more like an inappropriate prep class and suggests that this problem lies with the school rather than the preschool.

Following the commencement of school a flexible schedule of attendance and a gradual introduction to school has been advocated to enable children to participate more successfully in school activities (Cleave et al., 1982; Fowler, 1982). However, the practice of offering children shortened days in order to assist them adjust to school needs to be re-evaluated in terms of children's increasing hours of attendance at kindergarten and childcare, and parents' hours of work. For children whose parents work, shortened days at school may actually require different before and after school care situations and create additional stresses as children adjust to these situations.

Parent Involvement: The relationship between parents and teachers is important across all levels of the school but even more so at the commencement of school (Renwick, 1984). A joint effort between school and home helps effect a smooth transition (Goodnow, 1984). The continuity of parent involvement in their child's education benefits the children (Cleave, 1982; Glicksman & Hills, 1981) and renews the parent's sense of involvement in their child's education (SERVE, 1992). It is important that parents are informed of school expectations and teachers listen to parents' concerns and goals for their children. Informed parents are less likely to be stressed about their child's transition to school and more able to assist their child in overcoming their confusion and frustration and in adapting to the new environment. (Bredekamp, 1987; Glicksman & Hills, 1981). Parents should therefore receive sufficient information and opportunities to understand the new environment and to share it with their child (Conn-Powers et al., 1990; Davies, 1991).

Parent involvement in the transition process can include orientation visits for parents and children, providing parents with verbal and written information about the school, providing opportunities for parents to become familiar with the staff, providing parents with information on their rights and responsibilities, involving parents in class activities to facilitate smooth transitions, providing information about the school program, providing time to talk to teachers, presenting an education program for parents of beginning children, suggesting activities that may assist in preparing children for school, arranging talks at local preschool services, and organising social events before and after the commencement of school.

FACTORS INFLUENCING CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT TO SCHOOL

Whilst there is consensus about what constitutes an effective transition program, there is only limited research data measuring the impact of transition programs on children's adjustment to school. This study proposed that children who attended schools that conducted a high number of transition activities adjusted better to school initially, than children who attended schools that conducted a more limited number of transition activities.

The study involved 197 children in the first year of schooling in four Melbourne government primary schools. Schools were matched as closely as possible on the basis of: total number of activities; and the number of activities for parents, children, and staff, prior to and after the commencement of school. Two schools conducted low numbers of transition activities and two schools conducted high numbers of transition activities. The two schools that were rated as conducting a low number of transition activities both prior to and after the commencement of school provided one opportunity for children to visit the school, one opportunity for parents to visit the school, and contacted preschools prior to children commencing school. The two schools rated as conducting a high number of transition activities both prior to and after the commencement of school provided three opportunities for parents and three opportunities for children to visit the school, and contacted preschools prior to children commencing school.

All schools had a similar number of children in the class; female teaching staff; straight preparatory class structure; and similar estimated socio-economic status of the majority of school families. All schools provided reduced hours of attendance in the first weeks after commencement. Eight teachers participated in the study and all parents were invited to participate.

The Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), (Gresham & Elliott, 1990) was employed to measure children's adjustment to school. The SSRS includes a range of items in the domains of social skills, problem behaviour, and academic competence. Social skills included items related to co-operation, assertion, self-control and responsibility. Problem behaviour items were related to hyperactivity, externalising and internalising behaviour. Academic competence included items related to literacy, numeracy and overall performance. Children were rated by classroom teachers and by parents after nine weeks of schooling. A number of valid aggregate adjustment scores were created from the adjustment domains. Parents also supplied relevant background information.

Variables Impacting on Children's Adjustment to School

The results of the study supported the hypothesis that children who attended schools that conducted a high number of transition activities adjusted better to school than children who attended schools that conducted a more limited number of transition activities. Statistical analyses are not reported in detail in this paper but may be obtained from the author. These results also suggest that a number of other factors influence children's adjustment to the first year of school. These factors need to be considered when planning for effective transition.

Numbers of transition activities: In supporting the hypothesis, the data suggest that children attending schools that conduct a high number of transition activities have less problem behaviour at school, $r=.26$, $p<.001$, and at home, $r=.16$, $p<.05$, than children who attend schools that conduct a more limited number of transition activities. It can be implied that transition programs with multiple opportunities for children and parents to familiarise themselves with the school environment and expectations have a positive association with children's adjustment to school and lower ratings of problem behaviour.

