

Who said transitions were easy?

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Transitions for preschool children have long been of considerable interest for educators and policy makers, not just in terms of investigating the impact on a child's academic outcomes, but also in terms of examining the process of adaptation and settling into a new environment. Whether these are transitions from home to an early childhood setting, or transition to school, they are of significant interest for academics. From infancy to childhood, childhood to adolescence and throughout life, transitions form an important part of development and the family life cycle, as well as having long-lasting effects on individuals and their ability to adapt to the process of change.

With transition being a natural part of life and being both a process and experience, it may also be challenging and stressful for all parties involved. In particular, research indicates that factors such as gender, ethnicity, child temperament, and quality of relationships may have an influence on the nature of transitions (King, 2018). Numerous studies demonstrate that positive transitions from early childhood care particularly to school, can be associated with; proximity of pre-visits to a school environment, general preparedness of the child to make a change, positive communication about transition from the educators' and family's side, and quality of support from primary school teachers to accommodate the needs and individual abilities of a new child in the classroom (Ebbeck, Saidon, Rajalachime, & Teo, 2013; King, 2018; Pierce & Bruns, 2013).

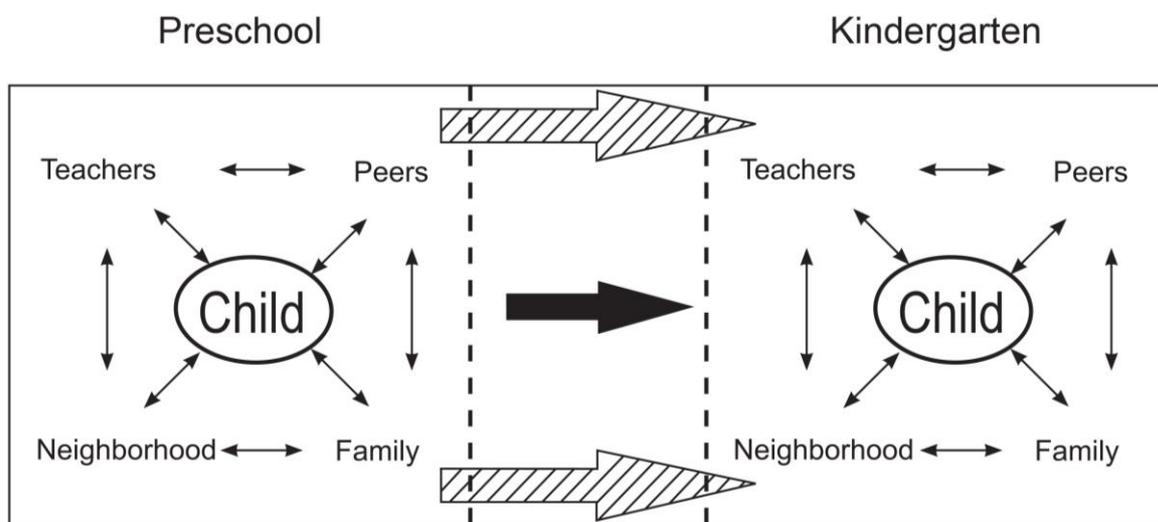
While the subject matter of transitions is widely discussed in the there seems to be consensus on some of the factors that positively contribute towards transitions. In particular Dockett and Perry (2007) summarise that:

- A positive shift to a school environment has strong links to social competence
- A child's own image as a learner is impacted by their new school experiences
- Children who appear to experience academic and social challenges in the beginning of their schooling years are likely to continue experiencing them in later years, and, possibly, throughout their adult life. These difficulties may sometimes result in low self-esteem, disruptive behaviour and overall developing a fear of failure
- Transition to school is a highly individual process which is unique to every child and family
- Children who experience consistency throughout the transition process and high levels of support from the early childhood teachers, family and primary school teachers, are likely to find the whole process easier than those whose transitions were not successfully facilitated by various parties
- The external expectations, particularly from families and primary school teachers, shape the transition experiences and subsequent adjustment to a new environment
- Perspectives on the child's 'readiness' for school varies across cultures and communities and therefore may directly or indirectly influence the child's experience.

