Outcomes of good practice in transition processes for children entering primary school

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Outcomes of Good Practice in Transition Processes for Children Entering Primary School

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Abstract

This study provides an overview, from an international perspective, of the research literature on supporting the transition from ECCE to primary school. It identifies issues concerning socio-emotional well-being and cognitive development at transfer from early childhood settings to school, giving the perspective of children, parents and practitioners. It outlines some examples of successful transition initiatives which have enhanced the transition for children and their families and identifies aspects of these in order to draw some implications for policy planning.

1. Introduction

The start of primary schooling has been perceived as one of the most important transitions in a child's life and a major challenge of early childhood. Initial success at school both socially and intellectually, leads to a virtuous cycle of achievement (Burrell & Bubb, 2000) and can be a critical factor in determining children's adjustment to the demands of the school environment and future progress (Ghaye & Pascal, 1989). A range of writings (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002; Dunlop & Fabian, 2003) propose that the way in which transitions are experienced not only makes a difference to children in the early months of a new situation, but may also have much longer-term impact, because the extent to which they feel successful in the first transition is likely to influence subsequent experiences.

Transition is often seen as an ecological concept (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) comprising an interlocking set of systems of home, nursery and school, through which children travel in their early years of education. However, there are several ways to theorise early childhood transitions research including seeing transition as a 'rite of passage' (van Gennep, 1960), as a ‘border-crossing’ (Campbell Clark, 2000) and as ‘rites of institution’ (Bourdieu in Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002). Other theoretical perspectives include 'life course theory' which places children and families in the context of the social structures, cultures and populations which affect them over time and place (Elder, 2001). Research that gains children’s perspectives of transitions
and develops children’s agency is also gaining increasing recognition (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta & Wintersberger, 1994) as children develop solutions to socio-cultural well-being and curriculum understanding at transfer (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Dunlop, 2002a). Consulting with children is increasingly seen to be part of each child’s human rights (http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm). The Convention on the Rights of the Child offers a new vision of the child as an individual and as a member of a family and community, with rights and responsibilities appropriate to his or her age and stage of development.

Currently, educational transition is defined as the process of change that children make from one place or phase of education to another over time (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002). Changes of relationship, teaching style, environment, space, time, contexts for learning, and learning itself, combine at moments of transition making intense and accelerated demands (Fabian & Dunlop 2005). Change can bring the excitement of new beginnings, the anticipation of meeting new people and making new friends, and the opportunity to learn new things. There can also be an element of apprehension of the unknown which can cause confusion and anxiety, leaving an impression that may still affect behaviour many years later. Page (2000) suggests that allowing children to experience discontinuity is seen as part of the continuum of life and learning. If going through a transition is a learning skill in its own right, it is therefore important that children build resilience to change but are also given support to help them mark, as well as to negotiate, change.

Expansion of educational provision and childcare in the early years has led to an increase in the number of moves that young children experience, so by the time children enter statutory education they may have already attended a number of educational settings. Ensuring that each transition is successful is significant for children’s emotional well-being and to their continuing cognitive achievements. Transition may also support early integration of groups from different backgrounds, thereby becoming a necessary element of inclusion. The majority of children will have a positive transition brought about by the support of their family, early childhood setting and school, but research (Curtis 1986; Cleave & Brown 1991; Dowling 1995; Kienig 1999) has raised concerns that starting school might cause anxiety that affects some children’s emotional well-being and their long-term social adjustment, thus hindering future learning (Cleave & Brown, 1991; Dowling, 1998; Kienig, 1999). If children’s emotional well-being is significant for continuity of learning, it is also likely that better provision for transitions will result in fewer difficulties in later schooling.
Transitions that include parents in the initial stages are likely to offer parental support into inducting them into their child’s learning at school. Given the emphasis that is currently being placed by a number of governments upon parental programmes and continuity in the early years, successful transitions are clearly seen as being cost-effective, contributing to the retention rate at primary school and likely to reduce the need for later social and educational remediation.

