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Educational Transitions within the UK: What is known and what needs to be investigated?

Transitions within and across educational settings are one of a few universals of every child's life (Ramey & Ramey, 1999). The transition period spans the time prior to entry, through settling-in, until the child is established in the new setting. According to Fabian and Dunlop (2002) it is a time of accelerated developmental demands. Some children adapt easily to a new educational environment, however, for others moving from an environment in which they are familiar and secure to a new classroom environment can be a daunting task (Brostrom, 2003). Margetts (2003) suggests this may be due to the change in location, teacher, curriculum, and philosophy that occurs with each transition.

In particular, Bredekamp and Copple (1997) suggest that the transition to school is one of the major challenges that children have to face. They advise that for younger children with few well-developed coping strategies this transition can be very difficult, and cite lack of continuity in teaching practices, and an absence of a system to ease transition as contributing to difficulties experienced. Furthermore, Yeboah (2002) has suggested that a child's experience during this early year's transition is a critical determinant for their future progress, and attainment educationally, economically, and as a member of their social community. Finally, Pianta and Cox (1999) report that by the end of the third grade most children are on a trajectory of development that they will follow for the remainder of their school years (p. xvii). They report however, that although these early years play an important role for our children's future, knowledge of this period is limited, particularly in terms of this important transition to formal schooling. In addition to this point, it appears that transition research within the early years has become stagnant. This means that the available research, which was mainly carried

out in the 90's and early millennia years, is no longer applicable to an ever changing education system. Therefore, serious attention needs to be re-focussed on updating the literature to ensure every child's experience of transferring across the increasing number of early year's settings is as positive as possible.

What are Transitions?

Children generally move from one level to another during their educational careers, in a series of transitions (i.e. foundation stage to primary, primary to secondary etc). These stages can be quite different (age and ability wise) across the world but as this study focuses on the UK population this report will concentrate mainly on the UK education system. The foundation stage and primary school education (key stage 1 and 2) within the UK are different phases in an educational continuum, with distinct differences in policies, curriculum, teaching methodologies, environment and surroundings, role of parents and finally what is expected of each child (Fabian, 2000; Yeboah, 2002).

Within the UK, the first year of formal schooling is known as the reception year / classroom. Although legally children do not have to start formal schooling until the start of the term following their fifth birthday, the majority of parents choose to enrol their child within a reception class environment once their child have reached the age of four. In fact, Salter (2000) estimates nearly 73% of four years are in a reception classroom in primary schools across the country. Many of these children will have attended a pre-school environment (at least from the age of three, for others it may have been earlier). However, a small number of children enter the reception classroom and this is their first experience of the education system altogether. Therefore, the teacher of the reception class will be faced with trying to

educate a large group of children (up to 30 usually) who are all embarking on an educational journey but who are entering this at very different academic points.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, introduced in September 2008 as part of the British National Curriculum) is the period of education from birth to five years. This curriculum stage contains the basic aims, tasks and skills that are considered important to be developed in an early years setting. The overall aim is to help children with social and emotional development, to provide children with academic skills and to prepare them for school. This preparation consists of stimulating the child's general development and teaching basic mathematics and reading skills. The most important part of the foundation stage is the child's development and meeting his/her needs. During the reception class children work towards the early learning goals that form part of the curriculum. Most children are expected to achieve these goals by the end of the foundation stage, regardless of their pre-school history.

The EYFS was designed to provide a secure foundation for later learning and to teach the necessary skills children would need to access the curriculum at Key Stage 1. However, in a highly critical Ofsted report in 2004 the foundation stage was described as 'bureaucratic and time-consuming'. Furthermore, it was argued that the curriculum did not help prepare the children for formal schooling. Estyn (2007) suggests this may be because teachers struggle with implementing the guidance in a unified approach, especially since preschool settings and primary school environments tend to 'teach' using different techniques.

For example, the reception classroom can be strikingly different from the general preschool environment; which typically orientates toward social development, with teachers who

display more warmth than those in primary school environments. Love et al (1992) argue that these teachers are also less demanding of the child in terms of formal routine and instruction. Moving into the reception classroom, most teacher–child interactions tend to emphasize cognitive skills and academic activities. This means more time is used for *teaching* new skills compared to the preschool environment of *guiding* unstructured activities. Reception teachers tend to group children differently to enhance autonomy. The children spend more time in large groups and less time in small groups. Overall a reception classroom usually consists of more total children and more children per adult (Seppanen et al, 1993). In these ways, there are considerable differences between preschool and formal school environments. Children find this shift somewhat challenging: the emphasis on academic skills and the demands to interact with a wide range of children are reported to be the most difficult aspects of the transition to school (Love et al, 1992; Margretts, 2003).

