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Moving in, on, up and out: successful transitions

Summary

This chapter considers transition to school as a joint enterprise shared by the teacher, children and parents. School start is no longer the first educational transition children experience: taking account of the variety of experiences, people and environments children will have already encountered, means effective communication between all involved. Two illustrative cameos highlight similarities and differences between children's early childhood journeys and consider implications for each of the transitions they make. A case is made for the usefulness of theories as tools to help this transitions process, bringing a particular focus to children's agency, parental engagement and teacher collaboration.

> **Cameo 1**
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> Harry, as the second child in his family, had often visited his older sister, Leah's full-day nursery and later on her school, and so was familiar with these settings and keen to join in. Their parents decided to look for a childminder for Harry as they felt this might suit him better than the baby room at his sister's nursery. A loving and boisterous little boy, this arrangement worked well and he went on into Leah's nursery when she started Reception Class. Before he was three he had a new little brother and the family moved house shortly before he started school. His little

brother followed him into the care of the same childminder so there was a strong sense of continuity for the family. A few concerns about his speech and his boisterousness had been expressed by the nursery staff and discussed carefully with his parents, but the private nursery had found it hard to build relationships with the school or to pass on appropriate information. Harry was only just four when he started in reception class. The good staff:child ratio in reception and the play-based nature of the programme, particularly early on in the year, promised a smooth transition. Not long after school start Harry's teacher said he was very lively, then that he didn't sit well at tasks and apart from a nature school day, it turned out that much of the morning programme was very sedentary and quite formal. Harry put huge effort into conforming and was exhausted at the end of the school afternoon, often falling asleep at After School Club. However, referral to a speech and language therapist closely associated with the school has supported Harry's attempts to make himself understood and a year on he is thrilled to be starting Year 1. His imaginative play is rich and he wrote his first letter during the summer holidays between reception and year 1.

Cameo 2

Jasmine made the most of her entry to nursery class at four-years-old and, although initially she spoke little in English, she was very composed and made thoughtful choices about what to do with her time. She was always still working at a self-chosen activity when it was pick up time. Quiet, self-contained and self-assured – and very interested in making, drawing

and enjoying books and stories – Jasmine intruded very little on others in her nursery class. Her persistence in the everyday tasks she set herself are well summed up by her attention to detail in making spring flowers for her mother at Easter time. In her home culture Easter was not celebrated but she listened with interest to Easter stories and was intrigued by the spring blossoms that her teacher brought into the art area. After three attempts to make the perfect tulip, she retrieved the first attempt from the bin and re-worked it to her satisfaction. Pre-school assessments revealed her skills with phonics, number and word recognition. On the school induction day she met two teachers who were to job-share her new entrant class: Primary 1 (Scottish system). Jasmine started school at five-years and five-months. She made friends easily and soon she and Rachel were inseparable. Both always exceeded teacher requests and, when asked to draw a park scene, their pictures were the most vibrant and skilled in the class. Jasmine regretted that she didn't have much choice in school and said there were no books like at nursery – "At least there are, in the bookshelf but you have to concentrate on the reading book and you can only choose a story book if you get all your work done". She was cooperative and fitted in, taking responsibility in the class and moving easily into the next class.

Introduction

The introductory cameos illustrate the individuality of new school entrants whilst highlighting some of the differences children find between their preschool experience and primary education: differences to which children gradually adjust. Current

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concepts of starting school see young children's transitions as a process rather than an event. In this chapter a focus is taken on four examples of transitions as a continuing process:

- moving into a new setting;
- moving on in that setting;
- moving up through the system represented in that setting;
- moving out of it to the next stage of education.

School start is no longer the first educational transition children experience – most children will have experienced pre-school provision, sometimes just for the year before school, some for several years. In different parts of the UK children's experience varies – in Scotland all children are entitled to two years of free early learning and childcare (terminology adopted in 2015) before starting Primary 1 and some in more economically disadvantaged circumstances will be offered this entitlement from the age of two. In England and Wales children usually start in Reception after their fourth birthday and even when this is to some extent play-based this can mean adapting to school uniform, playgrounds, school dining rooms, older children and an increasingly formalised literacy and numeracy curriculum. Although the Reception Year for four-year-olds in England and Wales and Year 1 in Northern Ireland is reported as non-compulsory and part of the Foundation Stage, most children effectively start in school-based provision age four. Overall in the UK children start school younger than most of their European counterparts.

