

Transition and learning – a vital partnership

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Overview

Recent research identifies the strong influence of transition and other school experiences on children's academic competence and behaviour. This presentation will provide an overview of this research. A range of strategies that can be implemented to provide effective transition programs, responsive to the local community, will be identified.

Importance of the school context

The school context is one of the most influential for shaping the course of human development. When children adjust quickly to the first year of school, much of the negative effects on children's confidence and school behaviour can be overcome (Glicksman & Hills, 1981). Furthermore, the child who makes a satisfactory initial adjustment to school is more likely to be successful in their future progress than a child who has difficulty adjusting to the school situation (Ladd & Price, 1987, Thompson, 1975).

Starting school is a period of transition and adjustment as the child moves from preschool services or home, to the school environment. It has been perceived as one of the major challenges children face in their early childhood years (Love, Logue, Trudeau & Thayer, 1992, Ladd, 1990). Children are faced with a new environment of buildings and classrooms, new school and teacher expectations, new academic challenges, and acceptance into a new peer group (Ladd, 1990, Rice & O'Brien, 1990). They are required to function independently, develop relationships with staff and peers, and to behave in ways that are appropriate for their class and school and involve conforming to rules. Adjustment to school partly depends on the child possessing the necessary skills to respond to the demands of the new environment and to work independently (Role, Fiechl & Innocenti, 1982). It also includes responses to academic demands, behavioural expectations, length of school day, interaction with others, acceptance of rules, and class size (Love et al., 1992).

When there are discrepancies between existing skills and behaviours and what is expected in the new school setting, problems in adjusting to school can occur (Lombardi, 1992, Renwick, 1984). These problems particularly in relation to behaviour can also impact on teachers' acceptance of children, the classroom situation, and on other children (Renwick, 1987). There is a strong relationship between behaviour and academic competence. The presence of academic problems places children at higher risk of developing social behaviour deficits (Merrell, 1989; Ladd, 1990) and it has been suggested that ten percent of children have academic difficulties in adjusting to school (Love et al., 1992).

It is important to identify school factors associated with children's transition to school that may influence the learning community and to implement strategies that promote rather than hinder learning.

The influence of transition and school factors on children's academic competence and behaviour.

Recent studies suggest that children's adjustment to the first year of schooling is influenced by their familiarity with the school setting (Margetts, 1997), the presence of a familiar playmate (Ladd, 1990; Margetts, 1997) and attendance at outside school hours care (Margetts, unpub).

Children who had more transition experiences prior to the commencement of schooling (that is, six or more visits to the school) were rated as having higher levels of social skills and particularly self control including the ability to respond appropriately when pushed or hit or teased by others, to control one's temper in conflict situations, and to respond appropriately to peer pressure (Margetts, 2000). More transition experiences were also associated with children having less problem behaviours and higher ratings for academic competence including reading, mathematics, motivation and overall academic performance.

Having a familiar playmate in the same class was associated with more social skills, less problem behaviours including aggression and hyperactivity, and higher ratings for academic competence (Margetts, 1997).

In relation to attendance at outside school hours care, preliminary results of a current study (Margetts, unpub) suggest that children who attended before school care had significantly higher scores for externalising behaviours and hyperactivity. Children who attended after school care had significantly lower scores for internalising behaviour such as acting sad or depressed, appearing lonely or anxious in groups, or perceived as having low self-esteem. Attendance at both before and after school care (befaft) was also associated with lower scores for internalising behaviour. Thus, while attendance at before school care is associated with higher ratings of externalising behaviour, it would seem that attendance at after school hours care had a positive influence in relation to lower levels of internalising type behaviours.

These results suggest that children should be provided with many opportunities to become familiar with the new school setting prior to commencement and children should be placed in classrooms with children they are familiar with. It could also be suggested that parents should be discouraged from using private or school-based before school care, at least during the first term of school commencement.

Providing effective transition programs

An effective transition program should provide the implementation of the best transition practices and therefore result in successful adjustment to school. Transition programs that support children's adjustment to school and address the challenges that may disrupt children's learning and development should include strategies that attempt to retain the benefits of preschool programs, reduce the stress children might experience commencing school, create an appropriate degree of continuity as children move into school, respond to the variety of children's backgrounds and experiences, and provide positive experiences (Love et al., 1992).

