...WHEN THE BELL RINGS, YOU CAN TALK: EXPERIENCING THE PRESCHOOL TO SCHOOL TRANSITION

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Abstract

Although starting formal schooling is acknowledged as a major milestone in children's educational journey, within the Maltese education system little is known about transition practices from kindergarten/preschool to school. Successful transitions depend on relationships and practices which contribute towards facilitating the process for children and their families. This study focused on transitions as experienced by parents, children and staff in one early years setting. Organizational matters, pedagogical practices, adult-child relationships and peer relationships within kindergarten and school were reviewed through questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions conducted with thirty-five parents, three kindergarten (preschool) practitioners, three teachers and two members of the senior management team. Thirty-three five-year-old children in their first year of compulsory school participated in three group activities, including a story-telling session, puppet play and a visit to the preschool. Although participants benefitted from a transition process with activities involving children, parents and practitioners, more initiatives can be adopted to support and strengthen children's experiences.

Introduction

The aim of this study was to gain insights into stakeholders' experiences of children's transition from kindergarten/preschool to the first year of compulsory school in the absence of any study on transitions in the Maltese context. Specifically, it sought to record the perspectives of staff, children and parents about pedagogical and organizational changes from kindergarten to school as well as peer and adult-to-child relationships during kindergarten and in the first year of compulsory school. Although compulsory education starts in the year a child turns five, there is a high participation rate of four-year-olds (100%) and three-year-olds (98%) (European Commission/Eurydice, 2014) attending non-compulsory kindergarten/preschool. Thus transition from non-compulsory to formal education is experienced locally by all kindergarten children.

The transition process associated with the commencement of formal schooling begins prior to the first school day and lasts until such time a child experiences a sense of well-being and belonging within the new setting (Dockett & Perry, 2014). Positive transitions promote long-term academic success, confidence and competence in school (Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2010; Peters, 2010; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007) and are influenced by the nature and quality of support offered to children and parents before, during and after the transition to school occurs (Dockett & Perry, 2001).

Locally, the National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012) purports that the transition from kindergarten to school is one of the most significant transitions children are expected to experience and efforts to make this transition as seamless as possible are recommended. Schools and settings are free to organize their own activities for new in-takes of children and initiatives depend on the insights and sensitivities of staff.

Literature

Transitioning from non-compulsory to formal education is a major challenge of early childhood (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Woodhead & Moss, 2007; Brooker, 2008; Peters, 2010; Dockett & Perry, 2014; O'Farrelly & Hennessy, 2014). Social and academic challenges arise

as children contend with new environments, spaces, relationships, teaching styles, contexts for learning and learning itself (Fabian & Dunlop, 2005). The new learning environments are qualitatively different to previous experiences (Walsh, Taylor, Sproule & McGuiness, 2008; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014) where children experience intense and accelerated demands (Fabian & Dunlop, 2005).

Despite children's resilience and resourcefulness in their efforts to make sense of new situations (Donaldson, 1992), not all experience a positive and successful start to school (Margetts, 2007). Children experience transitions differently and their concerns are not necessarily shared by adults (Fisher, 2009). Children's competencies are challenged as their identity, roles and relationships change (Griebel & Niesel, 2002; Fabian, 2007) during this period of ambiguity, marginality and transformation (Lam & Pollard, 2006). Children's identities and the way they position themselves as learners are affirmed early on in their educational journey (McNaughton, 2002). However, their experience of the transition to school impacts learning and development in the short and long term (Sayers, West, Lorains, Laidlaw, Moore & Robinson, 2012).

When children communicate effectively, build positive relationships and actively participate in and engage with the learning opportunities which surround them, they are more likely to experience confidence, have a sense of control over their own lives and develop resilience (Burrell & Bubb, 2000). Emotional well-being empowers children as learners (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006; Merry, 2007; Gutman & Feinstein, 2008). Children starting school with a friend in the same class, have higher levels of social skills and academic competence and less problematic behaviour than other children (Broström, 2002; Margetts, 2002). When children have a strong sense of well-being, belonging and connectedness with others and the new setting they are more likely to experience a successful transition to school (Margetts, 2014).

