

The Role of Schools and Communities in Children's School Transition

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Topic

School transition

Introduction

While recognizing that perceptions of children's readiness for school are integral to discussions of the transition to school,^{1,2} a range of research has concentrated on investigating the social and cultural contexts in which children exist and the influence of these contexts on future school success.³⁻⁶ This latter focus has included developing an understanding of the roles of schools and communities in the transition to school.

Subject

Discussions about transition to school often revolve around an event (starting school) that occurs when children are deemed to be "ready." One of the major challenges with this focus on children's readiness is that the social and cultural contexts in which children live are regarded as less important than the characteristics of individual children. This is despite research indicating that schools themselves make major contributions to children's readiness,^{7,8} as well as what is known about the importance of community influences on learning.⁹ This report emphasizes the importance of school and community contexts, as well as their impact on perceptions of readiness and connections with children's future school success.

Problems

Defining "transition to school" can be problematic. In some instances, transition is the name given to a specific program that operates shortly before and/or after a child starts school.¹⁰ In other instances, transition is regarded as a process occurring over the long term, incorporating a range of experiences, including maternal ante-natal care, provision of health and welfare services and access to high quality child care¹¹. In this report, we consider transition in the latter sense, with many experiences, people and services contributing to the general well-being of children and their families, and hence affecting their preparedness for school. We also regard transition as a process that continues after children start school.

Several research problems follow from this conceptualisation of transition. These include:

- What impact do the many and varied experiences of children and families have on transition?
- Who is responsible for facilitating transition?

- What are the roles of schools and communities in promoting positive transitions?

Research Context

There is increasing pressure to recognize the global implications of education and to establish educational programs that guarantee the development of a highly trained workforce.¹² Early childhood education faces this same pressure, often in the guise of academic curriculum that is “pushed down” from primary schools, and in increasing pressure from schools and schools systems to ensure that children entering school are prepared, particularly for the academic demands of school.^{13,14}

Consequences of this context include:

- pressure for prior-to-school services to implement a stronger academic curriculum and become more “school-like”;
- pressure for families to prepare their children for school with specific experiences; and
- deficit views of communities, families and children who do not provide or engage in these experiences.

Key Research Questions

If transition is considered in the broad sense outlined above, what are the roles of schools and communities in facilitating transition? If transition is more than a program of activities offered by the school or prior-to-school service immediately before and/or after children start school, who is responsible for providing transition experiences and promoting the importance of transition?

Recent Research Results

Recent research, policy and program initiatives in Australia and elsewhere have sought to address these issues. Research perspectives from the Starting School Research Project^{10,15,16} have emphasized the following key elements in promoting effective school transitions:

- a focus on relationships;
- the importance of a strengths-based perspective;
- the critical importance of appropriate funding and resourcing;
- effective planning and evaluation; and
- responsiveness to contextual variation.

These elements have been incorporated into policy initiatives, such as the Families First strategy operating in New South Wales.^{17,18}

The focus on relationships has been critical, reflecting the principle that relationships are key mediators of children’s readiness competencies.¹⁹ Relationships provide resources for children and families as they enter new and different contexts and confront different expectations and experiences.

It is not only children’s relationships that are central to effective transitions. Relationships between schools and prior-to-school settings, among service-providers within communities, between families and schools and among families themselves all play an important role in constructing a context based on collaboration. It is this sense

of collaboration, of working together, that is the key for facilitating positive transitions.¹⁷

Schools have a key role in establishing and maintaining these relationships. Research evidence suggests that what happens at school largely determines children's success, both during the transition and in later school outcomes^{20,21,8} and far outweighs factors such as the age at which children start school and their assessed readiness.²²

Schools that make efforts to reach out to families and communities and build connections across services and agencies are rewarded with higher levels of engagement and family connection with school.²³ This is particularly so when school and prior-to-school services collaborate and where relationships that are established before children start school continue into the new school environment.²⁴

Schools exist within communities. The relationships between schools and communities influence children's transition to school and their ongoing connection with school.²⁴ Communities with high levels of social capital²⁵ provide both structural and social support for families and children at times of transition. These can include services such as out-of-school-hours care, and social networks that provide information about school and its expectations.