Whilst not many studies focus on transitions from home to a preschool environment, Amerijckx and Humblet (2015) note that the social dimension of stepping into a large early childhood environment should not be underestimated. With preschool being the first official environment related to formal learning, positivity of this first encounter is crucial for subsequent successful transitions later in a child's life. In particular, initial peer socialisation has been highlighted as "a crucial issue for children in preschool, in order ... to develop friendships" (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015, p. 104). Moving into a larger group of children may affect each individual child differently, therefore mixed age groups may

serve as an asset, with older children supporting younger ones to cope with significant change and acting as protectors against other children. Interestingly, in the process of transition from home to a preschool environment, significant attention has been paid to this aspect of wellbeing. In particular, the child’s self-esteem, confidence and self-expression are at the core of consideration for early childhood teachers and families. Socialisation in its broadest sense is paramount here since it plays a determining role in children’s wellbeing and capacity to integrate new knowledge (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015). This view is supported by Huf (2013) who adds that if children are unable to apply their knowledge in a new setting, they may lose their feeling of competence and eventually withdraw from activities.

In the majority of studies investigating transitions, key attention has been given to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), with outer contexts affecting the next circle and so forth. This is seen to occur until the actual impact on the individual becomes apparent, however a more specific theoretical model on transitions has been suggested by Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta in 2000:



(Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000)

This model clearly illustrates how the experiences of families that take place over a certain period of time, may carry over to other transitions and influence the experience of their children. Transition into a new setting “takes place in an environment defined by multiple changing interactions and relationships among child, school, family and community factors” (Kennedy, Cameron & Greene, 2012, p. 23). The above ecological and dynamic model does not only provide theoretical ground to understand transitions, but represents a range of important mini-contexts and offers guidance for appropriate intervention, highlighting three key elements:

- Vital connection between families, educational settings and communities within schools
- Having a retrospective look and thus linking the first day at school with the current moment
- Reaching with appropriate level of intensity

(Kennedy, Cameron & Greene, 2012)

These important aspects imply a series of practical considerations, as well as prompting the need for creating a separate transitions curriculum for all the stakeholders in order to facilitate change and encourage exploration of the new environment in a positive light. In considering theoretical grounds for examining transitions, it is worth considering Rogoff’s stance. Rogoff (2003) holds an alternative position on the issue of transitions, considering development as “a process of changing participation in sociocultural activities of individual communities” (p. 52). In this process,

individuals tend to develop through participation and contribution to cultural activities that have developed through the engagement of people over time (Dockett & Perry, 2007). This implies that educators do not just consider how participants (in this case, children, educators and families) change as result of events taking place in a new educational environment, but also they take into account how these events may change over time as a result of that participation. The cultural aspect here is viewed as ‘mutually defining’ (Dockett & Perry, 2007) rather than when culture influences an individual. In seeking to understand the nature of participation in sociocultural practices, Rogoff (2003) stresses the importance of embracing various analytical perspectives namely, personal, interpersonal, and cultural. Sociocultural perspective on transition, thus, suggests viewing transition as communal and social processes that are never limited to seeing one individual in isolation. Activities that accompany transitions should not only precede the process, but should be supported by appropriate social and cultural understandings.

The notion of child’s agency should not be under-emphasised in aiming to understand important aspects of transitions. During transition processes, children should not be viewed as passive recipients of a prepared environment where knowledge is transmitted by teachers in an authoritative manner. Research on the concept of children’s “competent submissiveness”, shows that in a transition process, children may find themselves involved in asymmetrical power relationships, which implies a complex dependency on adults’ decisions (Buehler-Niederberger as cited in Huf, 2013, p. 64). This may result in children developing “cooperating complicity”, where they may willingly accept their role as ‘just a child’ and actively seek to adjust themselves to this role (p. 64).

