



## Effective Transitioning Practices from Early Childhood Centres to Primary Schools.

ShabnamSingh  
latasins@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** Many levels exist in the educational continuum. The passage from an early childhood setting to primary school is seen as a major transition and one of the crucial steps a child takes in the education continuum. Most children find this transition traumatic. The transition also has vital implications for children's learning and, if not handled properly, tends to have a long-term impact on the lives of the children. This article examines literature on transition to school, discusses the significance of transition, and the need to reduce potential adverse effects by providing a smooth transition.

**Keywords:** Transition, effective transitional practices, adjustments

### Introduction

When I moved from Fiji to New Zealand, it was not only a culture shock for me but it also entailed learning a lot of the nuances of and making adjustments to a new culture. My experience has prompted me to conduct a study on the lives of young children during a major transition, namely the moving from an early childhood centre to primary school.

Brostrom (2005) suggests that a transition is said to be a journey or process in three stages that takes place in a period of time. He identifies the three stages as planning and talking about the transition, taking risks, and eventually settling in and becoming a fully established member of a new setting. Mirkhil (2010) makes a salient point that when a child commences on their journey to formal education, this new beginning is a significant milestone in a child's life. Similarly, Courtney and Kowalski (1995) allude to the view that starting school is considered a major transition in the lives of children, family, educators and the community.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) terms a child's move from kindergarten to school as an "ecological transition", where a child achieves their potential for growth by learning with family, friends, teachers and neighbours. The transition from an early childhood setting to school is about learning to "fit in"; for example, learning to relate to new adults, children at the school, the new environment, equipment, and the new rules and routine (Dalli, 2001). A successful transition requires time and adjustment. Educators can play a crucial role by helping the child and their family to have a smooth transition by planning ahead and by working in collaboration with the family.

Dockett and Perry (2004) provide a synthesis of evidence to support that a successful transition has a major impact on a child's academic and social performance. However, the effect of a poor transition can also have a major – and negative – impact, with the child potentially achieving less at school, finding it difficult to make friends, withdrawing and displaying behavioural difficulties (Howie & Timperely, 2001). Skinner, Bryant,

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Coffman, and Campbell (1998, as cited in Howie & Timperely, 2001) warn us that the first couple of weeks of school and classroom routines can shift some children into a trajectory of school failure.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction.**

Starting school is an important transition and a major milestone in a child's life. In New Zealand, this usually occurs when a child turns five. The success or failure of this transition can have a long-term impact on the child. Teachers at the child's early childhood centre and their new school, as well as the child's whānau, can work together to ensure the child's transition to school is a smooth passage rather than a rocky road. Transition can be seen as an ecological concept (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which has a set of systems of home, nursery, new school and new environment with new friends, through which a child travels in the early years of their education. There are changes in relationships, teaching styles, space, and contexts for learning, which can bring excitement to a child but at times can also make the child apprehensive, confused and anxious about the unknown territory that they are stepping into (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007).

### **Communication.**

Dockett and Perry (2003) argue that communication between staff in the child's preschool and new school is important. Through communication, the child's parents and teachers at both the preschool and primary school become aware of each other's expectations and can work towards meeting them. McGann and Clark (2007) concur with Dockett and Perry, and state that connections between early childhood programmes and primary schools are through communication via school visits. Fabian and Dunlop (2007) also agreed with other researchers that communication is important. They suggest that children starting school should be supported by parents, teachers (both preschool and school) in a purposeful way, namely by staff sharing views of the children as learners and parents receiving information about school and the curriculum.

### **Sense of belonging.**

Fabian and Dunlop (2007) argue that a sense of belonging is important and the child's culture should be brought to the school setting. Similarly, Dockett and Perry (2003) state that parents should share important information with the teachers about their children so that a sense of trust, respect and offering can be developed. Howie and Timperley (2001) believe that transition is easier when there is a high degree of linkage, continuity and match between settings. Mirkhil (2010) concurs with Howie and Timperley, and states that children can distinguish the physical and social differences between preschool and primary school, differences such as having lots of classrooms, different types of outdoor areas and the more academic orientation in primary schools. As children come from a play-based environment, these significant differences can impact on children's ability to adjust to the more formal school environment.

### **Dispositions and rules.**

Numerous views have been richly illustrated in literature reviews pertaining to children's transition from early childhood centres to primary schools. Dockett and Perry (2003) discuss



the importance of the child's disposition, such as their feelings about going to school. Those children who liked going to school, for example, liked having friends. Dockett and Perry (2003) further state that A child's disposition also affects how well they cope with change and their ability to make friends at school. Dockett and Perry (2003) also discuss how rules are important to children – what the children can or cannot do in the school setting. As the school environment is different from the early childhood setting, there are different rules. Similarly, Fabian and Dunlop (2007) support the notion that knowing rules is important for children; for example, knowing expected ways of behaving, how to get along with others and when to take turns. Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Ritchie, Howes, and Karoly (2008) also state that children should learn to follow rules and have respect for others. Abiding by rules, behaving as expected, getting along with others and being resilient are essential to being able to fit in, and having these skills and behaviours will make the preschool-to-school transition smoother for the child.