Compulsory education ushers in changes in adult expectations, differences in educational philosophy, a shift in curriculum emphasis, pedagogical practices, rules and routines, adult-child interactions, jargon associated with formal schooling and the language for instruction (Cassidy, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2007). The kindergarten to school transition is emphasized with shifts from a play-based exploratory curriculum to a more formal one; from child-initiated activities to teacher-led tasks; a holistic approach through play-based pedagogy in kindergarten is transformed into subject-based formal teaching and learning in compulsory school (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002; Walsh et al., 2008; Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew & Ingram, 2010; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014). Preschool is associated with play and freedom to engage with activities of one's choice. Schools are associated and perceived as the sites for teaching and learning (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Karlsson-Lohmander, 2003; Pramling Samuelsson, 2006; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006).

In preschool, children have more control over their activities and can choose what and when to do something (Einarsdottir, 2006). At school, learning is structured, the teacher plans the day, lessons involve instruction through teacher-lead activities and children have very little influence on what they can do or when to do assigned work (Griebel & Niesel, 1999 cited in Griebel & Niesel, 2002). Subject matter learning is often prioritized over play or playful learning (Hakkarainen, 2006). The greatest difficulty for children arises from adjusting to a more formalized pedagogy (White & Sharp, 2007).

If an imbalance between adult expectations and children's capabilities arises, dips in learning potentially emerge impacting on children's self-concept, relationships and learning trajectories (Galton, Gray & Rudduck, 1999). Inappropriate demands can lead children to experience anxieties and suffer emotionally, socially and academically (Dunlop, 2002;

Margetts, 2002; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Einarsdottir, Dockett & Perry, 2008).

To improve the possibility of smoother transitions for children, Hopps (2014) proposes widening the definition of 'intersetting communication' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which primarily addresses information exchange between preschool and school and thus relies on the relationships amongst adults in both settings. Knowing about preschool experiences is crucial for practitioners to facilitate children's seamless transitions to school (Peters, 2002).

Children's experiences of starting school are also influenced by messages and narratives of their parents (Griebel & Niesel, 2002; Johansson, 2002). Parents who are knowledgeable about administrative procedures and the curriculum, are more likely to feel confident and transfer their confidence to their child (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006). They can use this knowledge to help children gain an understanding of school, develop a greater sense of self-awareness, strengthen their ability to form relationships, improve their motivation towards learning as well as their communication skills and resourcefulness in meeting new challenges (Fabian, 2002; Margetts, 2002).

Methodology

The aim of this case study was to analyse the transition from kindergarten (preschool) to school experienced by a group of children, parents and staff. Four themes were explored: adult-child relationships; peer relationships; similarities and differences in the organizational set-up, and; the pedagogical approaches adopted in kindergarten and the first year of formal education.

The research was conducted over five months. School had started four weeks prior to the start of the study and thus the participants were still experiencing the transition from kindergarten to school. The school offered facilities for two to fifteen-year-olds. Kindergarten children at this school spent four hours per day at school, with the option of extended day services. In compulsory school, children spent six hours per day at school.

The school was chosen because of the familiarity one of the researchers had garnered having worked in the setting as a qualified teacher. Ethical issues were adhered to. Consent was obtained from the Head of School. Information letters were distributed to staff and parents. Written consent was obtained from adult participants while verbal consent was obtained from the children prior to every phase of data collection which involved them. Participation was voluntary and individuals could withdraw at any stage. The use of pseudonyms ensured that no identities would be disclosed.

Thirty-five (65%) of a possible fifty-four parents and eight staff participated. Staff included three kindergarten (KG) practitioners, three Year 1 teachers and two members of the senior management team. Thirty-three (61%) of the fifty-four five-year-old children who had been invited, participated. They were distributed in three Year 1 classrooms and included 17 boys and 16 girls. With the exception of one child, all had spent four hours per day in kindergarten and were now experiencing a six-hour day in their first year of compulsory education.

Data from the children were collected through an audio-recorded story-telling session; puppet play, which helped children to project their views; and a visit to their KG setting and kindergarten practitioner.

Stories create contexts for children and provide a good starting point for discussion. *Topsy and Tim start school* (Adamson & Adamson, 2003) was chosen because routines described by a boy and girl experiencing school for the first time were similar to those adopted at the

children's school. Story-telling was a routine activity for the children in this study. The story was shared within children's classrooms, with 6 to 8 children at a time. These considerations minimized unequal power relations between the children and adult researcher.