2. Research into Early Educational Transitions
Traditionally evidence of the impact of transitions in young children’s lives as they enter school has drawn heavily on a westernised model of education in which young children and their families increasingly have rights of access to preschool education and care. In a dominant culture of legislated-for education-for-all, there is a common language of early childhood education and care (Dahlberg, Pence & Moss, 1999) which is widely used and includes a vocabulary of promoting development, ensuring readiness to learn as well as readiness for school, ‘child-ready’ schools (Broström, 2002) and a focus on educational interventions and outcomes as markers of quality. The imposition of school into the lives of young children marks an artificial boundary which demands that development has reached particular key markers. Not being ready to make the transition to school at a particular time can have detrimental effects on future learning and self esteem.

In schools, the educational philosophy, teaching style and structure of elementary education often varies from the nursery experience. Recognising that children can find it difficult to cope with such changes, many schools have made efforts to smooth the entry to school by preparing both children and their families for the differences they will meet. This bridging of gaps is helpful and important. So too is the concept of “narrowing the gap” (Dunlop, 2002). Not a new idea, as in recent years research has begun to show that ‘the key to effective services for young children is less through bridging the gap between different types of programs, and more through ensuring continuity in certain key elements that characterize all good early childhood programs’ (Lombardi, 1992).

The lack of emotional well-being can cause worry and stress leading to aggression, fatigue or withdrawal, all of which have the potential to impair learning capacity (Featherstone, 2004). Children can become disaffected, disorientated and inhibited
(Fisher, 1996), resulting in behavioural problems which impact on commitment, motivation and relationships (Kienig, 2002). Changes of environment, resources, curriculum, institutional culture, pedagogical approaches and styles of classroom interaction, all carry a potential to have an impact on how children respond during the first major educational transition. Starting school means having to learn the social rules and values of the organisation as well as coming to terms with changes in identity, roles and relationships (Griebel & Niesel, 2000) as children become a ‘school pupil’ on entry to school, with different expectations placed on them.

The greater the gap between the culture of the school and the culture of the early years nursery setting or home, the greater the challenge to the child and the greater the risk of not being able to comply with understanding the requests of the teacher. A study by Brooker (2002) outlines how children move from ‘child in the family’ to ‘pupil in the school’ and how the values of home and school often differ. These include differences in the way in which play at home and play at school is perceived according to family and cultural values, and may cause emotional difficulties for children. A number of research projects emphasise the importance of making strong connections between the differing cultures and traditions on either side of the early education divide (Broström, 2000; Dahlberg & Taguchi, 1994; Neuman, 2000) and use the differences to underline the consequent importance the transition into school assumes.

**Inclusion in the school or class**

Using notions from temperament theory, children’s response to starting preschool has been discussed in terms of ‘adjustment’ to peers, adults, and the new environment (Margetts, 1999, 2000. Mobley & Pullis, 1991). Taking a more social-psychological perspective, a report on the ‘Transition from home to Pre-school’ Project, one of the very first studies to look at early childhood transitions, looked at entry from home into early childhood settings as an experience of socialisation (Blatchford, Battle & Mays, 1982). This reported that, after an initial period when the new children appeared to lack the necessary information about “rules, rituals and power structure” (p. 157), they rapidly learned to participate in high levels of social interaction. Similarly, in another study, within their first week of attendance at a preschool, the behaviour of twelve 3 to 4-year olds studied became similar to that of the established group members (Feldbaum, Christenson & O’Neal, 1980). Both studies therefore suggest that time for socialisation or enculturalisation is a central element in children’s integration into a new educational setting, and should be
appropriately supported by adults, so that integration into the group is successfully achieved. The implication is that this is also a necessary element for the transition to primary school.

**Resilience in early childhood**

There is a growing body of literature on the subject of resilience in early childhood which discusses why some children are more able to accommodate change than others, and the role schools can play in supporting children who for a variety of reasons may not cope well in transition. The term ‘resilience’ is used to describe a collection of qualities that support adaptation and the capacity for “normal development under difficult conditions” (Fonagy et al. 1994 pp231-57).

