

VOICES FROM THE FIELD - Transition to School Practices: the Need for Evidence

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Perspective Policy

What we do not know about transition to school could fill volumes. What we do know is very ably summarized by Early¹ and comes largely from a series of articles written by her, Pianta and colleagues, based on a large survey of U.S. kindergarten teachers carried out in the mid-1990s.^{2,3,4} Love and Raikes⁵ emphasize that the transitions start early, reminding us about the longitudinal studies showing lasting results of prior-to-school interventions (e.g. Carolina Abecedarian or Infant Health and Development Program), focused on cognitive skills and parenting skills among families of children who were economically or developmentally disadvantaged.

The conclusions of both reviews are straightforward and intuitive: improvement in facilitating transition for children and families prior to the beginning of a school year, individualizing the practices when needed, and high-quality preschool programs improve children's developmental outcomes when they start school. These recommendations are based on teachers' perspective and on well-documented links between children's experience in high-quality preschool and better academic outcomes.

Notwithstanding the above, the current research base on transition to school has major gaps in knowledge, which make it difficult to ensure that policy recommendations are accurate. I will address three of them below.

The first and most obvious one in the Canadian policy context is that all the research comes from the U.S. While many of the universalia are directly applicable to the Canadian context, when it comes to specific practices, policy planning – which involves taking stock of funding levels, teacher training, community options and population structure, to name just a few factors – needs to be directly relevant. The standard transition activities in Canada, which vary not only from province to province but even from school board to school board, most often involve a half-day session in June prior to kindergarten entry that gives a small group of children with parents the opportunity to visit the school and meet the principal and the teacher. In many schools, groups are small enough to allow for some individual conversation. This is often followed by another

opportunity for an informal school visit in late August (frequently called “a lemonade party”). Finally, many school boards practice the so-called “staggered” entry to the first level of kindergarten. This means that before starting with the whole class, each child experiences his or her kindergarten classroom once with only four or five other children, and once with half of the class. Such small-group beginnings also give the teacher an opportunity to recognize those who might be facing more transition adjustment problems. Nevertheless, it is currently not known whether these practices, fairly standard in Canadian schools, actually work in improving transition outcomes.

Secondly, only a systematic monitoring of how children’s preschool history combined with school’s transition procedures and individual transition experience results in adjustment outcome in the first year of school can provide a sound basis for practice. While it is obvious from the survey carried out by Pianta, Early and colleagues in the U.S.^{3,4} that optimal practices are those that consider individual needs of students, the optimal balance between a group and individual approach is difficult to establish without more detailed research. Moreover, only systematic and standardized information about children’s preschool experience, collected several months prior to school entry, can facilitate tailoring transition practices to individual needs.

Third, the process of transition is stressful/challenging to every child to a certain degree. Therefore, transition practices could be conceptualized as a type of preventive process, ameliorating the outcomes. With these two tenets, policy thinking could follow the model proposed by Offord and colleagues⁶ in advocating a balance among universal, targeted and clinical approaches to intervention in children’s mental-health issues, depending on the needs of children, their families and communities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that no matter what a child’s (and family’s) preschool experience was, the transition to school is a stressful process. In most cases, the environment is new; often children have to ride a bus for the first time in their life, they have a new teacher, and they have to make new friends, follow new routines and play on a new playground full of older children. Canadian children entering language-immersion programs also have to start learning a new language. All children require preparation for this transition and need to participate in basic transition procedures. Creating an opportunity to observe children and/or talk to parents several months prior to school entry will identify a proportion of children who require a more intensive approach, an increased “dose” of preparation. Very few of those will probably need even more help, including close involvement of the family. Such a model, followed with a systematic monitoring of children’s adjustment in kindergarten, coupled with teacher reports on their teaching experience would provide the most reliable knowledge for evidence-based recommendations so far.

We already know that there is a group of children – and families – who need intensified assistance with transition: the families of children with identified special needs. There is scant literature on the transition experience of these children,^{7,8} all of which comes from the U.S. While the issues are fairly obvious, and most if not all school boards in Canada have policies in place to ensure these children have their educational needs assessed; the process of transition and adjustment is often neglected. In view of the fact that most primary-grade children with special needs actually attend mainstream classrooms,

inadequate consideration of their adjustment to such a setting prior to school entry is regrettable.

The final challenge in implementing the best transition practices goes beyond the lack of knowledge base. Like many “in-between” issues, transition is not a process naturally owned by anybody. It is not the preschool’s responsibility any more and not yet really the schools’ responsibility either. Nevertheless, it appears that schools have the most to gain, since their functioning can be greatly improved by faster and more positive outcomes of the process. Adjusted children learn better and faster⁹ and hopefully are less disruptive, thus making the teacher’s work easier. However, schools are systems that are already stretched very thinly, and additional resources are difficult to come by without appropriate justification.

Without the ability to make a connection between specific transition practices and the adjustment of the whole family to the school environment, we will only be able to make educated guesses in terms of policy recommendations. Ultimately, until research can demonstrate clearly that a planned and early preparation for transition leads to better educational outcomes, it is probably unlikely that money will be poured into funding transition practices.

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