Through puppet play, children were assisted in reflecting upon and talking about their experiences of starting school. Children were introduced to *Peter Puppet,* posing as a five-year-old boy who had recently started school, had been separated from his friend Neil, and did not know what to expect from school. Children were encouraged to speak about Peter's feelings while drawing a picture to show him some of the things that he would be doing at school. By contextualizing Peter's situation to resemble that which children had experienced, they readily reported about school activities which Peter would be engaged in with his teacher. In so doing, children were indirectly talking about their own transition experiences.

In groups of four, children visited their KG setting and the KG practitioner who had worked with them during the previous scholastic year. The visit lasted for about one hour and was conducted in order to help children recall and describe events they experienced at kindergarten. Field notes recorded children's comments and complemented the researcher's observations.

A four-page questionnaire was distributed to the staff. Informal individual interviews were subsequently conducted to complement the questionnaires and obtain clarifications about their perceptions and experiences.

The questionnaire consisted of eight questions, four of which were closed and four were open-ended. The open-ended questions requested staff to identify (a) three practices they believed were essential in supporting children during the transition from kindergarten to school; (b) challenges which children face when moving from kindergarten to school; (c) ways in which parents best support children during their transition to school, and; (d) changes or new initiatives staff would like to see in school to help children with the transition.

For each of the four close-ended questions, staff was expected to respond to given sets of statements. In the first question, the staff was invited to determine whether each of 15 transition practices was 'in place and beneficial', 'in place though unnecessary', 'not in place but could be beneficial', or 'not in place and not necessary' for a healthy transition. Statements related to pedagogical practices; organization of the setting; relationships with parents and children; information exchanged between kindergarten staff and school teachers; the content of meetings amongst staff; communication practices and invitations extended to parents and children.

In the second closed question, staff were asked to indicate how strongly they believed personal characteristics would impact on children's adjustment to school. Characteristics included academic competence; positive friendships; verbal confidence; skills in constructive problem-solving strategies; an ability to follow directions; engage positively with groups of children using appropriate strategies; taking responsibility for belongings and confidence in seeking help when necessary. Staff were asked to indicate their view by marking each personal characteristic on a scale from '1' to '5', where '1' implied the characteristic does not impact upon a child's adjustment and '5' indicated the characteristic strongly impacts on a child's adjustment.

In the third closed question, participating staff were asked about the level of challenge they face arising from variations in children's behaviours. They were asked to rank order six behaviours on the basis of the perceived challenge these posed an educator. Challenging behaviours which were identified included those brought about by 'high levels of distractibility', 'difficulties when interacting with friends', behaviours of children who are

'academically-challenged', 'non-compliant', 'unable to communicate their needs', and 'lack responsible behaviour'.

Finally the staff were asked to record the extent of their agreement or disagreement with each of eight statements focusing on potential challenges arising at the transition stage from kindergarten to school. The statements related to the staff's perceptions of children's or parents' expectations, attitudes or experiences which impact on the transition process. A five-point scale was used where '1' denoted strong disagreement and '5' indicated strong agreement with the statement.

The four-page questionnaire distributed to parents included closed and open-ended questions. For three questions, parents were provided with a set of statements, for which on a scale of 1 to 5, they were asked to indicate the extent to which each given statement reflected their child's attitudes and behaviours (a) before the start of the academic year, (b) during a school familiarization visit before the start of the scholastic year, and (c) when talking about the first weeks at school with their children. A score of '1' indicated that the specific statement did not reflect the child's position at all, while a score of '5' indicated that the statement strongly reflected the child's behaviours and attitudes.

Open-ended questions allowed parents to (a) reflect and report on how the familiarization visit had helped them and their children; (b) report on their child's general attitude about starting school, having a new teacher and new friends; (c) list issues of concern they had about their child's introduction to school; (d) report on similarities and differences between kindergarten and school as identified by their child; (e) identify issues their child could have been struggling with and (f) offer suggestions for the school to improve its services.