There is a considerable literature on school start (Peters, 2010) and school readiness (Graue, 2006), and some focus on the ways that children adjust to school (Margetts, 2014; McNair, 2016). Studies also address the complexities of transitions and offer child, parent and teacher perspectives. A number of informative literature reviews exist. Much of this work addresses what lies ahead for children and less of it attends to the experiences they have already had. Many transitions studies look at both sides of the transition (Dunlop, 2013) – a small number also examine the transition from home into full-day care, early childhood settings such as playgroup or preschool, a very few look at transitions across the day and within settings, but the majority of early childhood transitions studies are focused on school start.

The chapter is, therefore, sequenced to look at the beginning teacher's role in supporting children in each phase of the transitions process: the child's start in the education system in prior to school settings away from home; the ways in which children's experience changes over time; looking ahead to new transitions with children; supporting the departing child's contact with the next stage of education (see Figure 8.1).

INSERT FIGURE 8.1 ABOUT HERE – Two examples of transitions as a continuing process

Throughout the chapter transitions are seen as a positive tool in the development of teaching and learning approaches including relationships, class environment, curriculum and pedagogy. The two cameos are used to illustrate these elements of transitions and to support continuity. A focus is taken on children's growing sense of competence, the challenges and opportunities that transitions provide to children,

parents and teachers and the benefits inherent in the new/beginning teacher developing a concept of transitions as a way of classroom/school life to support teaching and learning: together the beginning teacher and the beginning children move along the sliding scale of novice, apprentice, practitioner – and often expert – in making transitions work for them. Set in the context of the two children's transitions' trajectories, three key concepts inform the discussion. These are:

1. children's agency;
2. teacher collaboration;
3. parental involvement.

The socio-cultural nature of learning provides opportunities to understand transitions as the entry to, acquisition of and shaping of a whole new culture – undertaken by children and their teacher with the help of supportive parents.

Key ideas drawn from researchers such as Rogoff (Rogoff et al, 2003) , Corsaro (Corsaro and Molinari, 2000) and Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), inform the discussion which focuses on the transition trajectories of children as they build 'transitions capital' (Dunlop, 2007) and 'transitions ease' (Dunlop, 2014) on their journey in, on up and through early childhood education and, in due course, out of the particular classroom and stage of education. Children's engagement in school, in social relationships and in their learning, place them firmly in a collective enterprise with each other and their teachers as they create meaning together (Bruner, 1986). The examples are early years related but the concepts apply across early years, primary and secondary schooling.

What matters at times of transition?

Embarking on the development of teaching and learning approaches including relationships, class environment, curriculum and pedagogy with a new entrant class as a beginning teacher gives a unique opportunity to co-construct their practice with the children's collaboration. Most children arrive in school with preschool group experience: they have expertise to offer. They need to find a classroom with both recognizable features as well as new interest. They expect to learn to read and write, sometimes immediately, but they move into this with greater ease from a basis of the familiar – for example an accessible story area, opportunities to play, time to talk with the teacher and build relationships – often achieved effectively through child-teacher discussion of their transition reports or portfolios if these are passed on. It may be helpful to sit near a friend in the early days and to be able to sustain the independence acquired in pre-school by having real opportunities to choose from class activities and areas as well as to be free to manage their personal needs such as visits to the toilet and enjoying their snack without a rush.

Transitions studies provide good insights into approaching work with an entrant class – such studies may be grouped broadly into three paradigms – those that focus mainly on the individual development and readiness of the child for school; those that, on the other hand, look more at the school context(s), systems and structures to find answers to ease transitions; those that combine to consider development in context with a focus on the interpersonal and socio-cultural (Dunlop, 2009; 2010).