Building relationships and community capacity-building – a policy framework that focuses on recognizing and building on the strengths within each community²⁶ – have been central elements of the work of the Starting School Research Project.^{10,15,16} In several communities, the stimulus for building relationships within communities and across agencies, prior-to-school and school services has been the development of a transition to school program.^{17,27} Collaboration across services increases the likelihood of dedicated funding and resources, both through the pooling of resources and the likelihood of local, state or federal funding for a coordinated initiative that has demonstrated community commitment. Such commitment is regarded as important for program sustainability. It is also an important factor in ensuring that programs and approaches developed are contextually relevant for that community.

Two examples illustrate the importance of building relationships among children, families, early childhood services, schools and communities. The first of these is located in Wollongong²⁷, a large city in NSW. In 2003, a Transition to School Network was formed to connect families, educators and service-providers across the city and to focus efforts on promoting a positive start to school. A range of activities has been organized through the network, including an annual picnic in the park aimed specifically at children starting school and their families. The local council and businesses sponsor the picnic, and children and their families receive a range of information about starting school, meet people from schools, and have opportunities to engage in activities that help them meet other children and families who will be starting school. The network also organizes a range of School Expos where all schools in the area are invited to the same venue to provide information about their school and families are encouraged to seek out specific schools and information. For the children, the highlight of the network's activities has been the design and launch of an official transition to school mascot. Billy Backpack was designed by a school student and now appears as a character at network events.

In contrast to Wollongong, Cobar is a small farming and mining community in rural NSW. Many families live on farms outside the town and do not have access to many community resources. Community meetings to discuss transition to school identified some concerns among local families, particularly those who felt isolated and ill prepared to make decisions about whether or not a child was ready to start school. A transition team was formed, consisting of parents, early childhood educators and teachers in schools. The team worked with children and families, as well as all prior-to-school services and schools in Cobar, to develop a brochure called Starting school with a smile.¹⁶ This brochure was specific to Cobar and described the sorts of things families could do in and around Cobar to support their children in the transition to school. It referred to local resources and included photographs of local settings and people. The brochure was launched by the town mayor and has provided a valuable community resource for many families.

Each of these examples reflects the strengths of communities to identify and respond to the challenge of supporting a positive transition to school for children. They emphasize the importance of relationships and have as one of their bases the challenge of helping people make connections. In each case, financial resources were pooled from different sources, and the activities resulted from concerted planning and evaluation. The teams (composed of parents, early childhood teachers, teachers from schools and other community members) embraced collaboration and demonstrated the effectiveness of working together. Significantly, each team responded to the contexts in which they were located.

Research Gaps

Much of the evidence invoked in discussions of school and community roles in supporting the transition to school remains anecdotal or derived from small-scale, locally relevant research. It is important that this research base not be dismissed, as many of the decisions and influences relevant to successful transitions are drawn from individual beliefs, experiences and expectations, as well as locally relevant and constructed understanding of school and who succeeds in school.⁶ However, it is also important that such studies are complemented by larger-scale, longer-term, generalizable studies.

Research gaps also exist in the areas of understanding connections between transition programs and the quality and nature of school environments and curricula; using a strengths-based approach to working with families as they support their children's transition to school; and examining the sustainability of collaborative programs as people and resources change.

Conclusions

Starting school successfully is a social and communal endeavour. Children do not make the transition to school on their own, and their perceived state of readiness is but one of the many variables to consider in making judgements about the effectiveness of this transition. Schools and communities make significant contributions to children's connections with school, both in the transition process and in later school engagement. Where children and their families feel connected to schools, valued and respected in schools and communities, they are likely to engage successfully with school, with the result that not only children and families but also schools and communities benefit. When the reverse occurs, with children and families feeling

alienated from school and unsupported in the community, communities and those within them suffer.

Implications

In order to meet increasing pressures for greater accountability of academic outcomes, it can be tempting to focus on increasing the readiness requirements of individual children as they start school. This approach overlooks the significant influence of schools and communities on children's engagement with school.

Policy perspectives that support the roles of schools and communities in transition are based on:

- collaborating with multiple stakeholders across a range of contexts;
- acknowledging transition as a joint responsibility, rather than something "owned" by a particular group;
- recognizing the importance of relationships and providing time and resources to support relationship-building; and
- identifying the existing strengths, rather than deficits, of families and communities and developing strategies to build upon and extend these strengths.

To learn more on this topic, consult the following sections of the Encyclopedia:

- [How important is it?](#)
- [What do we know?](#)
- [What can be done?](#)
- [According to experts](#)

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