The concept of resilience has been reflected in the educational literature (Howard, Dryden and Johnson, 1999; Krovetz, 1999) and applied to early childhood transitions (Griebel & Niesel, 2001). The concept may help to explain why some children cope well with transitions, whilst others find them more difficult. Benard (1995, p1) claims that there is a natural human competence and capacity for resilience through which the individual can develop social competence, problem-solving skills, a critical consciousness, autonomy and a sense of purpose. Factors of family, school or community which may influence outcomes and help children to cope with life-stressors, of which transition may be one, are believed to be caring relationships, high expectations and opportunities to take part (Benard, 1995, p2). In terms of educational transitions the optimism engendered by a caring relationship with a teacher can promote a sense of self-worth (Kidder, 1990) and support the development of self-esteem, self-efficacy, autonomy and optimism, which are all critical features of resilience.

Many children experience a considerable degree of autonomy in their infancy where their experiences are often negotiated with adults. These children, though adept in many ways, can find the transition to school enormously difficult because they move out of this environment of autonomy into one of conformity, lack of choice and paucity of explanation (Fortune-Wood 2002). It is difficult for children to envisage what school is like before it has been experienced. Those with older siblings or those who play with school-aged children, may have acquired some understanding of school values and systems vicariously. Within role-play they may have developed ‘script knowledge’ (Gura 1996, p.37) while they were exploring make-believe school with those who have already had experience of school. However, for the first child in a
family and for many others, school will be a completely new experience. In presenting their picture of school, parents, siblings and friends shape children’s thinking but on arriving at school the reality may be different as children may experience discontinuities in the way in which they are expected to learn and behave (Stephen & Brown, 2002). While the reality of school can be different from expectations it can also be exciting and challenging in a positive way.

A number of studies (Ladd & Price, 1987; Margetts, 1999 and 2000; Peters, 1999.) highlight factors which are important in facilitating the transition to school and are critical for school success (Love, Logue, Trudeau & Thayer, 1992) and where settling well in their first year at school ‘sets them up for later’ (Laurent, 2000). Research points to ‘the critical need for attending to children’s early years - to providing them with a healthy start that readies them for school and later life’ (Kagan & Neuman, 1998). If children are to make sense of school with its institutional ways, bewildering new vocabulary and strange culture, most will need support and the opportunity to talk through what school means for them (Fabian, 2002). Home and school can work together to achieve this by collaborating to provide children with positive experiences as they are initiated into school, and building good memories of this particular ‘rite of passage’ (Kessler, 1999), so that they are indeed set up for later.

3. An analysis of findings from a range of early childhood programmes
This first major educational transition can be viewed as an opportunity for families and the education system to work together to build children’s dispositions to engage with change, whilst sustaining their capacities to learn. The contribution of parents in that process (Griebel & Niesel, 2002; Johansson, 2002) such as parents’ values, beliefs, and socio-economic status, as well as their own experience of education will affect the way the transition is experienced. Perry, Dockett and Tracey’s (1998) investigation of parents, children’s and teachers’ views of transition to school included a content analysis that revealed five major categories of response: knowledge, adjustment, skill, disposition and rules. Comments were analysed in terms of frequency with teachers and parents focusing more on the category of ‘adjustment’ than any other, whilst children focussed on ‘rules’. For the adults ‘disposition’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘skill’ followed ‘adjustment’ in order of importance.

**Children’s perspectives**
A child’s perspective approach to studying entry into school is relatively recent and is illustrated in the work of Ingrid Pramling-Samuelsson and Marita Lindahl (1991, 1994) in Sweden, Sven Thyssen (2000) in Denmark, Wilfried Griebel and Renate Neisel (2000) in Germany, Aline-Wendy Dunlop in Scotland (2001, 2002) and Sue Dockett and Bob Perry (2001) in Australia. Their studies seek information from all the players on how day-to-day transition experiences are for children. The approaches used in interviewing children are carefully thought through, and often visual material is used to help children understand and be effective in sharing what they think and know. Children's first-hand accounts often produce surprises and this has implications for the adult capacity to listen and to hear what it is that children are saying.

