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BRIDGING CHILDREN'S EARLY EDUCATION TRANSITIONS THROUGH PARENTAL AGENCY AND INCLUSION

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<u>SUMMARY</u>

Studies of transitions in the early years have tended to focus more on the institutional experience and on reporting the views teachers and parents hold of the experience of children, in order to ease the transition, than on how parents themselves experience the transition process. The present paper focuses on the ways in which parents experience their children's transition from pre-school to primary education in order to identify ways in which their inclusion in this process might enhance their children's experiences. The paper draws on a longitudinal study of early years transitions undertaken in one local authority in Scotland. The study involved classroom observations, child, parent and teacher interviews, video analysis of classroom discourse, tracking of school approaches to transition as well as interpretation of classroom record keeping, transition records, school reports and curriculum documentation. In particular this paper uses data from the tracking of school approaches and from semi- structured interviews held in the parents own homes. The data were interpreted through SPSS and through NUD*IST(QSR, 1991-2000), so as to capture the statistical as well as the interpretative nature of the responses.

It is concluded that early childhood transitions are in fact also family transitions as the family experiences shifts in the child's identity in preparation for, and on becoming a school pupil, in the child's status, and in their own roles in their child's life. There is evidence that educationally active parents enhance their child's transition to school and support children in the emotional/social and cognitive challenges they face. The implications such findings hold for policy change are considered.

INTRODUCTION

The present study

The longitudinal study of early years educational transitions on which this paper draws was undertaken in one local authority in Scotland, over a four year period. The study tracked the experience of 151 school entrants to four primary schools in order to establish the degree of continuity and progression in learning between early years preschool and primary settings. Twenty eight focus children were studied in detail, this involved the development of measures of continuity and discontinuity in terms of settings, curriculum, relationships, pedagogy and parental role.

The concept of transition

It is proposed that the transition from pre-school to school is the first major transition in children's educational lives (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002). Authors very often focus more on the social and emotional nature of the transition than on the effects of transition on children's learning in a curricular sense. In the last ten years of early years' practice the school system has shifted considerably in how it welcomes the school entrant (Dunlop, 2002). Most schools have some sort of induction programme, ranging from a half day visit to a series of regular visits over the term preceding entry to school. Educationalists in the pre-school and early primary sectors are more likely to communicate about children than in the past, and documentation claims links and connections between the

nature of the official curriculum for 3-5 year olds in early education, and the nature of the early stages of 5-14 (SCCC, 1999).

Drawing from a range of disciplines, transition itself can be variously conceptualised as a straight transfer from one setting to another (Galton, Morrison & Pell, 2000); a process of induction of the individual into new cultures (Brooker, 2002); a change which should be looked forward to, celebrated and marked as a "rite of passage" (van Gennep, 1960) from one life stage to a next; a border-crossing (Campbell Clarke, 2000) with entry criteria; a rite of institution (Bourdieu, 1998) through which the parameters and modus vivandi of the new establishment is established and legitimised, and finally as a process in which the individual in transition may be able to exercise some agency (James , Jenks and Prout, 1998. Mayall, 2002).

In contemporary schooling the process of young children leaving their pre-school setting and entering their primary school one, is now rarely seen as simply a transfer of numbers. The importance of helping children to adjust well to the new class, to become somewhat familiar with it before the start of the school year and to encourage parents to some measure to be part of that process is now well documented. Claims are made about giving children a good start, building on their prior learning, easing the transition for them: all in order to promote progress and achievement. Such acknowledgement needs to be further exploited if schools are going to take full account of the diversity of children, their current knowledge and experience and their capacity to take advantage of what school may be able to offer them. There are strong arguments to be made for involving children

more in the planning of that process (Dunlop, 2003), so more fully acknowledging their changing status, identity and roles. Johansson (2002) writes about the twin role of the pre-school: to prepare children and parents alike for the system, but also through parental involvement in the curriculum, to foster their influence and empower the parent-teacher partnership, so involving families more in the process of education from the beginning.

