



<i>Presentation Title</i>	A Research-informed Approach to Understanding and Supporting Young Children's Transition to Primary School
<i>Format</i>	Paper Session [3.04]
<i>Sub-theme</i>	Supporting Transition – Interfaces at Pre-primary, Primary and Secondary Levels

A Research-informed Approach to Understanding and Supporting Young Children's Transition to Primary School

Susanna Wai Ching LAI YEUNG
The Open University of Hong Kong

Abstract

Entrance to primary school is often seen as the start of formal schooling. In Hong Kong, this is also a time when free, compulsory education begins. Early success in primary school is important as it plays a critical role in children's future development and later school success. Hence, there is increased attention to providing supporting measures to ensure a smooth transition to primary school. This paper will begin with a review of the literature to understand children's transition experiences. Then, based on research findings on the different models of transition, the paper will examine different transition supportive practices. In particular, the paper will use the transition measures recommended by the Hong Kong Education Bureau as an example for discussion. The paper will end with recommendations for policy and school practice.

Keywords: transition support measures, kindergarten, primary school

Introduction

In the past decade, there is mounting research and policy efforts to ease the transition from preschool to kindergarten in the United States. Kindergarten marks the beginning of formal schooling and signifies an important milestone in development for young children. Large-scale research, such as the National Education Longitudinal Study (Meisels, & Liaw, 1993) and the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NICHD, 2003), abounds in the study of school readiness, a concept tied closely with transition. There is a well-documented relation between children's performance in the early grades and their later academic performance (e.g. Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Gutman, Sameroff, & Cole, 2003). On the other hand, children who showed difficulties in transition and adjusting to school had a tendency to be behind their peers (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988). Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, and Cox's (2000) national survey of children's transition difficulties as reported by teachers showed that 32% exhibited some problems during transition, and 16% were having difficult or very difficult problems. Such findings are alarming and warrant concern. Based on the recognition of the importance of early success, many transition support measures and policies are implemented in the US, though with varying approaches and intensity. However, very little research in this area has been done in Hong Kong. This paper aims to review different models of transition to examine the efficacy of transition support measures. Second, it will examine transition measures recommended by the Hong Kong Education Bureaus and make recommendations based on a comprehensive model.

Transition from kindergarten to primary school – the scene in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, formal schooling starts at age 5 years 8 months. This is also when compulsory 9-year free education begins. Before primary schooling, parents can choose to send their children to preschool institutions (or kindergarten) in Hong Kong. There are 3 levels of kindergarten education, starting at the age of 2 years 8 months in Kindergarten Level One. The normal class size in kindergartens is 30, with one teacher and usually 0.5 to 1 assistant teacher. In the primary school, there are 6 grades, with Primary One (equivalent to Grade One in the US system) admitting children aged 5 years 8 months. The usual class size is around 35 to 40. There is one teacher as the class teacher and several subject teachers.

With this background information, we can turn to a brief discussion of what transition to primary school involves. These include changes in a variety of areas, relationships and contexts. To name a few, there are changes in identity and status; geographical location of the new school; environment; physical setting; teacher-child ratio; pedagogy and curriculum; and rules and regulations.

In summary, there is a strong emphasis on academic skills, self-discipline, concentration, on-seat and on-task behaviors in the primary school setting. Teaching and learning changed from a more child-centered, integrated and learning through play approach in kindergartens to a more subject-based approach in primary schools. Limited in-class social interactions are permitted and experienced. These changes in expectations and demands present tremendous challenges to the child's competence and "school readiness".

Models of transition to inform practice

In the previous section, we have discussed the multitude of changes and problems that some children encountered in the transition process. There is therefore an urgent need to examine

and design effective transition measures to ease the process and sets the stage for successful early school experiences. Though there are numerous existing transition measures reported in the literature, to maximize the effectiveness of transition support, a search of a research-informed model is a necessary starting point.

Prevalent transition models can be very broadly grouped into two models. The first is the developmental or child perspective. This approach rests on the premise that child characteristics, such as gender, child's intellectual functioning, temperament and school readiness, all have a direct effect on whether successful transition can be made. Hence, transition measures target at the child to prepare the skills or attitude necessary for a smooth transition. This model can provide partial support to explain transition adjustment. However, the findings account for less than one quarter of the variance in understanding school outcomes (LaParo & Pianta, 2000).