Many transitions' researchers have made use of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems

theory to aid understanding of transitions (Fabian and Dunlop, 2007; Dunlop and

Fabian, 2007). Engaged by the way in which he placed human development in context

and asserted the interrelated and dynamic nature of the different contexts occupied by

the child (in the present case home, preschool and school), transitions' researchers

have also found that interpretations of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

need not focus only on the individual child, but allow consideration of children

collectively. His theory of human development changed over time to a concept of

bioecology (Rosa and Tudge, 2013). A systems approach can offer a space to

juxtapose, for example, human development in context with socio-cultural theory and

sociologies of childhood. Elder (1998) too, focuses on change over time, seeing

people not simply as the products of their experience but as producers of culture. In

focusing on *timing in lives,* Elder proposes that 'the developmental impact of a

succession of life transitions or events is contingent on when they occur in a person's

life' (p.3). When several different transitions occur in tandem, this can disrupt the

timing and duration of normative transitions: in early childhood it is, therefore,

important to work collaboratively with families and to develop relationships that

allow the sharing of events that may impact on children's day-to-day experiences.

Elder and Bronfenbrenner both concern themselves with agency and the capacity to

act and influence the life course.

Empirical work such as Corsaro and Molinari's (2008: 261) focuses on children's

collective experiences and their shared agency. They highlight that children find

differences between preschool and school, including:

1. the requirements of order, control and rules in the classroom; how closely linked

to preschool?

2. classroom and educational activities - the more structured tasks related to instruction in the more advanced educational activities;

3. the demands of a new and more differentiated peer culture.

They argue that expectations of what school will be like are based on preschool priming events: 'Priming events involve activities in which children, by their very participation, attend prospectively to ongoing or anticipated changes in their lives' (*ibid*: 263).

Alderson (2003), in her discussion of 'Institutional rites and rights' considers the contribution of childhood studies, indicating that such studies tend to 'meet [children] in their everyday contexts and relationships where they have expert knowledge' (p.27), whilst the *Cambridge Primary Review* (Alexander *et al.,* 2009) urges teachers to 'respect children's experience, voices and rights. Engage them actively and directly in decisions that affect their learning' (p.12).

Shared beginnings

Beginning teachers, whether newly qualified or new to the particular school situation, share with the incoming children the experience of being new. From this perspective it is helpful to think about how teacher and children may be able to work through these changes together. However, the nature of transitions in education is that they are on-going and consequently it may be helpful for the beginning teacher to adopt the view that transitions are a way of life (Brooker, 2008) both for adults and in the daily lives of children.

As a newcomer with class teaching responsibilities, these may overwhelm any desire to take a wider view. In this chapter an emphasis is placed on the importance of theories as tools which can support teacher and child in the classroom setting. This relationship of theory and practice can be argued to support teachers' career-long learning to the benefit of children's learning (Donaldson, 2011):

> The capacity of the teacher should be built not just through extensive 'teaching practice' but through reflecting on and learning from the experience of supporting children's learning with all the complexities which characterize twenty-first century childhood. The 'craft' components of teaching must be based upon and informed by fresh insights into how best to meet the increasingly fast pace of change in the world which our children inhabit (pp.4-5).

Bulkeley and Fabian (2006) assert the importance of the child's emotional well-being as a buffer that supports children's capacity to cope with such changes at times of transition. Denham (2006) makes a connection between positive emotional expressiveness, enthusiasm, the ability to regulate emotions and behaviors and social emotional wellbeing and successful learning.

The importance of bringing together a knowledge of children, a respect for their contribution, insights about the child and about childhood, allows an acknowledgment that times of transitions present opportunities, can emphasise common experiences between preschool and school, as well as the differences that new children and new teachers take into account as they shape shared routines in the new classroom culture.

A culture that includes stories, drawing, discussion, shared play, folios, literacy, special events, production of routines, friendships, expectations, play and changes in the peer culture as children make new friends and judge with whom to play and work. Used to making such decisions in preschool, children can bring this independence into the primary school as part of their contribution. Emerging from this discussion are some informative ideas to work from as teacher and children settle in together: the concept of transition trajectories, children's agency, teacher collaboration, parental participation and theories as tools.