This means a shift in the system towards viewing parents as contributors rather than as a responsibility. Schools may see parental involvement as a policy obligation and responsibility rather than any real help, however it could be that the interpretation of curriculum could be a common task for teachers and parents together. A stage at which this might be most strongly argued is at the transition into the education system. Parents in the present study had surface involvement, but no shared discussion or shaping of curriculum once children had entered the primary phase. Consequently whilst they experienced individual teachers and head teachers as approachable, they found the system itself excluding, or only prepared to include on its particular terms.

Any study of childhood or children's experience, is inevitably the study of child-adult child relations. (Mayall, 2002). One of the key questions in this research was "What part do parents play in continuity of children's educational experience?" Not a new question, three useful studies were undertaken in the 1980s into continuity and transitions into and from pre-school settings into primary education in the UK (Blatchford, Battle, & Mays, 1982. Cleave, Jowett & Bate, 1982. Watt & Flett, 1984). During the 1990s a range of further studies have developed in USA, Australia, New Zealand and the UK: all countries

in which children make a significant educational transition at around 4 or 5 years of age: into kindergarten, reception class or primary education.

The role of parents

In the early studies the importance of close interdependence of the 3 'parties to the transition': children, staff & parents, was emphasised, as was a lack of meaningful contacts between parents & staff after entry. Information held by either party if shared could be highly relevant to continuity (Blatchford, P., Battle,S. & Mays, J. 1982).

When a child starts school there are certain features of the building, curriculum, people & personal relationships which are critical to the continuity of experience and it is easy to see that each child's transition is likely to be unique to them (Cleave, S., Jowett, S. & Bate, M. 1982). When, as reported by Cleave et al., parents lack of understanding of the place of pre-schools in the learning process, is combined with little or no planned contact between pre-school, school & family, then children are unlikely to experience much continuity as they move to the next setting.

Parents, who are the potentially continuing factor for the child in the move from preschool to primary, must play a part in both. Watt & Flett (1984) stated that continuity in early education is a measure of professional sensitivity to children & families: of people rather than of structures. They found that parents who are educationally active in particular can make a positive contribution to the long term educational continuity of their children, continuity in early education is also about the self-respect of parents in their parenting role, there can be a discontinuity in parents'

minds about the purposes of preschool & the purposes of primary education. Parental role may be seen differently in different settings: this makes for discontinuity for parents: sometimes needed, sometimes not, this can cause parents to feel less and less needed by their children and so they experience a role shift themselves.

Insights from research studies which report the part parents do actually play in the transition, cause the question to shift from "What part *do* parents play in continuity of children's educational experience?" to "What part *could* parents play in continuity of children's educational experience?" and therefore to raise a second area of enquiry around the agency of parents in the transition process.

METHODS

A structured interview was prepared to cover 6 key themes to do with continuity, progression and transition to school. These themes were matched for nursery and primary, and are linked to associated themes for the third section on family experience. Under each heading a number of questions and points for discussion were used to draw out respondents' ideas on each of the themes. Both parents of the focus children were invited to be present wherever possible. The transcripts were shared with the parents for verification. 24 parents in total completed the interview process, 2 further parents partially completed the interview. All interviews but one took place in the parents' own homes.

Pre-school experience	Primary School Experience	Home Experience

Choice of pre-five unit	Choice of primary school	Family Life
Expectations of nursery	Expectations of primary	Expectations of family life
Parental experience of pre-school	Parental experience of primary	Experience of being a parent: the case study child
Transition into nursery	Transition to primary	Family transitions
Pre-five curriculum	5-14 curriculum	Home Learning
Pre-five primary links	Pre-five/primary links	Links between home & pre-school/school

Table 1: to show the key elements of the parent interviews

DATA

To date the data have mostly been interpreted qualitatively, however descriptive statistics yield categories of nominal data which help to give a picture of the dominant views held by the parents in the study. A selection of responses are given in order to highlight the scope of parents' thinking and personal involvement in their child's entry to school.