Five months after the administration of the questionnaire five parents participated in a focus group discussion. Organizational changes and their impact on children's adjustment; the children's experience of starting school with a new teacher; the impact of friendships and relationships; similarities and differences of teaching and learning in kindergarten and school were the themes for the discussion.

Findings

The data in this study were analysed by comparing the views and perceptions of the participants with regard to the four main themes and their impact on transitions. Pedagogical and organizational matters and the relationships between adults and children as well as amongst children themselves were reviewed through the experiences and perceptions of the main stakeholders involved in kindergarten to school transitions.

Organizational matters

The key topics associated with organizational matters and which were referred to by the parents and the staff concerned the length of the school day, routines and adjustments which children have to make at the start of the school year or gradually become accustomed to. The organizational changes arose from the formality associated with the first year of compulsory schooling.

The first month of school is challenging as children need to cope with several changes at a time when they are particularly sensitive to the amount of new information given to them.

> *The first few weeks are the hardest, because the children need to get used to quite a few routines which are a little different to last year…when they get used to these procedures, they feel more secure. Knowing about preschool practices helps me plan for more gradual change.* (Teacher A)

Changes included morning assembly, sitting for longer periods of time, less opportunities for free play, less 'fun' activities such as art and craft work. In referring to challenges which children face as they start formal schooling, staff reported that academic skills must improve because more learning takes place, children spend a longer time at school and have to sit down all day. They play less, are less creative and within the classroom set up, there are no toys or fun corners as children would have experienced in kindergarten.

The participating staff members reported that in kindergarten, children are allowed to play for a short time then settle down by sitting on the carpet and lessons start. In Grade 1 there is no time for this as there is more academic work to be seen too and so it is a matter of rules and routine. Children have to work much more rather than play in Grade 1. They have to listen more carefully to what the teacher is saying and asking of them. Their concentration span has to improve and they need to settle down quicker at the beginning of the school day.

KG practitioners and teachers were aware of each other's work through practices which contributed towards continuity in children's experiences from kindergarten to school. In their responses to items on the questionnaire, seven of the eight staff reported that "*preschool staff and Grade 1 teachers meet to discuss curriculum and pedagogical practices which strive for continuity and progression*". KG practitioners agreed that knowing what children would experience in school helped in preparing children for the transition. School teachers who were familiar with KG experiences encouraged children to refer to their earlier experiences and knowledge to better adapt to school life.

> *Since I know how things are done in preschool, I can introduce these routines gradually and together we can discuss how and why things change here at school.* (Teacher B)

Parents (40%, n=14) expressed concern about their child's longer school day, anticipating their child would be tired after a six-hour day and lack the energy to deal with the daily homework or get fed up. One parent reported that '*occasionally she [my daughter] feels tired after school and does not feel like doing her homework*'. Another parent reported that the longer school day impacted on her children's lunch arrangements. In asking parents to identify issues children were struggling with, the parent wrote that:

> *…probably in the first few weeks when he was missing lunch at home. Both used to bring their lunch back from school and we tried several kinds of lunches until we found what suited them best. Lunch used to be their main meal.*

One parent suggested that the morning assembly be more appealing and 'age appropriate' claiming that '*assembly every morning … she doesn't always know what's going on and this tends to make it a bit boring for her*'.

However in their response to possible suggestions for improvements and during the focus group discussion, overwhelmingly parents reported they were satisfied with the way the school handled transitions and with the sensitivity shown by staff. Routines had been introduced gradually and children were not overwhelmed by the changes.

In contrast to the staff's concerns and parents' perceptions, none of the children seemed bothered about the longer school day. On the contrary, since children were spending six hours a day at school and they had two lunch breaks, this was positively regarded because it offered the possibility to spend more time with their friends. Homework was a task they seemed to cope with although some claimed it was sometimes boring and sometimes fun. Children's

main concern arose from having to sit in places assigned by the school teachers: in kinergarten they could choose where to sit, in Year 1 they were assigned a place in class. This had an impact on their relationships: some were happy to be assigned a place because it gave them the opportunity to make new friends. Others reported that while they accepted the place chosen by the teacher, they looked forward to an opportunity to be next to a particular child.