Considering aspects of choice and control across various educational settings, through ethnographic analysis, Huf (2013) suggests that more freedom of choice is apparent in preschool settings, as opposed to highly structured activities offered by conventional primary school environments. This discrepancy is paramount and should be taken into consideration when facilitating transitions from preschool to school environment. Huf (2013) calls for the integration of children’s views irrespective of the nature of educational settings, as well as providing opportunities for bringing children’s own interests and ideas, and adding playful elements to the process. Acknowledging and practicing a child’s agency in the transition process allows for the integration of children’s own relevancies into teacher-led tasks and therefore leads children to gain competencies by not allowing adults’ requirements to undermine their own ideas and interests (Einarsdottir, 2007; Huf, 2013). In this case, the initially unbalanced power relationships can be transformed into *cooperative non-conformity*, resulting in children having a chance to establish and practice a new role of themselves as a school pupil and being an equal member of a large group of children. This way, children positively “participate in the new order..., bring in their social competencies to establish their role” (Huf, 2013, p. 73), which largely facilitates their agency and positively impacts on the future process of adapting to the new environment.

This positive view of children reaffirms them as capable learners and citizens and is further supported by Fluckiger (2010), who researched children’s ability to switch between cultures. Fluckiger (2010) found that children whose home culture and language were different to the dominant culture and language practiced in the early childhood education centre, transversed between the two cultures and languages, building “knowledge, skills and dispositions” that ensured that children were able to operate successfully in the different settings (p. 107). In the children’s case, their transitions were partly supported by the parents and by the teachers, however, there seemed to be no promotion of the ‘other’ culture in the home or the early childhood setting. This is contrary to what the New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) encourages, as the curriculum promotes the use of children’s home language in the educational setting.

Transitions from home to the early childhood education centre or school can be understood as moving between different physical settings, as well as moving from one set of rules and language to another. Although those transitions can be challenging, it seems that the support children require is based less on their culture but more on their personal

characteristics (Fluckiger, 2010). Traum and Moran (2016) focus on infants' and toddlers' daily transitions into and out of the early childhood education centre. They raise an important point, that working with parents and honouring their values and beliefs is essential. This notion of relationship is well aligned with *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), which has Relationships and Family and Community as two of its principles. The Ministry of Education (2017) promotes the view that teachers need to work in close partnership with the families to ensure that the cultural values practiced at home are adopted by the centre. However, there seems to be a lack of questioning about whether this integration of the child's home cultural values is supported by the parents. As Fluckiger (2010) elucidates, some parents prefer for the home culture and language to be just that, used and practiced at home, while they expect their children to become savvy in the dominant culture and language through participation in the early childhood education centre. Therefore, it could be argued that working in partnership with parents also needs to include respecting and following parents' wishes of not focussing on children's home culture in the early childhood education centre but rather reminding children that there are different ways of doing and being in different contexts.

Research has established a link between children's academic success and how well they speak the dominant language, or language of instruction. Souto-Manning (2016) highlights the importance of teachers holding a positive view towards children's home language, rather than seeing the children as in need of help or having no language skills. Children "who speak languages other than English should not be defined in terms of English" (Souto-Manning, 2016, p. 265) but should be considered as having an advantage, as bilingualism or multilingualism is for example linked to delaying the onset of Alzheimer's, as well as opening doors to exploring and navigating different worlds (Fluckiger, 2010). However, while speaking more than one language is deemed an advantage, to ease the transition into formal, mainstream education, a good grasp of the dominant language is essential.

Interestingly, there seems to be a conception of some home languages being given preference, while other home languages are considered a hindrance (Souto-Manning, 2016). This notion suggests that if teachers see a child's home language as negative, transitions into the setting will be challenging, not because of the child's home language or culture but because of an attitude, linked actions and perceptions, that lead to the child and her/his culture to being viewed as problematic. In this vein Souto-Manning (2016) draws attention to the Hispanic population in the United States, however similar conclusions are noted by Taylor (2011), who investigated Aboriginal children's transitions to school and their academic success in Australia. The issue, according to Taylor (2011) is not the culture, but what is given preference in each culture and what is considered important and valued. For example, a study discussed by Taylor (2011) found that indigenous Aboriginal children scored lower on reading and mathematics, compared to their white Australian counterparts. However, if the assessment would include the children's visual-spatial awareness, ability to assess risk, motor skills and independence, the Aboriginal children would outdo their peers from other cultures. Therefore, what to include in curricula and how to assess children's skills needs to be negotiated, as diverse cultures place emphasis on different areas of learning. For a positive transition, the contexts of where children are and where they transition to need to be understood by all those who work with and support the child's transition.