The second model, an ecological dynamic model, acknowledges that transition is a process that involves the bidirectional transactions of different people (child, parents, teachers, peers, and even the community) in different contexts (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). This model is derived from several theoretical frameworks, namely, Bronfenbrenners' ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the Contextual Systems Model (Pianta & Walsh, 1996) and the Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, & Morris, 1998). Details of these perspectives are beyond the scope of the present paper. Essentially, this model sees a child's entry into an educational institution as an ecological transition. Transition is defined by the changing interactions among child, family and contexts through a transactional, dynamic process. Changes in any of the stakeholders in the contexts can have ongoing, bidirectional, direct or indirect effect in the transition process. These interactions influence the child's transition but also become outcomes in the process. Transition can begin long before the child enters primary school and continues to change after primary schooling has begun.

This perspective has gained some support by research findings in the literature. For example, research has shown that the parents' prosocial behaviors can predict those of their child's in kindergarten (Ladd & Hart, 1992), which in turn predicts the child's academic success (Ladd, 1990). Further, parents and teachers who create academic and social goals together enhance the continuity between home and school and eases the transition process (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

The author wishes to further elucidate this model through a socio-constructivist perspective, which interprets transition as a process of co-construction through communication and participation between the institution and family (Griebel & Niesel, 2002; Niesel & Griebel, 2007; O'Carroll & Griffin, 2009). Transition competence is seen as competence of the social system through this perspective (Dunlop & Fabian, 2002). School transition cannot be perceived as a 'one size fits all' program (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta (2000). Co-construction also implies that instead of a top-down approach in which the family is briefed or educated about appropriate strategies to prepare the child in transition to the new school setting, a partnership approach to family involvement is adopted where both family and school communicate and partner together to share legitimate roles and responsibilities in promoting the child's academic and social development.

To optimize the effectiveness of transition measures, the author has integrated all the above discussed perspectives to formulate a *comprehensive model of dynamic co-constructed transition competence* (abbreviated the "CDCC model") to inform promising support

practices. In the following section, this comprehensive, integrative model will be employed to analyze the different transition support measures recommended by the Hong Kong Education Bureau. This model underlines the importance of the ecological, dynamic nature of transition, but emphasizes that transition support has to be co-constructed with the family (and other stakeholders as well) as respected partners. The following government documents have been examined as these are important official guidelines that all schools in Hong Kong refer to:

- Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum (1996)
- Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum (2006)
- Interfaces at Various Levels of Schooling – Supporting Transition 9A Interface at Kindergarten and Primary One Basic Education Guide (2002)

Summary of findings of document analysis

The following are the major observations in the document analysis:

- There was no mention of transition support in the 1996 Pre-primary Curriculum Guide. However, the 2006 edition has addressed this issue by adding one section with three short paragraphs that discusses kindergarten transition to primary school. Teachers are advised to have some knowledge about the primary curriculum and how former students adjust. Primary One teachers are to keep contact with kindergartens. Readers are referred to the Basic Education Guide (2002) Chapter 9 and parent pamphlets for more recommended support measures.
- The Basic Education Guide advises that schools should develop a school policy for transition, organize induction program with a variety of activities, maintain close ties with kindergartens and child care centers, adopt appropriate curriculum practices in primary one to dovetail with early childhood practices, and promote home-school co-operation. Kindergartens are advised to implement a range of transition measures such as arranging classroom setting like that of Primary One, slightly increasing the amount of written work and use different modes of homework, help students to develop the habit of recording homework in the handbooks, adopting similar rules and routines to those used in Primary One, and arranging visits to primary schools for Kindergarten Level Three students (Curriculum Development Council, 2002, p.6).

In sum, the different government documents have differing degree of coverage on preschool transition to primary school. The most explicit and relatively significant discussion of transition support measure was provided in the Basic Education Guide. The underlying orientation in the transition measures discussed in these documents seemed to be a child model, as most measures target at preparing the child's adjustment in the new school. These measures are important, but other measures can be added to address other aspects in the transition process. Some practices in the document are rather generic and low in intensity in nature (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004). It is commendable to note that the practices have included some of the major stakeholders in the transition process. Nevertheless, little or no mention of some other stakeholders (such as preschoolers' peers in both the preschool and the new primary school, the old and new community connected with transition) can be found in the documents.