> *The rules are different. We cannot sit where we like.* (Pamela)

> *The teacher put us together and now we are friends.* (Catherine & Helen)

> *When we go for an outing….. I can sit next to Jo on the van.* (Lisa)

Another organizational feature which had an impact on children's peer relationships concerned outdoor play. While at KG children played with same-aged peers, in Year 1 a larger playground was used. During break-time, this was shared with children who were a year older. Some were pleased that they could play with older peers but others felt that having to share play-time resources, resulted in less time to engage in their preferred games.

Pedagogical matters

The transition from kindergarten to the first year of compulsory education ushers in expectations about academic achievement which contribute to pedagogical changes. All stakeholders were conscious of changes which implied more structure, less flexibility, reduced time for play and the completion of homework tasks.

The KG staff felt obliged to inform children about pedagogical changes they would need to adjust to. *'I feel I had to prepare them for what they were going to face in their first year of compulsory education.'* One kindergarten practitioner mentioned the increased work at school and the reduced opportunities for self-initiated play. Her colleague added that in kindergarten, *'…they have several daily opportunities to engage in activities of their own choosing…when they move up, they are not so lucky.'* She felt it was important to inform the children that they would not have a sand-pit, dress-up corner or large toys in the next grade.

The three teachers concurred with the views expressed by the kindergarten practitioners but believed this is part of the process children have to experience as they progress through the educational system.

> *…yes, things do change once children start school. There is more curricular material to cover and the emphasis on literacy and numeracy is strong. Although there is a more teacher-led approach, we still adhere to a holistic approach to education, where we take an integrated approach to teaching and learning, which is very hands on and interactive.* (Year 1 teacher)

While staff agreed about the formal approaches to teaching adopted in compulsory education, they shared similar views about educational beliefs and perceived themselves to be making efforts to plan, organize work and teach in a manner which is appropriate for young children.

Parents were positive about the transition to compulsory schooling: 83% (n=26) reported that their child was ready to make the move to formal schooling, and 88% (n=31) claimed that their child was not finding it hard to keep up with the teacher's expectations. Concerns related to their child staring school included daily homework, difficulty in keeping up with the syllabus, and developing appropriate reading skills (20%, n=7 in each instance). Parents were concerned about the reduction of creativity in formal schooling (14%, n=5) but few suggested a need for more opportunities for learning through play in compulsory education. One parent suggested retaining cooking activities *'which kids seemed to enjoy a lot [in preschool]'* while another one recommended that *'teaching at this level (Grade 1) should be*

more similar to preschool in that it should teach more through play rather than a strict classroom style'.

Parents were invited to report about their child's experiences of their first five weeks at school when comparing kindergarten to formal education. Some reported their child claimed that they used to play much more when they were in kindergarten (40%, n=14); others commented that fun things happen at school (57%, n=20). Some parents reported children felt there was more time for fun things in kindergarten while others claimed compulsory school is not harder work than kindergarten (51%, n=18 in both instances). They did expect formal school to retain or encourage a positive disposition towards learning and acknowledged the *'increased focus on learning'* and *'it's more structured than in previous year'*.

The parents were satisfied with the teaching and learning experiences and expressed full confidence in the practitioners who are perceived to be committed with the children and enthusiastic about their work. They also appreciated that at this school, children are not put under undue pressure to cope with curricular material: *'the way he describes the activities reassures me ... I am especially happy that children don't have to worry about tests until they are eight years old and that is quite a relief'*.

Children's insights into the pedagogical changes experienced with the transition immediately highlighted the reduction in opportunities to play and engage in child-initiated activities. In response to what they thought Topsy and Tim would do at school, many thought *'they'll have a lot of work to do because that's what we do now'*. With fewer opportunities to play, the absence of play dough, a sand-pit and a dress-up corner in the classroom were frequently referred to. They drew on their experiences to inform Peter Puppet about potential activities he would engage in at school.

'Peter can play with the train set'

> Michaela: *I think he will like the train set*
>
> Researcher: W*ill Peter get the chance to play with that?*
>
> Michaela: *Yes, Peter can play with the train set.*
>
> Researcher: *When will he be able to do that?*
>
> Michaela: *If he finishes his work the teacher will tell him that he can play on the carpet*

'…when the bell rings, you can talk.'

