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

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Introduction

The transition to school is recognized as a focal point of children's future school engagement and educational outcomes.[1,2] Children who start school positively are well positioned to build a sense of belonging that promotes engagement in the educational environment.[3]

In many discussions of starting school, the terms 'transition' and 'readiness' are used interchangeably. While some renderings of readiness incorporate child, family, school, and community elements,[4,5] often the major focus is the academic readiness of individual children[6,7] or, sometimes, groups of children.[8,9] In contrast, a focus on transition directs our attention to the processes of continuity and change that characterize children's school start. While a great deal of the research focus on educational transitions is directed towards children's changing role, identity and status,[10] studies of transition also incorporate focus on what happens within children's social and cultural contexts – notably the family,[11] school, and community.[5,12]

Subject

Starting school is a key transition point for individuals.[13] The first day of school is often marked by special events and rites that hold both individual and social significance. For example, in some German states, school starters are presented with a Schultüte – a cone filled with sweets and school supplies – before engaging in celebrations with families. In Australia, children don their school uniform and multiple photographs are taken. These events mark both the importance of starting school for the individual, and provide social and cultural recognition that starting school is an important life event.

However, the first day of school is neither the beginning nor the end of the transition to school process, and it is not only the individual that contributes to the effectiveness of transition experiences. Transition occurs over an extended time frame, incorporating a range of experiences involving the child, family, community and educational settings.[14]

Research indicates the importance of school factors. Increasingly, schools are expected to be ready for children[2], recognizing that "'lack of readiness' is not a problem of children being insufficiently skilled to learn at school, but instead it is where there is a mismatch between the attributes of individual children and families, and the ability and resources of the school and/or system to engage and respond appropriately".[8]

In addition to school factors, the importance of the community in supporting learning and promoting children's preparedness for school has been established.[15,16,17] This paper emphasizes the importance of school and community contexts, as well as their impact on the transition to school.

Problems

There are many ways to conceptualize the transition to school. For example, transition can be described as the movement of individual children from prior-to-school or home to school settings; as a rite of passage marked by specific events; and as a range of processes.[18]

An international group of scholars defined transition to school as a time of "individual and social change, influenced by communities and contexts and, within these, the relationships, identities, agency and power of all involved".[19] To reframe discussions about starting school towards a focus on transition, the group developed the Transition to School: Position Statement,[20] which characterizes transitions as times of opportunities, expectations, aspirations and entitlements. One of the key features of the Position Statement is that it recognizes the many participants in

transition and urges consideration of the four constructs not only for the children starting school, but also for the families, communities, schools and school systems that contribute to transition experiences.

The move to reframe starting school as a time of transition recognizes several research problems:

1. Who is involved in the transition to school?
2. What strengths do they bring to transition processes?
3. How do stakeholders define effective transitions?
4. What strategies facilitate effective transitions?
5. What are the roles of schools and communities in promoting effective transitions?

Research Context

Recent worldwide attention has been directed to the importance of the early years.[21] The attention to early childhood education has extended to the early years of school and to the nature of the transition between early childhood and school education[2]. The development of new curricula for early childhood education and school education in many countries has contributed to the focus on transition to school.

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.[22] 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.[23]

Consequences of this context include:

1. pressure for prior-to-school services to implement a stronger academic curriculum and become more "school-like";
2. pressure for families to prepare their children for school with specific experiences; and

3. deficit views of communities, families and children who do not provide or engage in these experiences.

Key Research Questions

- What are the roles of schools and communities in facilitating transition?
- How can transition experiences promote opportunities, expectations, aspirations and entitlements for all involved?
- What is the potential to support continuity of learning across prior-to-school, home and school environments?

Recent Research Results

Recent research, policy and program initiatives have sought to address these issues.[2,3]

What are the roles of schools and communities in facilitating transition?

The essence of effective transition practices is commitment to building secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships among those involved. It is from these relationships – between and among children, families, communities, educators and educational settings – that continuity between community, home, prior-to-school and school is built.
Strong relationships support effective transitions[7]. When strong relationships exist between schools, prior-to-school settings and communities, each context is regarded as a valuable resource. Relationships are key mediators of children's competencies.[24] Relationships provide resources for children and families as they enter new and different contexts and confront different expectations and experiences[25].

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 effective transitions.[3]

Schools have a key role in establishing and maintaining these relationships. What happens at school largely determines children's success, both during the transition and in later school outcomes and far outweighs factors such as the age at which children start school and their

assessed readiness.[26]

When schools make efforts to reach out to families and communities and build connections across services and agencies, they are rewarded with high levels of engagement and family connection with school.[27,28,29] 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.[30]

Schools exist within communities. The relationships between schools and communities influence children's transitions to school and their ongoing connections with school.[3] Communities with high levels of social capital,[31] 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 educational expectations. Social capital is generated by the web of connections and interconnections present within communities and the trust and shared values that underpin these.