A concept of transitions trajectories lets us acknowledge that successful transitions may take time, that children deal differently with transitions and that prior experience needs to be taken into account as well as the particular dispositions of each child. In shaping classroom routines a balance needs to be struck between group cooperation and managing individual responsiveness. Figures 1 and 2 show how Harry and Jasmine move **in, on, up and out** of the new entrant class: their particular trajectories differ.

Children's agency is promoted through real opportunities to make decisions, for example, as Ladd (1990) highlighted – whom to work with, whom to play with, who to be friends with and whom to avoid – illustrating self-regulation, the importance of choice, perspective taking, imagination and creativity. Building from what children offer, it is possible to see how adjustments for one may be helpful for all. Children's concern with rules, children's understanding of what is expected from them in school, the need to find ways of entering activities and play and also of leaving them show that each situation offers opportunities to exert agency.

	Transitions Trajectories	Children's Agency	Teacher Collaboration	Parental Involvement	Theories as Tools
Harry on entry - Relationships with trusted adults in nurturing nursery environment allowed Harry to look forward to Reception. As transition approaches nursery worries about his physicality. They work with the family to consider supports Harry may need. They hope there will be a playful learning approach.					
IN	Three friends from nursery going to particular primary school – peer relationships. Most going to the alternative primary in the area.	Exerted agency through boisterous play with peers and focus on topics of his own choice.	Quite separate – moved from a long day care private nursery to school. Came to induction day – no visit from school..	Working parents who had enjoyed the support of preschool – managed work flexibly for settling in period. Attended the induction day.	Sources of agency. (Bruner, 1986; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Rogoff, 2003), Subversive practices (McNair, 2016).
ON	Nursery wanted to send on a report and photos but unsure how this would be received. They sent it nevertheless but were uncertain as to how this was received. No feedback.	Harry's personal agency continued into primary school – "Its impossible not to warm to him. He's cheerful, sometimes lacking concentration and restless."	There was no face to face contact between settings, Harry's receiving Reception teacher responded to Harry's size not age, and found him immature.	Some concerns about Harry's stamina and the energy required to manage the demands of a school day. Reassured that he could attend after school with his older sister.	Children's dispositions – resilience, playfulness and reciprocity. (Claxton and Carr, 2002)
UP	A gradual process of increasing engagement in learning – helped by SLT to an improved capacity to communicate. Responded to his Year 1 teacher in school who listened to the children in her class, was a singer, and story teller.	Exerting agency through participation in discussion and in groups, and through his own growing sense of self-worth. Starting to show what he is capable of.	The Reception team passed on information and suggested Harry was immature. His new teacher loved his enthusiasm and cheerfulness Harry adapted well to Year 1.	Some diffidence about own school experience, not clear if parents picked up on school's views of Harry needing support. They felt in Reception Harry had been labeled unfairly. They warmed to the Year 1 teacher.	Children's participation and voice. Socio-cultural theory (Rogoff, 2003) Situated learning. Lave and Wenger (2002) Importance of the first teacher. Harrison, L (2007)
OUT	Very involved with peer group by end of year 1. Had adjusted well to school and looked forward to supporting his little brother's start in Reception.	Liked his teacher and ended the Year 1 class with increased confidence, a sense of being appreciated and well integrated with his peer group.	Records passed on formally and informally to the teacher taking the class the following year. Progress reported positively.	Regular attendees at school parent meetings.	Access rituals (Corsaro, 1979). Adjustment to school (Margetts, 2014) Relational Agency (Edwards, 2011)