> Luke: *Peter can play and then he has to stop when the teacher says*
>
> Luke then draws lots of dots around the page, and explains: *Peter is joining the dots...I did a 'b' for him*
>
> Luke fills his paper with dot to dots that form letters and says: *He has to do all the letters...and then he has to do numbers...he cannot talk...you have to be quiet...but when it's play-time...when the bell rings, you can talk*

'…we used to play doctor…but now there isn't so much time'

> Jessica: *Sometimes he can play on the carpet...after he finishes his work of the teacher.*
>
> Researcher: *Will he have enough time to play* [in compulsory school]*?*

> Jessica: *Well, not as much as before...before we used to play doctor and dress up, but now there isn't so much time ...now we work more.*

'…we always play on the carpet.'

> Mike: *Peter can play on the carpet.*
>
> Researcher: *Will he like it there?*
>
> Mike: *Yes. There is a train and some cars...he can play with them.*
>
> Researcher: *Will he have time to play?*
>
> Mike: *He can play. The teacher will let him.*

Adult-child relationships

Developing and nurturing strong and positive adult-child relationships was emphasized by staff, parents and children.

> *We all have different characters and I can see that this can be difficult for children because they need to adjust to a new teacher who might be very different to their previous one.* (KGA 1)

Practitioners acknowledged that children need time to adjust to the new teacher and curricular demands in compulsory school should not restrict opportunities for adults to get to know the children.

> *Getting to know the children as individuals is so important ...it's when you build trust that you can really progress ...even though sometimes I feel there is so much curricular material to cover, being with the children should not just be about that.* (Teacher C)

According to five of the eight staff, finding difficulty in expressing themselves was one of the challenges children faced in new school environments.

> *It's not easy for the children to feel comfortable around their new teacher...when a child finds it difficult to share his/her needs, then it's important for me to try and communicate my intentions clearly to that child, so that he/she will not feel threatened.* (Grade 1 teacher)

Most parents (83%, n=26) reported their child was ready to move to formal schooling and 88% (n=31) felt that their child had no difficulty keeping up with the teacher's expectations. Parents reacted favourably to the opportunity to meet the new school teacher prior to the start of the scholastic year together with their children (70%, n=22). While 42% (n=15) reported that their child was eager to find out who their new teacher would be, 45% (n=16) believed the children would miss their kindergarten teacher. Several parents indicated it was important for their child to like the teacher (37%, n=13) and mentioned their concern about the mutual relationship which they expected to develop between their child and the teacher. Parents' shared a concern wondering whether the teacher:

> *Would [she] like my daughter and would my daughter like her'* or that *'the new teacher will be sensitive to her'* or *'that the child will build a good relationship with her as they have had with the other teacher'.*

During the focus group interview, three of the five parents reported that their child had only just begun to feel more confident with the teacher.

Children appeared to have a very trusting relationship with adult practitioners. Six of the ten children who had older siblings recalled that they knew all the Grade1 teachers because of their brothers/sisters. Two girls proudly shared this knowledge with one boy who had missed the familiarization visit and did not know his new teacher on the first day at school. At the end of the story telling session one child commented it was a special first day for Topsy and Tim '*because they saw the new teacher*'. He then immediately recalled his own kindergarten teacher, '…*she helped us go upstairs to our new classroom …I didn't know where I had to go.*' (Liam)

Children reported that their k teacher had spoken to them about compulsory school: '*Ms Jane was right. [Formal schooling] is harder work than before. She told us*' (Camille)

With *Peter Puppet*, Sam drew a teacher in the background, commenting that '*if Peter cannot find a friend, he can tell the teacher*' and Abram agreed that '*if someone hurts you, you have to tell the teacher*'. Informing the teacher whenever something happens was described as '*good, because she helps you*'. Leanne shared a 'trick' she has, admitting that '*if someone bothers me, I tell them that I will tell the teacher and they stop*'.

Peer relationships

All members of staff acknowledged the importance of children's friendships, noting different attachment patterns: while some children are especially attached to one or two friends, others manage to develop wider friendships.