Bioecological theory[12] emphasizes the importance of inter-related contexts in supporting children's development and learning. Communities differ in many ways, including the availability and accessibility of resources and the opportunities afforded for interactions that affirm community values, aspirations and expectations. There is a well-established link between the local community context and children's development and learning,[32,33,34] largely linked to the availability of opportunities to engage in a range of experiences.[15]

When positive relationships are built between families, schools, prior-to-school settings and other community groups, there is the potential for collaboration and, through this, information sharing, the establishment of networks, and growing awareness of different contexts and resources.[35] These, in turn, can lead to everyone working towards common goals.

How can transition experiences promote opportunities, expectations, aspirations and entitlements?

Utilizing the Position Statement, educators are encouraged to reflect on transition practices from a range of perspectives. For example:

How do transition strategies and experiences provide opportunities for:

- Children to continue shaping their identities and to extend their existing knowledge, skills and understandings through interactions with adults, peers and family?
- Educators to share their own expertise, while recognizing the expertise of others, as they communicate and make connections with children, other educators, families and communities?
- Families to strengthen and support each child's learning and development?
- Communities to recognize starting school as a significant life event in the lives of children and their families?

In what ways do transition approaches recognize:

- Children's aspirations for friendships and a sense of belonging at school?
- Family hopes for positive educational outcomes for their children?
- Educators' aspirations for professional partnerships and support to create strong learning environments for all children?
- The aspirational importance of education within communities?

How do transition approaches respect the expectations of:

- Children to learn, face challenges and have access to support?
- Families to have their knowledge recognized and valued?
- Educators to access appropriate support and professional recognition?
- Communities to attend to the wellbeing of all children and the promotion of active citizenship?

How do transition approaches reflect entitlements of:

- All children to access high quality educational environments?
- Equity and excellence in all interactions with children, families, educators and communities?
- Professional recognition for educators – across prior-to-school and school sectors?
- Communities to be engaged as contributors to educational environments?

What is the potential to support continuity of learning across prior-to-school, home and school environments?

Transition is a time of both continuity and change. A great deal of focus is directed towards the changes – or discontinuities – encountered during the transition; changes such as the environment (physical and educational), pedagogy and curriculum, expectations, rules and routines.[36,37] However, it is also important to note that not everything changes at times of transition – elements of continuity remain. For example, family contexts continue to support children, many relationships are retained, community resources or supports may continue to be accessed, and children's learning journeys continue.

Pedagogical approaches in schools and prior-to-school settings can promote, or inhibit, continuity of learning for children.[2,37] Continuity of learning, pedagogy and curriculum is facilitated by positive relationships and interactions. An integral part of this is cross-sectoral communication, where educators in early childhood and school settings communicate regularly to support the sharing of information.[2,38] While there may be many challenges to such communication – including a lack of awareness of the role of educators in 'other' settings,[35,37] and different expectations about transition experiences,[39]– where such communication exists it provides a powerful basis for continuity.[3]

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 [40], as well as locally relevant and constructed understanding of school and who succeeds in school.[2,41] However, it is also important that such studies are complemented by larger-scale, longer-term, generalizable studies.

Many studies of the influence of school and communities on the transition to school have been undertaken in urban areas, and have focused on children's primary or secondary school experiences. Fewer studies have explored more diverse contexts – such as schools and communities in rural, regional or remote areas, or involving younger children and their transitions experiences.

World events, including changing immigration and demographic patterns have contributed to increasingly diverse community, family, school and prior-to-school contexts. There is much to be gained from research that recognizes such diversity and explores the transitions experiences and expectations of all involved.[42]

Research gaps are also noted in the factors identified and studied in relation to school and community influences on transition to school.[5] While many studies identify risk factors, vulnerabilities, or the impact of disadvantage on children and their transitions to school, fewer explore the strengths inherent among families, schools and communities.[40] Assumptions about disadvantage and deficit can color the issues explored.[7]

Conclusions

Starting school successfully is a social and communal endeavour. 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, respected and supported in schools and communities, they are likely to engage positively 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:

1. collaborating with multiple stakeholders across a range of contexts;
2. acknowledging transition as a joint responsibility, rather than something "owned" by a particular group;
3. recognizing the importance of relationships and providing time and resources to support relationship-building; and

4. identifying the existing strengths, rather than deficits, of families and communities and developing strategies to build upon and extend these strengths.

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