Figure 8.1 – Harry's Trajectory

	Transitions Trajectories	Children's Agency	Teacher Collaboration	Parental Involvement	Theories as Tools
Jasmine on entry - Time to settle, to develop English and to make relationships in preschool class.					
IN	A confidence in making peer relationships, going to school with friends.	Shows focus, interest and persistence.	Nursery class within school – potentially good opportunities for meeting together and sharing information.	Jasmine's mother was very focused on her happiness and worried about juggling work and children.	Transitions as a collective process (Corsaro and Molinari, 2008). Priming events (Corsaro and Molinari, 2000).
ON	Report from nursery class passed on and discussed – showing Jasmine to be focused, interested, engaged in her own learning, skilled.	Quietly subversive – pursues tasks in her own way. Too workbook bound, not enough choice. Strong disposition to learn.	There was a real need for collaboration as the new entrant class was staffed by job-share teachers who, though experienced, had never taught at this stage. They were supported by Christopher's teacher.	Joined in with the arranged induction activities and attended parents nights when she could. Missed the regular conversations with the nursery staff.	Children's dispositions – resilience (Claxton and Carr, 2002).
UP	Jasmine's own expectations were entirely pragmatic – she expected to manage herself and was not over-dependent on her job share teachers.	Mature, scaffolding others –eg in shop play.	Shared information from the nursery class contributed to a smooth start but none of he teachers was aware of Jasmine's exceptional and natural ability with phonics. The teachers worked on the colour 'red'- this had little interest for Jasmine.	Brings and picks Jasmine up from school. Finds the new mothers in the playground unfriendly.	The more able or experienced other (Vygotsky, 1979) Agency in social and cultural contexts (Bruner,1986), Complex play.(Smilansky, 1990).
OUT	Her move to the next stage coincided with family change, a school move and her parents' separation. She navigated these multiple transitions capably with the mutual support of her older sister.	Highly motivated but finding a lack of choice and opportunity to show her creativity as for a while at least there was an overdependence on workbooks.	High level job share collaboration. Two different styles. Shared planning midweek. Poor school leadership, but good stage leadership.	Marriage breaks up and Ameena moves to another area because of the need to find a new home. The children move school.	Parental participation (Dunlop, 2003).

Figure 8.2 – Jasmine's Trajectory

Teacher collaboration at times of transition takes several forms – teachers as stage partners supporting each other within settings with planning, record keeping, resources and development, mentoring of beginning teachers, working together across sectors to ease transitions through knowledge of each other's practices and how they affect children. Help from a member of nursery staff to ease children's entry to school can be very helpful in the earliest days.

Parental participation

Parents too are affected by their child's transitions and contribute in shaping successful transitions (Dunlop, 2003). Where an individual worry or concern is identified, it is important to work with parents together to co-construct the transition, to know more about the social capital of the child and to understand what they are bringing with them to school. Parental disposition and their thoughts about appropriate roles at transition make an important contribution and help parents to feel involved in the process of transition to school.

Theories as tools

A number of theories to explain transitions help in understanding both the new teachers' experiences and those of the new entrant to a class. The concepts of rites of passage (van Gennep, 1960) and rites of institution (Bourdieu, 1990) help in recognising the adjustments both adults and children are making, whilst intent participation (Rogoff *et al.,* 2003), situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), learning in companionship (Trevarthen, 2002), understandings of children's peripheral and intent participation (Rogoff *et al.,* 2003), the importance of scaffolding learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and of teacher knowledge of complex play

(Smilansky,1968,1990) all contribute to environments in which early educators arguably become more aware of the impact of their practices (see also chapter 9).

Tables 8.1 and 8.2 show how theories as tools for understanding transitions may be mapped onto children's everyday experiences. References are provided to explore such theories further. There is a Harry and a Jasmine in many early childhood classes across the country.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that beginning teachers and beginning children share a unique opportunity to make the most of the opportunities transitions into school offer. Together they may shape the culture of the classroom into one that values children, affords them opportunities to contribute, recognizes both the agency of the child and of the teacher and encourages them to co-construct the early days of shared experience in a way that set them up as a community of learners – socially, emotionally and academically. In that way, they move into their first year together in school, on into the learning processes, up through new experiences and demands and out to the next stage of their school careers.