Transition programs should include strategies focusing on program continuity, ongoing communication between staff at the preschool and school levels, preparation of children for transition, and the involvement parents (Administration for Children, Youth & Families, 1986; Bredekamp, 1987).

Transition adjustments and consequential problems for young children starting school can be reduced if continuity of learning is promoted through the provision of developmentally appropriate experiences (Bredekamp, 1987; Lombardi, 1992). An integrated curriculum that recognises that learning occurs in different ways and within and across curriculum areas reflects the preschool philosophy and provides a more continuous link with prior learning experiences. Associated with this approach is the recognition and provision of time for children to become familiar with, and to consolidate, new skills and behaviours. It is also important to provide familiar experiences. In the playground, water play, sand play and the provision of same-age play spaces supervised by adults may assist in children's adjustment to school. Messy play and dramatic play areas can be included in the classroom.

Transition programs should involve ongoing communication between staff at the preschool, child care and school services and with parents. In this way programs can be developed to better reflect the needs of the community and to ensure maximum benefit to the children. For example, Belgrave South Primary School works closely with the local preschool staff in planning transition and also surveys all parents of preschool children to find out what they want from the transition program.

First hand experiences of the school prior to commencement allows children time to talk about their feelings with sensitive adults and to prepare them for the challenges 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, to become familiar with the new environment, to identify differences between preschool and school and the adaptations required, to participate in classroom activities, to meet new friends and develop support systems. 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 valuable school experiences in the company and security of familiar playmates and staff.

School experiences can be varied. As well as orientation visits for children and their parents, preschools arrange visits to schools to listen to the orchestra or band, to use the library, art room or other facilities, and to participate in classrooms and play-times. Some schools implement buddy systems with existing prep children taking responsibility for the children in transition and this is particularly effective given the similarities of age and play interests. Other schools invite preschool children to have lunch at the school, to attend school dress up days or festivals. Still other schools organise prep and other school children to visit preschools so that preschool children are able to interact with school children on familiar territory.

Other transition activities implemented by schools include letters and special newsletters to incoming children and their families.

It is important that parents are informed of school expectations and teachers listen to parents' concerns and goals for their children (Bredekamp, 1987). Parents should receive sufficient information and opportunities to understand the new environment and to share it with their child (Davies, 1991). Increasingly schools are providing opportunities for parents to become familiar with the staff; helping parents to understand the transition process from the child's perspective and identifying skills and behaviours related to successful school adjustment, and organising social events before the commencement of school.

Having friends in the same class can help children adjust to the demands of school. A smooth transition may be promoted through children continuing their existing friendships inside and outside the new school environment, or participating in a buddy system. Strategies should be developed for promoting the continuance of existing friendships or the development of new friendships. Prior to school commencement, school staff should identify children who do not

know any other children at the school. Useful strategies for promoting friendships include introducing parents to each other, providing special 'get-to-know-you playtimes' in the school playground after-hours, identifying emerging interests and suggesting parents of these children meet in their own time. To minimise the social adjustments children need to make as they commence school, some schools are now allocating children to classes based on their preschool classes and thus keeping children who are familiar with each other together.

In Summary

If the initial adjustment to school is satisfactory, children are more likely to be successful in their future progress than children who have difficulty adjusting to the school situation (Thompson, 1975; Ladd & Price, 1987).

As we move toward effective transition 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). Transition programs should therefore ensure the gradual preparation of children, continuity of peers, continuity of expectations between settings, continuity of programming, and ongoing communication between staff and parents. In this way the unfamiliar will become familiar, continuity of experiences will be facilitated and the child will feel more secure in the new environment, schools will have valuable knowledge of children's prior experiences, and the speedy adjustment of children and families into the new setting will be facilitated.

In helping children adjust more easily to school, administrators, staff and parents need to more fully understand the importance of a carefully planned transition program in developing strategies that help children adjust more easily to the first year of school, and promoting continuity between school and children's previous experiences. It is this area of collaboration between all people that is the most difficult to effect, and this is the challenge for all early childhood personnel.

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