Gender: Boys were rated as having more difficulty adjusting to school, in terms of social skills and behaviour, than girls. Boys had lower scores for cooperation, $r=.24$, $p<.01$, assertion, $r=.15$, $p<.05$, self-control, $r=.16$, $p<.01$, and responsibility, $r=.15$, $p<.01$. They also had higher scores than girls for hyperactivity, $r=.21$, $p<.01$, and externalising behaviour, $r=.20$, $p<.01$.

Relative age: Correlations between relative age and adjustment to school reveal that older children were rated as more academically competent than younger children $r=.20$, $p<.01$. This supports the findings of Savage (1975) and Teltsch & Breznitz (1988) and implies that relative age is associated with adjustment to school as a measure of academic competence.

Children's home language: The results of the study suggest that speaking English at home influences children's adjustment to school. Children who did not speak English at home were rated as having fewer social skills, more problem behaviour and lower academic competence than children who spoke English at home, $r=-.16$, $p<.05$.

Attendance at preschool services: Children who attended preschool services for more than twelve hours per week, $r=-.22$, $p<.01$, or attended centre-based child care, $r=-.19$, $p<.05$ were rated as having more problem behaviour. Children who attended sessional preschool only had lower scores for problem behaviour, $r=.21$, $p<.01$. The association of attendance at centre-based child care with children's adjustment to school in terms of problem behaviour cannot be ignored. Taken together with the data of 'The School Transition Activities Project' (Margetts, 1996) indicating that whilst eighty-six percent of schools contacted kindergartens only two percent of schools contacted child care centres about children's transition to school, it can be inferred that the development of links between child care and school situations is urgently needed. It is imperative that strategies are implemented to develop effective links between child care centres and schools for including children who attend centre-based child care services, and their parents, in effective transition processes.

The presence of a familiar playmate in the same class: The presence of a familiar playmate in the same class was a highly significant factor associated with children's adjustment to school. Children who commenced school with a familiar playmate in the same class were rated as having more social skills, less problem behaviour and greater academic competence than children who commenced school without a familiar playmate in the same class, $r=.23$, $p<.01$. It should also be noted that having a familiar playmate in the same class may also compensate for deleterious factors, such as attendance of more than twelve hours at preschool-type situations, speaking a language other than English at home, being a boy, and being young, which place a child at risk in terms of not adjusting well to the first year of school. Thus strategies should be developed for promoting the continuation of existing friendships, or the

development of new friendships prior to children commencing school. Pairing children with friends in the same class should be a priority in helping children adjust to the demands of school (Margetts, 1997).

The results and implications of this study, taken together with elements for effective transition, provide a basis for understanding factors that influence children's adjustment to the first year of school and for developing effective transition programs.

LOOKING FORWARD

In looking forward and helping children adjust more easily to school, we need to remember that in practice, the quality of transition depends largely on the physical environments, the teachers who are directly involved, and the organisation of the transition process including liaison between preschool, home and school (Briggs & Potter, 1990).

Administrators, staff and parents need to more fully understand factors influencing children's adjustment to school and the importance of a carefully planned transition program. Strategies can then be developed that help children adjust more easily to the first year of school, and promote continuity between school and children's previous experiences. Transition programs should therefore ensure the gradual preparation of children through multiple opportunities to visit the school prior to commencement, continuity of peers, continuity of expectations between settings, continuity of programming, and ongoing communication and collaboration between staff and parents. By taking account of children's previous experiences, school experiences can be adapted to minimise changes and discontinuities. Then the 'human' seedling will continue to thrive.

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Dr Nicola Yelland
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13 December 1999

Dear Nicola,

Thank you for reviewing my paper, *Transition to school: Looking forward* presented at the Australian Early Childhood Association Biennial Conference Darwin 14-17 July 1999, for publication in the conference proceedings.

I have modified the paper in line with reviewer suggestions and have enclosed two hard copies and a copy of the paper on disc formatted in MS Word for Macintosh and also in MS Word and RTF.

Carmel Diezman suggested that the results should be reported in terms of percentages. This is not possible as correlation analyses were employed in this study. However I have reported these results for researchers and also noted that 'Statistical analyses are not reported in detail in this paper but may be obtained from the author'. I hope this is agreeable with you. Please let me know if further modification is required.

Best wishes for your innovative format in relation to the conference proceedings.

Yours sincerely

Kay Margetts