Children react differently to change and new experiences. Asking children allows adults to develop children’s own ideas and support them to bridge the nursery and elementary experiences. Such discussion reveals that children may feel acutely embarrassed by their lack of knowledge, or difficulty in finding their way around a new place, but also that they like their current abilities to be recognised (Dunlop, 2001).

Children enter the institutional world with already developing concepts of themselves (Donaldson, 1978), and by the time they start in nursery education are thinkers and language users. They learn at this stage to negotiate their desires and requests and to collaborate in the educators’ agenda. As they enter elementary education they have to learn to adjust to a much more adult-directed world in which decisions are made about what and when they will learn. Used to adapting skills to “the immediate and compelling” (Donaldson, 1978, p121), in situations which are embedded in the context, the child is then expected to be able to apply their thinking to the abstract or to situations which are unfamiliar such as dealing with representations of the world (in words and numbers, pictures and diagrams). Despite children coming to school able to think and reason about the world, events, people, language and number and with a desire to learn, this can make school difficult. Success in school however depends on this ability and requires the adult to be able to decentre in order to see things from the child’s point of view.

**Educator’s perspectives**
Teachers in a number of studies (for example, Fabian, 2002) commented that children’s capacity to concentrate, sit for periods of time and use their initiative were important. They report that for teachers, children being ready for school involves the ability to be part of a large group competing for the attention of one adult but who do not demand constant attention.

Margetts, (2000) notes that transition programmes should be based on a philosophy that children’s adjustment to school is easier when children are familiar with the situation, parents are informed about the new school and teachers have information about children’s development and previous experiences. Certain continuities should be aimed for such as continuity of peers, of expectations between settings (including teacher and child behaviours), of programming for children’s learning. By contrast, Corsaro and Molinari (2000) consider that many school priming events are embedded in the preschool experience.

In a survey which asked teachers to reflect on and judge a number of transition activities, educators were asked to rate a range of transition activities in order to judge which they most valued, and to express any possible barriers. Whilst many of the responses were positive, a contradiction between ‘meeting to discuss educational ideas’ and ‘co-ordinating education practice’ emerges, as the latter may be seen as ‘too binding’ (Broström, 2000, p14). Here lies a possible barrier to successful school transition, as educators, whilst enjoying the opportunity to meet and talk, may use the same language to describe rather different concepts but may not share joint meanings.

**Parental transitions as their children start school**

Typically, early years transition research has focussed on the child’s experience and how this is viewed by various stakeholders in the educational process. There is much less research detailing the transition process from the perspectives of parents and families. This is despite the strong recognition within the educational community and in policy statements that family engagement with schools facilitates educational success. Recent work from Scotland (Dunlop, 2005) and Australia (Dockett & Perry, 2005) focuses on the parental experience as parents anticipate, and then experience, their child’s transition from prior to school to school settings. Data sources include parental values (ROPV, Schaefer & Edgerton, 1985), discussion group transcripts, parental diaries, photographs and drawings. Findings include the nature of the school environment, the age of starting school, whether there are
gender differences in learning, the nature of preparation for school and expectations of school. Perhaps the strongest feelings are concerned with knowing what goes on in their child’s life at school, because when one parent said ‘I'd like to be a fly on the wall’, everyone agreed.

The study is based upon data from on-going group discussions with a small number of families living in suburban Sydney, Australia. All families involved had children attending a child care centre and all were involved in planning for the transition to school. Informal discussions led by a researcher occurred over the year preceding the children's move to school and into the children’s first year of school. Issues raised by families, such as the appropriate age for children to start school, potential parental roles at school, deciding on which school children would attend, and expectations of school, featured highly in these discussions. Similarities and differences in the issues and expectations of families in Scotland and the Australian group were explored and much common ground arose.