> *At the beginning of the year … some children will happily play with anyone while others are very particular who they choose to play with. I try to encourage them to play with different children so that when a friend is sick, there will be someone else to play with, but some of them find it quite hard and sometime choose to stay alone or next to me …* (Teacher A)

Five of the eight staff strongly agreed that '*experiencing a transition with friends makes it easier to cope with change*' and '*when a child finds it difficult to make new friends, the transition is much harder*'. Six members of staff indicated that '*positive friendship relations with children in their new class*' and '*demonstrating co-operative play behaviours*' were personal characteristics which strongly impact on a child's adjustment when transitioning from kindergarten to Grade 1.

Friendships, personality, learning needs, behaviour and factors associated with a child's development were considered at end-of-year meetings when grouping and regrouping children. All staff reported that at the end of the year, kindergarten staff held meetings with the Head of school to discuss friendships to ensure each child would have a good friend with whom to share the transition. This ensured that each classroom included children with diverse abilities, needs and strengths. '*We try to reflect on matters relating to the child's development and see how they can be best supported in the coming year*' (KG practitioner B). Despite challenges in regrouping children, practitioners' believe it is important for each child's development to have the opportunity to remain with some 'old friends' while making new ones, working with different children, experiencing different relationships and group dynamics.

> *It is important that we treat each child as a unique individual…some children can handle being separated from a close friend, for he/she will cope well in finding other friends in class…but for other children it can be difficult.* (Teacher B)

These considerations extended to seating arrangements. One practitioner mentioned that separating friends is sometimes necessary to avoid their distracting each other. Another practitioner considered separating friends as an opportunity for individuals to learn to work with new children, '*create a wider network of friends to support their social development*'. (Teacher C)

Many parents claimed that their children mentioned friends they would like to have in class (74%, n=22); were enthusiastic about the beginning of the scholastic year (57%, n=20); had identified a particular child whom they wanted to have with them (32%, n=10) and had adjusted well to the new mix of friends (57%, n=20).

Parents appreciated the sensitivity shown by the school in regrouping children from one year to the next and acknowledged the importance of having 'old' and 'new' friends. During the focus group discussion, one parent explained that for her son:

> *…he was going to be with his close friend …[this] made him feel that he would not be alone … whenever he talks about school, he is always talking about his friends.*

Another parent said:

> *It's important for my daughter to be with some of her old friends and at the same time be given the chance to make new friends.*

Children referred to relationships and friendships very seriously and dealt with the regrouping system in a very personal manner. Some were rather joyous in explaining they had their old friends with them; others were saddened by the separation but encouraged by the fact that they could see their old friends during recess. New found friendships were also appreciated.

> *Mandy is no longer with us in class, but we see her in the playground.* (Jackie & Ilaria)

> *We are sharing the same classroom again.* (Bob & Jack)

> *We used to dress up as firemen [last year] and rescue animals.* (Maurice)

> *Zack is our new friend…he is fun to be with…we never played together last year.* (Jose & Alex)

> *The teacher put us next to each other and now we are friends.* (Catherine about Helen)

Children's drawings for Peter puppet emphasised the value attributed to friendships. They sympathized with Peter's separation from his friend but were optimistic in offering suggestions and strategies to make new friends. Using toys and props to initiate friendships was frequently mentioned. Lauren and Becky drew a box with a ribbon around it, saying that Peter should give this to someone in class and then they would make friends.

> *Peter can read a book with a boy who will be kind and share.* (Abram)

> *Peter should use his watch to make friends.* (Mike referring to his drawing)

> *If Peter gets a ball to school, he can share it, and children will play with him.* (Lauren)

Cathy spoke about behaviours that attract attention arguing that '*you do something cool … someone notices and they say 'wow'…and then they talk to you and you make friends*'.

Discussion

The kindergarten to school transition in this study revealed an educational shift from an informal to a structured approach (Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew & Ingram, 2010; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014). The organization and pedagogical differences between

kindergarten and school implied that kindergarten experiences allowed for hands-on and playful activities with time for cooking, dressing-up, painting, sand and water play but the first year of compulsory school marked a sharp transition to formal learning where children had little time to play. Learning was organized in a more structured and teacher-directed manner reinforcing conclusions from previous research that schools are considered to be the sites for real learning (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Hakkarainen, 2006; Karlsson-Lohmander, 2003; Pramling Samuelsson, 2006; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006).