### **Social adjustment.**

Mirkhil (2010) argues that social adjustment is important, i.e. having the ability to negotiate and work alongside peers. Dockett and Perry (2003) concur with Mirkhil's statement and talk about adjustment being on three levels: the first adjustment is that of the teachers, as children in a school setting need to work as part of a large group; the second adjustment is that of parents, as their child needs to be able to separate from them; and the third adjustment is that of the children, who need to be able to work out the school rules so that they can fit into the new environment. Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Ritchie, Howes, and Karoly (2008) also state that children should be socially well-adjusted so that they can respond to new activities with curiosity and enthusiasm. Fabian and Dunlop (2007) present a similar viewpoint, focusing on resilience which enables children to cope well during transitions. Resilience, say Fabian and Dunlop, helps the child to develop social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy and a sense of purpose. This achieves the same end; i.e. children are able to adjust in a school environment. Transition requires social adjustment, which means children should be able to get on well with new people and the new environment.

### **Continuity and match.**

Howie and Timperley (2001) argue that educators have a responsibility to facilitate the transition so that there is minimal disruption to children's learning. Transition is smoother if there is a degree of linkage, continuity and match between the settings. Therefore, the early childhood educators should develop a partnership with the primary school and negotiate common learning goals. When the transition is mediated by educators, children are able to better negotiate the new environment. Landsman Ramey and Ramey (1994, as cited in Howie & Timperley, 2001) suggest that transition is effective when children are willing, like to go to school and perform well academically. When there is continuity and match, the children are able to have a better transition.

### **Educators' belief systems.**

Educators' beliefs play a crucial role in whether a child's transition to school is smooth or not. Educators each have their own beliefs about what is important for children to know and learn and the importance of socialisation practice for their development. Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Ritchie, Howes, and Karoly (2008) talk about educators' belief systems. They mention the skills children need to have to be ready for school and how to teach these skills to



the children. Children need to be healthy, but they also need to have effective communication skills, be socially well-adjusted and respond to activities with curiosity and enthusiasm. Timperley, McNaughton, Howie, and Robinson (2003) also mention educators' belief systems when they talk about children being able to socialise with others, being familiar with equipment and developing oral language skills. Children who exhibit good social skills are able to make friends easily and this makes transition to school much smoother.

### **Teachers' dispositions.**

A teacher's disposition greatly influences how their children are prepared for transition to primary school. Palmer (1998) asks: Do the teachers have the conviction of doing justice to their roles? Do they have integrity, the wholeness? and How authentic they are? Gibbs (2006) suggests that when teachers are at ease with who they are and how they teach, then there is a presence of authenticity in their teaching. Furthermore, teachers should be "servant leaders", which will enable them to value, honour and inspire children and help them to realise their full potential (Gibbs, 2006). Gibbs further suggests that what teachers do, what qualities and dispositions they have, and how they interact with children can have a lifelong effect on a child. Similarly, Colker (2008) suggests that a teacher may have the knowledge and skills, but without the disposition to make use of them, then very little will happen. Teachers should display dispositions such as passion, perseverance, patience, respect, high energy and a sense of humour (Colker, 2008). Teachers who display these characteristics are certainly able to pave a path that makes their children's transition to a school setting a smooth one.

### **Conclusion.**

There is a lengthy list of literature that testifies of the importance of successful transitions for children to primary school. Fabian and Dunlop (2007), Dockett and Perry (2003), and McGann and Clark (2007) provide their views on the importance of communication in a purposeful way; namely, sharing ideas of children as learners and parents receiving information about school and the curriculum. Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Ritchie, Howes, and Karoly (2008), and Mirkhil (2010) state that social adjustment is vital for smooth transitions, while Timperley, McNaughton, Howie and Robinson (2003) suggest that educators' belief systems play a crucial role in preparing children for a school setting.

The importance of a successful transition cannot be overstressed. A child who makes a successful transition is likely to understand the new teaching and learning methods, rules and discipline of primary school, and hence enjoy success in their new environment. However, a transition that is not done well may have a long-term impact on a child's future development and learning, not only at primary school but at subsequent levels of education.

The transition from preschool to primary school can be potentially very stressful for young children. Yet a smooth transition is vitally important because it can have a long-term impact on a child's school achievement and retention. The key areas that may affect a child's transition to school are communication, a sense of belonging, rules and dispositions, social adjustment, continuity and match, and their educators' belief system. If educators do not take responsibility for preparing preschool children for school, then children can find it very hard to adjust to the nuances of the new environment. Educators need to conceptualise transition according to their beliefs and practices, and work accordingly to provide that rite of passage for the children. It needs to be understood that a smooth transition from an early childhood setting to primary school is in the interest of the young children we value.

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