Recommendations

Based on analysis of the above government documents, some recommendations are made for

policy-makers and for school practices.

At a macro or planning level, the government should consider the following recommendations:

- Include more discussion and recommendation of transition support in the Preprimary Curriculum Guide;
- Ensure that transition support recommendations adhere to a coherent model across government documents;
- In designing transition support measures, strategies should aim at ensuring continuity and consistency across the child's different contexts;
- Maintain consistency in curriculum, pedagogy, structures, relationships and underlying values;
- Adopt the comprehensive dynamic, co-constructed transition competence (CDCC) model to examine the needs, roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in the transition system (child, family, school, neighborhood and community) to co-construct the transition process;
- Play a leading and coordinating role in promoting effective transition support measures.
- Provide more active support, such as in terms of extra resources for teachers or facilitating measures to remove work schedule barriers for parent involvement, by the government should be considered.

At the implementation level, the government can derive transition practices based on the CDCC model to recommend to schools. Schools in Hong Kong have been found to adopt different transition practices (Chan, Lau & Poon, 1999; Chan, 2009). However, there is no evidence of any theoretically or research-informed frameworks on which transition practices were based. Moreover, some practices have been perceived to be less effective as experienced by the child, the parents, or the kindergarten and primary school teachers (Chan, 2009). Hence, it is of paramount importance that schools should adopt a comprehensive model to inform practice. The use of the CDCC model to enhance existing support measures is highly recommended. The following practices are some examples to illustrate possible support measures that can be derived from this model:

- Demonstrate understanding and awareness of student diversity and show they value this difference by taking positive steps, such as employing auxiliary staff to work with students with special needs, inviting students with diverse cultural backgrounds to share in an Open Day on Cultural Heritage;
- Communicate and co-construct with families with children with special needs or families of a different ethnic background to understand their needs and expectations;
- Primary school teachers should meet and discuss with kindergarten teachers to understand the preschool curriculum and pedagogy and adopt a bridging curriculum in Primary One;
- Teachers need to dialogue with Primary One students to understand how they perceive the new curriculum and pedagogy to support transition, for example, allowing more in-class peer interactions, being more flexible with homework assignments, using a variety of assessment strategies.
- Adopt more specific and high intensity transition support practices for newcomers and their families. Pianta, Rimm-Kauffman and Cox (1999) have offered very useful principles that schools can use in planning transition practices.

- *Reaching out.* Schools should reach out proactively to connect with families to establish effective transition measures.
- *Reaching backward in time.* Schools should link up with families before the children enter school.
- *Reach with appropriate intensity.* Schools should develop multiple strategies that include a range of intensity. Examples include low-intensity practices (such as distributing leaflets), medium-intensity practices (such as briefing sessions for newcomers and their parents), and high-intensity practices (such as home visits and personal contacts).

Concluding remarks

Early success in primary school plays a critical role in children's future development and later school success. There is evidence (Chan, Lau & Poon, 1999; Wong, 2003) that a majority of children experience some form of transition difficulties in Primary One. Although many eventually overcame the problems, a substantial percentage still struggled after one month of adjustment. At the end of the Primary One, some students even wanted to return to study in kindergarten. Effective transition support measures serve an important purpose to create early success experiences and cultivate children's love of learning. The government policy-makers, the preschool and the primary school involved all have significant roles to play to realize this goal.