Children's engagement, learning, sense of belonging and deep involvement combine with the expectations teachers and children have of each other. As Peters says in her review of transitions: 'Hattie (2009) reminds teachers, if they are going to have expectations they should make them challenging, appropriate and checkable" (Peters, 2010: 26). Further, Peters cites Thomson and Hall, suggesting:

After moving to England from Australia, Thomson noted the impact that curriculum has on teachers' ability to incorporate children's existing funds of knowledge. Writing with Hall, she commented that in the current context of English schooling there was "little official opening for family, local and community knowledge, despite ongoing research which suggests that the inclusion of such 'funds' can be important 'scaffolding' for children whose languages, heritages and ways of being in the world are not those valued in schooling" (Thomson and Hall, 2008: 87) (Peters, 2010: 27).

With an interest in transitions firmly established, it is time to reflect on the strengths found in partnership. The importance of leadership for the transition process needs to be recognized (see Chapter 22). A review of transition practices (Fabian and Dunlop, 2007) found a number of whole school approaches were helpful for children in transition and their parents. These included, for example:

- 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;
- flexible admission procedures that give children and their parents the opportunity to have a positive start to their first day (Fabian and Dunlop, 2007: 25).

Today many children have considerable experience of change: but experience alone will not guarantee preparedness for what is to come further along the educational journey. It has been argued that tackled well, transition experience can stack up in terms of ability to navigate change – this has been called 'transitions capital' (Dunlop, 2014). However there is a premium here on how first and subsequent transitions are anticipated or bring about contact between the experiences, people and environments children have already encountered and what is to come. The 'double dip' that can occur for children where there is more than one change at a time also needs to be taken into account. It may be that young children navigate a number of childcare transitions in early life without apparent negative impact. We need to ask what other features of the child's life make this possible – it might be that while there are numbers of transitions through time, that most factors remain very stable for the child, e.g. the care may always be provided at home, the changes may be within settings, the quality of care is high even though change may be more frequent than planned, the family may sustain very stable routines and the emotional and social wellbeing of the child and family may be high. However should stability at home waver, or someone with whom the child has a stable and loving relationship moves away, for example, at a time when a child is changing educational setting, then the child's resilience and the degree of interim transition support will be important. Communication and relationships are therefore vital elements of supporting and enhancing early educational transitions.

Edwards (2011) writes of relational agency, relational turn and relational expertise: through shared endeavor practitioners either side of transitions, and parents and educators can generate common knowledge. Such communication must involve the variety of people involved in the child's life.

Sharing the transition to school with children, through relational pedagogy, provides the beginning teacher with a real opportunity to know the children in the class well, to be responsive to their needs and rights and to build learning relationships that add to children's ease in transitions and to their transitions capital for their journey through education.

Questions to consider

1. Think of examples of how you could build on directly from children's prior to school experience of curriculum: can you add these into your day-to-day planning?
2. Could you create transitions cameos of children in the class that take account of children's agency, teacher collaboration across the foundation stage/early level of curriculum and parental participation?
3. How does theory work for you as a tool to inform your practices?

Recommended reading

Dunlop, A-W (2013) Curriculum as a Tool for Change in Transitions Practices - Transitions Practices as a Tool for Changing Curriculum. In A. Keinig and K.Margetts, *International Perspectives on Transitions to School: Reconceptualising beliefs, policy and practice*. London: Routledge. It is essential that curriculum is accessible to children. This chapter presents ways in which careful attention to transitions can influence curriculum in the early stages of school in favourable ways for children, and how well thought through curriculum approaches may foster positive transitions.

Dunlop, A-W (2015) Developing Child in Society - making transitions. Chapter 12 , 142-153, In Reed and R Walker (editors), *Early Childhood Studies: A Critical Companion.* London: Sage Publications. This chapter takes a positive view of transitions and helps the reader to reflect on how children are positioned at times of transition by both pre-school and school settings. It talks about children being 'transitions' ready.

Margetts, K. (2014) Transition and Adjustment to School. In Perry, B, Dockett, S and Petriwskyj,A (eds) *Starting School: Research policy and practice.* 75-87. Dortrecht: Springer. In this reading the sense of belonging in school is supported by a discussion of the adjustments children make to new people, new environments and new rules and routines, as they go through the transitions process.

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