**Associated transition approaches**
The related case of a ‘family transition approach’ (Fthenakis, 1998), stresses the view that transitions bring discontinuities where perhaps we have in the past assumed a focus on continuity would prevail, with less attention being paid to the concept of discontinuity, especially the concept of “transition-related” discontinuities. Fthenakis (op cit) points out that transitions have, in the past, been defined by external features such as the child’s age, the timing of transition into new settings or a geographical move. His work draws attention to the need to take account of the psychological aspects of transition for the child and those around the child as well as traditionally recognised influences. On this view, transition to school becomes a family transition, and not just the child’s. Effective transition approaches therefore need to take families into account.

Insights can also be gained from other types of transition studies, for example, family empowerment in transitioning (Davey Zeece & Wang, 1998), the transition to parenthood (Cowan & Cowan, 1995), the coping strategies of children and adults in the transitions caused by divorce (Fthenakis, 1998), work-family border theory (Campbell Clark, 2000), transitions as rites of passage (van Gennep, 1960), transitions without school (Fortune-Wood, 2002) and the lack of progress and variations in teaching approach at the elementary-secondary transition (Galton,
Morrison & Pell, 2000). All these help to put the case of nursery-elementary transition in context and to emphasise the importance of supporting successful early educational transitions as a contribution to life-long strategies for meeting and dealing with change in ways which are positively beneficial.

4. Examples of successful initiatives

Several examples have been cited throughout the paper exploring the expectations of children, parents and practitioners at the start of school. This section, however, details some successful case studies that have enhanced the educational experience of young children.

A study in Scotland (Dunlop, 2002b) identified themes that supported children in their transition. The theme of Links and Continuity provides an example where staff work together to plan for children from the nursery to visit their new school and the primary children to go back to the nursery to visit. One of the aims was to build on the independence children achieve in nursery and to sustain this in primary through making opportunities for children to start school confidently and with teachers who have already had the chance to get to know each child. The new entrants were invited to school on four successive weekly visits and were involved in different types of activities. This Apprenticeship Model gives opportunities to make links as well as building confidence and familiarity.

The theme of Progression in Learning identifies how a nursery and a school developed a shared transition theme called ‘Once Upon a Time’. Nursery children joined in a range of learning opportunities associated with the story of Jack and the Beanstalk. The idea of growth and change was introduced in a variety of ways and discussions of growing up and changing to primary school took place. Story sacks, linked to this theme, were borrowed to be enjoyed at home. Further linked activities were offered on a day when parents and children visited school. Children who were entering three classes the following term had a common experience that day which allowed them to talk with each other and develop a shared idea of what school was like. When the children started school the corridor linking the nursery class and school had a beanstalk decorated with children’s photographs leading to the new classes. The topic continued in the first primary class and acted as a learning bridge from one situation to the next. Continuing the learning by involving children in anticipated changes in their lives is identified by Corsaro (1996) as a Priming Event.
Studies from Germany by Griebel and Niesel (2000, 2001, and 2002) indicate that the start of school for children is a transition in which there is a change of identity within each family. While parents and teachers both offer children support during the transition to school, they may have different expectations of the process which are communicated to the children both verbally and non-verbally. In order to clarify expectations, parents and teacher can prepare children for school by co-con structing the transition. This comes about through conversations about learning at school, and about what happens at school and in the family to prepare children to cope with aspects of school and negotiate their identity. Communication is clearly one key to a successful transition.

In a Danish case study, Broström (2002) outlines the importance of child-ready schools whereby schools work closely with the ‘feeder’ nurseries to develop curriculum continuity to meet the child’s needs. Through meetings between nursery and school staff in which the nursery provides photographs, drawings, favourite stories and so on, teachers gain an insight into the interests of individual children and can plan transition activities accordingly. He also identifies that dispositions about school are often associated with friends. This highlights the importance of making the transition with friends as this provides emotional well-being and confidence for children to approach new challenges.

In Australia, Dockett & Perry (2001) have developed Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs. One aspect in the background to this identifies that generally children who experience similar environments and expectations at home and at school are likely to find the transition to school, as well as school in general, easier. The converse also holds in that children who find school unfamiliar and unrelated to their home contexts tend to experience difficulty, confusion, and anxiety during the transition, particularly when the cultures in the home and school also differ.