Life transitions are often referred to as rites of passage, a term that Bove and Cescato (2013) employ to investigate children's transitions from home to the early childhood education setting or between different contexts. As children move from one set of knowledge and reference points to another, children have the opportunity to "try out new roles" and modify their ways of doing things accordingly (Bove & Cescato, 2013, p. 29; Fluckiger, 2010). While daily transitions between home and the education setting and then back to home are inevitable, Bove and Cescato (2013) argue that it is not the transition as such that is an issue, as it is how it is managed by both parents and teachers which decides if the transition is a positive or negative experience for the child. As families have different ways of interacting with the centre and the teachers, the educators need to get to know the parents as individuals and support the transition into and out of the centre in an individualised manner. This approach, as promoted by Bove and Cescato (2013) goes

beyond practising assumed cultural sensitivity but honours each parent and child as an individual, with customised rituals for each child and family.

Another influence on how transitions occur is the regularity with which children attend an education service and how the parents perceive the service. There is no doubt that the more comfortable parents feel with a centre and the more trust they have that their child is well looked after and cared for, the more confidence they have when supporting their child's transition into the centre. Munford, Sanders, Maden and Maden (2007) explain that early childhood education settings can become a second home for children and a place of support for the families. Parents do not only place children in early childhood education services for educational purposes but also because their children need care they cannot provide due to being part of the work force. Transition into and out of the setting can be challenging for children, but parents are also affected by the daily traversing between spaces. No doubt, many working parents can empathise with the challenge to drop off children in the morning, get to work on time, before having to return to the centre on time to pick the children up again. Munford et al. (2007) highlight the importance of building a community, which is inviting to parents and suggest that the education service could become a community hub, offering not only education to children but also support to the families using the education service. Transitioning children into centres where the parents feel supported and comfortable will ease the passing to and from the centre (Fluckiger, 2010).

For some families and education services, transition is not only a question of different cultures and languages that need to be navigated but children's differing needs and abilities. Working in partnership with parents and parents being honest about their child's needs was one of the indicators for successful transition identified by the teachers participating in the study, followed by having a good understanding of how to care for the child. The study highlighted the importance of parents sharing their knowledge of how to best care for their child with additional needs with teachers, and for teachers having the opportunity to learn more about the child's needs in theoretical and practical terms. The transition process could be further improved if the families and teachers were able to draw on the support of outside agencies, such as early intervention teachers, specialists and organisations that offer support for specific needs (Warren, Vialle & Dixon, 2016).

Another way to look at transitions is supported by the Deleuzian concept of assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This concept considers everything, including people, to be made up of many individual parts. To illustrate this, a child could be a sibling, a friend, a religious person, a community participant, and in those various roles, certain parts of the person are used or activated to fit this role. For example, when a child plays with a sibling, then the child will be more aware of the notion of sibling when playing with other children that are not a sibling - assemblages are influenced by the environment in which they are embedded (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). It could be argued that in order to transition between different environments, for example home and the education centre, certain parts of the person are used more in one environment than in another. This does not mean that children are denied their identity, but offers a different way of understanding the ability to move between cultures, settings, expectations and rules, without relinquishing their sense of self. Rather, this notion would encourage a range of knowledges, skill sets and flexibility in children, which in turn eases transitions for children.

The above discussion has identified the importance of acknowledging the families and their children as individuals. Transitions should not be conducted following assumed cultural practices or perceived needs but should be developed based on the wishes and requirements of each family and child. This means that teachers have to let go of their presumed expertise on what a positive transition looks like and have to truly listen to what the child and family might need. Transition processes are at times practiced as a fixed ritual, however, it is important for teachers to be responsive to the often daily changes in how the child needs to be welcomed and bid farewell to at the centre. Although *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) highlights the importance of working in partnership with parents and honours the principle of

Family and Community as well as Relationships, it seems that for some families, children and teachers, transitions are still an area that provides discomfort rather than celebration of something new, an adventure awaiting beyond.

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