
SITE VISIT: Transition from Nursery School to Grade One in Guyana

Based on studies by Janis Blakey, University of Alberta, and Norma Agnes Baichoo, Assistant Chief Education Officer, Guyana. Reprinted from *Coordinators' Notebook 21, Transitions and Linkages*, 1997. The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development.

Since 1976, children in Guyana have had a constitutional right to free education beginning at the nursery-school level. Nursery education, which is divided into two levels, covers children from 3 years, 9 months to 5 years, 9 months. A very high percentage of children in Guyana attend nursery school. The transition from nursery school to primary school has been a concern in Guyana since at least the mid-1980s, prompting research on this transition period.

In 1985, a research project was organized to identify the different perspectives that parents, nursery school teachers, and grade one (Prep A) teachers had on the problem of transition, examining goals and expectations, as well as looking at the importance assigned to specific features of early education, such as play, open structures, and child-directed learning. (Blakely 1986) The project also sought suggestions from the teachers about how to help with the transition. The results of the study served as a basis for reflection in future workshops which brought together both nursery and Prep A teachers in a search for common ground on which to facilitate transition.

At the time the research was undertaken, the nursery school curriculum was directed toward the integral development of young children in order to help them to develop to their full potential. It was characterized by a flexible approach which took children at their existing levels of development. By way of contrast, primary schools were not flexible, placing heavy emphasis on cognitive development, on tests, and on completing the syllabus. In the opinion of the researchers,

It is evident that teachers of Prep A classes need to understand the interaction of children coming from the nursery schools. In the primary school, many teachers prefer the children who would sit still and await instructions: any deviation is deemed undisciplined and difficult to cope with. This is clearly the teacher's preference for the kind of child he wants in the classroom, but because of the structure of the nursery programme and the school environment, these children have grown accustomed to another type of behaviour that is acceptable in that [preschool] setting. (Baichoo 1986)

Nursery and primary school teachers were found to have similar goals for children, such as the acquisition of basic skills, the promotion of cognitive development, the extension of learning to beyond the classroom, and socialization for respect and national consciousness. But when the

expectations of the two groups were compared, primary teachers were found to be more oriented toward preparation in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Both groups felt that cooperation with parents and the children's readiness for school were central problems to be addressed. The research also showed, as might be expected, that nursery school teachers regarded play as very important. Prep A teachers were less enthusiastic about play but thought that it was somewhat important, while parents did not rank play as important at all, even in nursery school. All of the groups considered an open structure for learning important, however, the educators were clearly more in favour of this approach than the parents. Interestingly, parents were more supportive of an open learning structure for grade one than they were for nursery school. Apparently, this reflected a parental desire to ensure that their children had mastered the basic skills thought necessary to read and write before entering primary school. Consistent with the above, parents were more supportive of a highly structured program of teacher-directed learning than were educators. The research also included interviews with children who, not surprisingly, "...liked teachers who played with them, taught them songs, told stories and did not 'beat kids.'" (Blakey 1986, 11)

A workshop was organized which brought together nursery and primary school teachers. Working in pairs made up of one nursery teacher and one primary teacher from the same geographical area, teachers were asked to pose solutions for bridging gaps between their respective levels of education. Their solutions included: visiting homes, working with children in smaller groups, establishing interest corners, and team teaching when the number of children permits.

Reflecting on the research results and the suggestions of the paired teachers, the group reached a number of areas of agreement and generated a list of eleven beliefs that all teachers felt were important. The eleven beliefs were that:

1. Children should be allowed to express themselves freely and clearly in written and oral form.
2. Young children should develop a sense of responsibility.
3. Young children should have self-confidence and a healthy self-concept.
4. Young children should be given an opportunity to play meaningfully because, through play, children sometimes learn what adults cannot teach them.
5. Second year children in nursery should be exposed to part of the Prep A programme.
6. Pupils should be promoted according to ability and performance and not by age only.
7. Children need individual attention from teachers, as well as from parents.
8. Children have a right to ask questions and to explore things in the environment.
9. Interaction between teachers and children, parents and children, and parents and teachers will result in a satisfying learning experience.
10. Parents, as well as teachers, should provide materials to create an exciting classroom.
11. Children learn from each other.

These statements were used as a basis for reflection by the teachers on how the curriculum and methods could be adjusted to be more in line with these beliefs. The teachers suggested further that:

- Prep A must have some semblance of the nursery for the 1st term and must be more conducive to learning (by including interest corners, for instance).
- Nursery and primary teachers should meet periodically.
- There should be a continuity of training values.
- The nursery teachers should meet the Prep A teachers halfway when considering academic achievements and prepare the children for the Prep A experience. For example, children should know how to write and understand some mathematical concepts, and they should be less mobile in the classroom.
- A report from nursery schools should be available to Prep A teachers.

Against this background, a recent report by Guyana to UNESCO (1996) indicated that activities intended to facilitate transitions were taking place in Guyana. In the ten administrative regions and in the capital Georgetown, nursery and primary schools are involved in activities to facilitate the transition from nursery to primary school and to define the underlying principles of early childhood education. These exercises include:

- Regular workshops for nursery teachers;
- Visits by second-year pupils of nursery schools to primary schools during the final term of the academic year;
- The meeting of Prep A and nursery teachers at specified nursery workshops to discuss prerequisite skills and expectations for the Prep A entrants;
- Visits by Prep A teachers to observe the second-year nursery pupils "at work";
- Assistance to parents at Parent Action Committee meetings to understand the Prep A programme;
- Speakers are encouraged to address parents about their roles and responsibilities for the psychological preparation of their children for entry to primary school at graduation ceremonies, prize-giving activities, and school-closing exercises;
- Teachers of Preps A and B should be encouraged to ensure that they provide a stimulating classroom environment which closely resembles the nursery school setting through the presence of manipulative toys, interest corners, basic charts, large clear and colourful pictures, and the allied arts;
- Meetings of clusters of schools and level committees should meet to identify difficulties in classroom performance and to arrive at workable solutions, especially in the area of methodology.

Last, in order to ensure that the concept of early childhood education and the transition from nursery to primary level is more widely understood, three approaches have been planned:

- Workshops for teachers of Preps A and B, and orientation of head teachers of primary schools (workshop courses are to include: the infant school curriculum, related theories and principles, establishing the infant school environment, the creative arts and the young child,

the integrated approach, the infant class time-table, transition from the nursery to the primary level, and the preparation for the new school term).

- As an outcome of the workshops for prep teachers, one hundred trained teachers will be selected to receive further coaching as Field Officers so that the implementation of the ECE at the primary level can be closely monitored.
- A public awareness programme is geared to help parents and the general public understand and appreciate their roles and responsibilities in the implementation of the Early Childhood Education programme.

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