Children attributed significant importance to friends and friendships as a way of gaining confidence in sharing a new experience together (Broström, 2002; Fisher, 2009). Organizational and pedagogical matters as seen through the eyes of children reflected possibilities or restrictions to be with friends to accomplish things together. Having an extended day at school with an additional break provided children with an opportunity to renew their friendships especially if they met 'old' friends who were in a different class; but completing tasks determined by the teacher, being able to talk when the bell goes, and having minimal or no access to hands-on activities certainly restricted the communication amongst children.

Parents and practitioners have an important role to play in supporting children and facilitating personal adjustments during their transition experiences (Griebel & Niesel, 2013). In the current study, members of staff considered information meetings between kindergarten practitioners and teachers, the end of year meeting with senior management to discuss grouping, the familiarization meeting for parents and children held with the new teacher before school started and the gradual introduction of rules and routines in compulsory school as appropriate initiatives to address transitions. However, they showed awareness that these measures were not sufficient. Seven of the eight staff members suggested more frequent meetings among staff in order to get to know about work covered in the different years and hence avoid unnecessary repetition, and longer, more frequent and fun activities with the children, especially towards the end of kindergarten, in order for the adult-child relationships to be strengthened. Thus, transition competence in children would not develop in isolation, but within a community which supports and nurtures its development (Griebel & Niesel, 2007; Dockett & Perry, 2014).

Parents were invited to support their child during the transition through the familiarization meeting and during a meeting where the curriculum was discussed. Most parents claimed that the school handled the transition effectively and had no suggestions to make for improvements. On the other hand, the staff was unanimous in reporting that these two activities were 'in place and beneficial' and were considered 'essential'. However, there was mixed response to the suggestion that letters to parents could be sent out to explain the importance of parental support during transitions. One member of staff admitted such a practice is not in place and is not necessary, another one did not know whether this was an established form of communication and three members of staff claimed that it is not in place but could be of benefit if it were introduced. Transition to school is more likely to be successful when parents have sufficient information and are given opportunities to understand the new environment. Parents who feel ill-informed about the school, the curriculum, procedures and routines, are likely to feel anxious, and have a negative impact upon children's adjustment (Fabian, 2002; Margetts, 2002; Shields, 2009).

The rapport between staff at kindergarten and at school was pleasant but could be strengthened. Although practitioners considered it important to be knowledgeable about each other's practices and the 'inter-setting' meetings with staff from kindergarten and compulsory schools were opportunities to share and reflect upon similarities and differences in practices, adults' expectations and children's achievements, the exchange of

documentation and having the staff and children work on a collaborative project were not established practices, were regarded as being potentially beneficial but not essential to support children during the transition. Such practices would allow practitioners to respond accurately to the questions posed by children and parents; help families develop realistic expectations in relation to starting school; and encourage a smooth transition. Different perspectives encourage practitioners to review the practices of others as well as their own (Einarsdottir, Dockett & Perry, 2008).

Conclusion

A successful transition to school requires children, families, early childhood and school professionals to develop positive, collaborative and supportive relationships (DEECD, 2011) where different perspectives are shared, reflected upon and critiqued (Bennett, 2013). During the preschool to school transition, children potentially face physical, social and pedagogical discontinuities in their experiences of starting school.

Although the transition practices exercised in the school sought to nurture and maintain relationships among key stakeholders, the management team and other members of staff need to work further to establish practices which assess and address the needs of individual children more accurately. This can be achieved by strengthening relationships among staff and with children and their families. Strong links between the preschool and school setting can lead to the development of shared goals and educational methods, and may create coherence in staff training and development (OECD, 2002). Good relationships among professionals need to be at the heart of positive transitions (Perry, Dockett & Petriwskyj, 2014; Peters 2010).

Dunlop (2013) encourages practitioners to view transitions as a tool for change, where preschools and schools 'operate together in more tightly coupled systems' such that children might experience greater continuity between the two settings. Transitions to school should be re-conceptualised in ways that recognize the opportunities, aspirations, expectations and entitlement of children and their families, educators, schools and communities (Educational Transitions and Change Research Group, 2011). There needs to be a commitment to acknowledging that individual children experience transitions in different ways and while attempts need to be made to support seamless and meaningful transitions for all children, different initiatives may be required to address their specific needs.

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