References

- Alexander, K.L., & Entwisle, D. R. (1988). Achievement in the first 2 years of school: Patterns and process. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 53(2).
- Bohan-Baker, M., & Little, P.M.M. (2004). *The transition to kindergarten: A review of current research and promising practices to involve families*, Harvard Family Research Project. Retrieved at <http://www/hfrp.org> on 12 November, 2009.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). The ecology of human development, *Annals of Child Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. & Morris, P. A. (1998). The ecology of developmental processes. In W. Damon & R. Lerner (Eds). *Handbook of child psychology* (Vol. 1, p.993-1028).
- Chan, P.L., Lau, C.K., & Poon, L.M. (1999). Shatin qu xiaoyi xuesheng shiying wenti yanjiu [Study on the adjustment issues of Primary One pupils in Sha Tin]. Hong Kong: Sha Tin Provisional District Council, Committee on Education and Welfare, Working Group on Education.
- Chan, W.L. (2009). The transition from kindergarten to primary school, as experienced by teachers, parents and children in Hong Kong. *Early Child Development and Care*. 9 Jan 2009 Online edition
- Comer J. P. & Haynes, N. M. (1991). Parent involvement in schools. An ecological approach. *The Elementary School Journal*, 91 (3), 271-277.
- Curriculum Development Council (1996). Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum. Hong Kong: Curriculum Development Council.
- Curriculum Development Council (2002). Interfaces at Various Levels of Schooling – Supporting Transition 9A Interface at Kindergarten and Primary One in *Basic Education Guide*. Hong Kong: Curriculum Development Council.
- Curriculum Development Council (2006). Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum. Hong Kong: Curriculum Development Council.
- Dunlop, A-W & Fabian, H. (2002). Conclusions: Debating transitions, continuity and progression in the early years, in H. Fabian & W-W Dunlop (eds) *Transition in the Early Years. Debating Continuity and Progression for Children in Early Education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Entwisle, D. R., & Alexander, K.L. (1998). Facilitating the transition to first grade: The nature of transition and research on factors affecting in. *The Elementary School Journal*, 98, 351-55.
- Griebel, W. & Niesel, R. (2002). Co-constructing transition into kindergarten and school by children, parents, and teachers in H. Fabrain & A. W. Dunlop (eds). *Transitions in The Early Years. Debating continuity and Progression for Children in Early Education*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Gutman, L.M., Sameroff, A.J., & Cole, R. (2003). Academic growth curve trajectories from 1st grade to 12th grade: Effects of multiple social risk factors and preschool child factors. *Developmental Psychology*, 39, 777-90.

Kraft-Sayre, M.E., & Pianta, R.C.(2000). Enhancing the transition to kindergarten: Linking children, families, and schools. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, National Center for Early Development & Learning.

Ladd, G. W. (1990). Having friends, keeping friends, making friends, and being liked by peers in the classroom: Predicators of children's early school adjustment? *Child Development*, 61, 1081-1100.

Ladd, G. W. & Hart, C. H. (1992). Creating informal play opportunities: are parents and preschooler's initiations related to children's competence with peers? *Developmental Psychology*, 24, 1179-1187.

LaParo, K., & Pianta, R. C. (2000). Predicting children's competence in the early school years: A meta-analytic Review. *Review of Educational Research*,70(4), 443-84.

Meisels,S. J., & Liaw, F. R. (1993) Failure in grade: Do retained students catch up? *Journal of Educational Research*, 87(2), 69-77.

NICHD, Early Child Care Research Network (2003). Does amount of time spent in child care predict socioemotional adjustment during the transition to kindergarten? *Child Development*, 74(4), 976-1005.

Neill, M, Guisbond, L., Schaeffer, M, Maddon, J., & Legoros, L. (2004). *Failing our children: How "No Child Left Behind" undermines quality and equity in education - an accountability model that supports school improvement*. Retrieved 10 October, 2009 from <http://www.fairtest.org/node/1778>

Niesel, R. & Griebel, W. (2007). Enhancing the competence of transition systems through co-construction. In Dunlop, A-W & Fabian, H (Eds) *Informing transitions in the early years. Informing transitions in the early years: Research, policy and practice*. NY: Open University Press, McGraw-Hill Education.

O'Carrol, K & Griffin, A (2009). Co-constructing family engagement roles in Eederal Way, Washington. Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) Newsletter, 1(4). Retrieved November 24, 2009 from <http://www/hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/co-constructing-family>

Pianta, R.C., Rimm-Kauffman,S.E., & Cox, M. J. (1999). Introduction: An ecological approach to kindergarten transition. In *The Transition to Kindergarten*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookers Publishing.

Pianta, R. C. & Walsh, D. J. (1996). *High-risk children in schools: Constructing sustaining relationships*. N.Y.: Routledge

Rimm-Kaufman, S. E. & Pianta, R. C. (2000). An ecological perspective on the transition to kindergarten: A theoretical framework to guide empirical research. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 21(5), 491-511.

Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., Pianta, R. C., & Cox, M. J. (2000). Teachers' judgments of problems in the transition to kindergarten. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 15, 147-66.

Wong, N. C. (2003). A study of children's difficulties in transition to school in Hong Kong, *Early Child Development and Care*, 173(1), 83 – 96.

Author

Susanna Wai Ching LAI YEUNG, Ph.D.
The Open University of Hong Kong