In Botswana, Le Roux (2002) noted that the San children were dropping out of school early due to the difficulties of adjusting to conflicting values and expectations between their tribe and the school. She found that children who attended pre-school were generally those children who progressed to primary school and were subsequently less likely to drop out of the system. Le Roux identified the importance of staff gaining a socio-cultural understanding of minority cultures, the need to avoid
rivalry between pre-school and school, to respect communities as a valuable resource and to explain the aims and advantages of early learning programmes to both parents and primary schools.

5. Identification of lessons learned from the analysis
In the ecological model put forward by Bronfenbrenner (1979), children’s development has been viewed as being influenced by their direct and indirect experiences of particular contexts within a broader socio-cultural setting. Thus, children’s transition to school and their ability to continue learning is influenced by a variety of personal and family characteristics, societal and family trends, contextual and life experiences. However, concepts of childhood itself are not constant but are embedded in social, political and economic understandings, which may affect the influences on the transition process. What is seen from the analysis is that there are certain aspects that currently make a positive contribution to the transitions process. These are identified here under two key areas that are linked to the socio-emotional well-being of children – the ‘settling in’ to school – and their intellectual progression; and a third area that is concerned with communication.

1. Activities that support learning across the transition
One way to bring about a successful start for all children is to manage the transition process from early childhood services to school in a proactive way that creates a stress-free bridge from one setting to another and develops understanding about the ways of learning in school. In planning effective transition programmes, children’s adjustment to a new environment can be supported through various transitional activities that create links between, and actively involve, children, parents, families, teachers, early childhood services, schools and the local community. This can include discussion and experience of activities such as visits prior to starting (with other children who will be starting at the same time), in order to learn about ways of learning at school, as well as familiarisation with the environment and people (Margetts, 2002); developing children’s thinking about the difference between philosophical learning boundaries – from play to formal learning - that anticipate change, in order to embrace change confidently and to enjoy what the new setting offers (Broström, in print); using play-based activities that start in one setting and are completed in the next (Fabian & Dunlop, 2005); using social stories that provide an insight into the next place of learning (Brödy & McGarry, 2005); mentoring by children already at the new setting to demonstrate ways of learning; and staff
becoming familiar with the children’s background and learning prior to the commencement of transition.

2. Supporting *socio-emotional well-being* during the transition:
A lack of emotional well-being limits the ability to build relationships and become active participants in life and learning (Roffey & O’Reirdan, 2001; Porter, 2003). Emotional stability, positive attitudes and the ability to communicate effectively are seen as essential foundations for learning (QCA, 2000) because secure and happy children are able to fully participate in, and engage with, the educational challenges confronting them (Burrell & Bubb, 2000). In short, emotional well-being empowers children as learners. By ensuring that aspects of the learning environment and the routine of the day are familiar, children are likely to become confident and have a sense of control over their lives. In addition, Winnicott (1974) suggests that bringing a transitional object - a special toy - to school comforts and links the child with other people, especially parents and family, when they are apart.

Children expect to do well at school but in order to cope successfully they have to acquire a range of specific school language and social knowledge such as the expected ways of behaving, getting along with others, waiting their turn, sharing, expressing their needs and being able to ask for help. Knowing the rules and knowing what to do is important for children (Perry, Dockett & Howard, 2000), so teaching the rules will help them to function well.

Children are less likely to learn well and profit from school without the support of friends. Margetts (2002, p112) found that children who commenced school with a familiar playmate in the same class ’had higher levels of social skills and academic competence and less problem behaviours than other children’. Moving with friends gave them the emotional foundations to gain confidence for learning.

A sense of belonging to the school community is an important contributor to how well children and families adjust (Dockett & Perry, 2005). This comes about partly through the relationships between and among children, families and staff but also through developing an identity and making the culture meaningful to individuals by having systems for bringing the child’s culture to the setting.