What is known: Current Knowledge

Researchers from around the world have been investigating educational transitions for the past two decades and have produced many reports about the various long term impacts that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ transitions can have on a child. For example, back in 1987 Ladd and Price argued that early maladjustment to the formal school setting may create serious problems in the social adjustment of children in other settings. Kienig (2002) went on to suggest this may lead a child to feel deprived of a sense of security and the emotional strain this causes, may disorganise cognitive activities, and reduce motor abilities which ultimately will not favour the operation of orientation and exploration reflexes. Furthermore, Kienig (1998) argued that a poor transition may result in behavioural problems and even disharmonies in the child’s overall development. Such findings offer evidence that the early school transition period can be identified as a *sensitive period* for later school success. This implies that the transition into

formal schooling is a period where a child and his or her social and physical environment are open to new influences (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). Therefore, minor adjustments in the trajectory of development in this period may have disproportionate effects on the direction of the child's school career. For this reason, the factors that may affect this trajectory continue to warrant considerable attention.

Research has highlighted a number of factors that have been found to contribute to a maladaptive transition to formal schooling. For instance, studies have increasingly shown that the relationship that develops between child and teacher can have significant implications for the child's subsequent school adjustment (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Pianta, Steinberg & Rollins, 1995; Saft & Pianta, 2001). Furthermore, the age a child starts formal schooling can have a negative impact on their later school success (Crawford, Dearden, & Meghir, 2007; McInnes, 2002). According to Piaget (1952) and Bredekamp and Copple (1997) children starting school before they are five years old will not have made the major shift in cognition that takes place between five and seven years of age. Thus these children are more likely to have greater difficulty in adjusting to the primary school curriculum.

Additionally, children attending a school within the UK are further disadvantaged according to Ofsted (2004) as the introduction of the EYFS has led to schools abandoning the practice of allowing children to start in reception classes in the term following their fifth birthday. The inspectors reported that schools insisted on the children starting earlier so that the teachers would have sufficient time to prepare the child's profile before they leave the reception class. As a result, these children are starting school too early and are simply not ready to cope with the demands of the classroom.

Factors more associated with the home environment can also lead to maladaptive transitions. For instance, the quality of the parent-child relationship influences the development of a wide range of competencies during the early years (Birch & Ladd, 1996). Parental involvement influences a child's feeling of confidence, the child's motivational levels, and the child's ability to perform with a sense of achievement within school (Reynolds, 1992). Bowman (1999) argues that children from disadvantaged families are often not prepared to cope with the demands of school, nor are schools or classrooms prepared to cope with the demands of the child. This can result in a situation where the characteristics of school and family are so disparate that the first year of formal schooling is the start of a downward spiral to failure.

Finally, research has shown that a child's characteristics can impact their school success. For example, a child's temperament can affect how they view themselves and their ability to successfully complete tasks. Children with easy temperaments are typically willing to try things repeatedly and are better able to handle frustrations and challenges. In contrast, children with more difficult temperaments may become more easily frustrated and discouraged by challenges or changes within environments (Turner-Cobb, Rixon, & Jessop, 2008). Anxiety can influence children's school performance (Woods, 2006) and the research carried out by Turner-Cobb et al (2008) clearly showed that starting formal schooling can induce stress and anxiety even in four and five year old children up to six months prior to the transition taking place.

What needs to be investigated: This Project

Research in general is often initiated because the researcher has noted a problem. For example, take Bowman's (1999) research mentioned earlier which focussed on children from disadvantaged families as they tended to struggle with the starting school transition. The

research typically focuses on WHO seems to have this problem and then services and programs are designed that targets these children or families to help overcome the problem. This is child or variable focussed research, which is what, makes up the majority of the current transition research that has been carried out to date. This type of research is highly informative as to individual issues that may be having an impact on a child's trajectory but it fails to look for links that maybe possibly contributing to the overall process in question. For instance, take the child-teacher factor found by so many researchers. As most of the research carried out in this area has been solely focussed upon the relationships that can occur between child and teacher it often fails to look at the wider-contexts that surround these relationships. For example, has the child's home environment provided them with a secure place to learn to form secure attachments to adults or has it taught them that adults cannot always be relied upon. The school environment may be a very friendly and open place or it may have a very firm and orderly feel to it which can project on to both teacher and child, impacting their forming relationship.

Therefore, to gain a clearer and richer insight into early school transitions surely they are best understood not only from the prevailing child-centered perspective, but when the influence of multiple contexts on child competence is acknowledged. However, as Friedman and Wachs (1999) postulate the different levels of the environment are rarely studied as an interrelated system. When this approach is taken however it clearly shows how multiple contexts can become integrated together. For instance, Talbert and McLaughlin (1999) reported that a school environment can be characterized by the teachers practices, teachers values, administrative polices, and pupil characteristics.

This multiple context approach seems to have gathered strength in recent years and many educators, researchers, and policy makers acknowledge the direct influences of contexts such as family, peers, and school on child competence. There is however still a need for research and policy to examine a range of school, home, and community settings to see how these influence children and their subsequent entrance to formal schooling. Furthermore, a theoretical framework that can be implemented to help understand the overall processes involved in starting primary school is still unavailable.

The overarching aim of this project therefore is to draw upon community psychology's understanding of the person-in-context, so that this research may endeavour to consider contextual influences that may affect a child's experience of starting formal schooling. This includes taking into consideration the wider social structures and systems which influence the manner in which a child may engage and participate in their new environment and the resulting impact this may have on their overall experience with starting formal schooling.

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