Acquiring skills such as being able to anticipate change, adapt their learning styles, understand in less familiar situations and develop conceptions of themselves as
learners in the school situation are all part of making sense of school. Some children have developed this 'emotional literacy' (Goleman, 1998) and are able to cope with change, while others struggle. Those children who are successful have developed social competence, resiliency and agency that will enable them to, ‘read’ the teacher, make meaning of the nature of school and to deal with new situations. In other words, they are able to function at school and have expectations about learning. Empowering children by teaching them social competence and problem-solving skills is likely to enable them to maximise their learning and succeed at school. It could be argued that if this is so for the transition to primary education, then this is also the case at the start of the pre-school experience.

3. Communication
In addition to the above, it is important to demystify school for parents and to make school accessible. Starting school is a co-construction (Griebel & Niesel, 2002) whereby children starting primary education are supported by parents, pre-school and school staff in a purposeful way sharing views of children as learners and planning jointly for a transition curriculum which bridges curriculum phases and increases the agency of the child. This may start with home visits or sharing of information about the child’s prior learning. Parents generally wish to receive information about the school, the curriculum, admission procedures, arrival and departure systems and so on. Having this knowledge and understanding about school boosts parental confidence which can, in turn, boost their child’s confidence. However, the amount of information can be confusing and at times hinder the transition process. If there is too much information, if it is given very rapidly or the terminology used is unfamiliar then this might alienate parents. Information that is accessible both in quality and quantity is more likely to help parents in their understanding, give them confidence and reduce stress. If there is insufficient information or misunderstanding it might lead to parents’ anxiety and, in turn, affect their child’s ability to ‘settle’ (Fabian, 2002). The transition to school is likely to be improved, therefore, by the appropriate quantity and content of information flow to parents and their children.

Implications for policy planning and implementation in meeting the EFA Goal 1 (‘Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.’)
Early childhood can be seen as a tool in which governments invest for their national futures because the benefits of early education are good for the economy (www.ifs.org.uk, accessed 09.12.05). By ensuring socio-emotional well-being during the transition process to school, learning is likely to progress. In order to achieve this, policy planners need to embrace the idea of co-construction of transition which is shared by all the participants; teachers, parents and children in the context of their own particular community, where the transitional territory between pre-school and school is one in which families have a part and can be social actors and agents in the transition process, but also where children are seen as developing, becoming pupils and moving on to the next stage and therefore supported through rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1960). To achieve this, the following suggestions might help with planning:

- Schools having a named person, or a small team, to take responsibility and a strategic overview of the process;
- Schools providing pre-entry visits for children and their parents that involve parents and children learning about learning at school as well as familiarisation with the environment and people;
- Schools having systems that allow for high quality communication and close interaction between family, pre-transfer settings and school, where information is both given and received about children's experiences;
- Schools being sensitive to the needs of individuals and particular groups and having strategies in place to support them;
- Flexible admission procedures that give children and their parents the opportunity to have a positive start to their first day;
- Children starting school with a friend and schools having systems in place to help children make friends; (repeating a year can cause friendship problems at the next transition);
- Schools having strategies to help children develop resilience to cope with change and to be active in making the transition work for them;
- Curriculum continuity across phases of education, that comes about from establishing the prior learning that has taken place and where children are helped to learn with and from each other; ‘looping’ where pre-school and school staff plan together and work alternate years in each phase;
- Schools evaluating induction and the management of transitions and transfers from the perspective of all participants, and that help to question the assumptions of the setting and see life from the child’s perspective;
- Special training for staff working with those children who are starting school.

These suggestions need to take account not only of countries where there are tightly connected links between preschool experience and primary education, but also to include countries where preschool provision is only loosely coupled or quite separated from primary education. However, it is also essential to be open to somewhat contradictory ideas such as, on the one hand, those of smoothing transitions to school and preparing children for change. On the other hand, arguing
the importance of transition as a means of maintaining distinctive and appropriate education for younger children. In exploring transitions in this way, new issues and challenges arise, for example, Does the age of transition to school matter? To what extent does the very vocabulary of transition suggest negative experiences? Is resilience gained through difficult experiences?
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