Parents predicted that all the focus children would settle readily into primary school: only four anticipated that there might be emotional difficulties and said they would seek help if it was needed. At preschool entry it was felt that children's previous experience and their own sociability were equally important (a view supported by the work of Perry, Dockett & Tracey , 1998), staff approachability and having a parent stay were second in importance, whilst going with someone, familiarity with the place and talking about the new experience were also deemed to help. On entry to primary school previous experience was also given a central place, in that 55% of parents felt nursery experience had helped children to settle in school, 15% felt within-child factors were important, while 20% felt a combination of family, nursery and within child factors all contributed to a settled start.

This background of parental views on children's experience sets the scene for looking more closely at the parents' own experience of the transition to school. At the time of the interviews: the summer between nursery and primary education, parents had clear views about what preschool had offered them and were able to speculate about their expectations of school. As with their children useful categories for considering this transition into school are settings, relationships, curriculum and pedagogy.

Settings

Parents had found that nursery supported them to be able to work, offered progress for their child, gave them peace of mind in terms of their children's well being and gave the mothers a chance to help and be involved but provided nothing for the fathers. 7 parents expressed that they had helped in class in preschool and would like to be able to do the same in primary. This could be quantified as educational involvement, however on all other dimensions of helping the role was a more administrative one (e.g. managing resources, fund raising and helping with events). Overall 57% continued in their desire to help in practical ways : for the other 43% time was a factor and little was found to be offered at times which suited the working parent, who could consequently feel very isolated from the child's experience, whilst valuing the preschool place.

Relationships

All felt that the staff in preschool knew their children either well or very well. Nursery made a big difference to 23% of parents, with 33% feeling the benefits were more for the

child and 38% finding benefits for the child and the family. Preschool also allowed them to form friendships with other parents. They voiced concerns as to whether primary school would be so welcoming.

Curriculum

Parents reported little knowledge of either the preschool curriculum (43%) or the primary school 5-14 guidelines (39%). It was felt that better communication about the programme in which their children were involved and about the content of the curriculum would allow them to be more educationally active for their children during this important transition. Those who had been given information found it helpful. Those with older children regarded them as a source of knowledge about the primary school.

Pedagogy

Those parents who were actively involved in their child's preschool and primary settings had more insight into teaching approaches and the teacher's role in the education process. Whilst there was a view that the whole nursery experience was an embedded preparation for school, a majority of parents focused on the skills and activities that promoted both social and educational involvement. Teachers were seen to provide a different type of experience and approach than had been prevalent in playgroup and this notion of the teacher was felt to be matched in style to what children would meet in primary school. However parents clearly understood preschool to be play based with active learning, whilst they expected school to have more structure and be more subject oriented. 77% of parents thought there would be play in primary school and 90% felt it was needed. 23%

were unsure if this would be available, whilst just 10% (n = 2) were unsure or thought there was too much play in primary.

In terms of learning, parents had varied ambitions for their children. 15% expected teaching and learning to focus on reading and 20% on the 3Rs. 50% wanted their children to learn everything they could both academically and socially , with a further 15% interested more in the academic role of the school.

What is clear is that although parents may not feel knowledgeable about curriculum, they have a clear agenda of what school should be like as their children transfer from preschool education to primary. They want their children to achieve, but for them this means children being happy, settled, motivated, their interests taken into account and for learning to be active and not over sedentary. 95 % expect school both to be different from, and to build on what has gone before.

Interpretation of data is now at a stage of allowing cross tabulations and several variables have been found to be significant: examples are included here. Two perspectives are taken: that of 'educationally active' parents and of parents divided by the age of their child on school entry. There were more children under five in the total school population at school start in the four schools under study, than there were over five (n= 151, 81 under five years, 64 over five years). This distribution is matched approximately in the Focus Group too (17 children under five at school start, and 11 over five years). Given that the whole year sample was thus divided, it is interesting to explore relations between

age categories and a number of variables of school entry. The entry to school is not worry free, some parents are concerned about their child's readiness for school, and many find it important that due planning is given to an appropriate pace of learning for young school entrants.

A contingency table analysis was conducted to determine whether there was an association between the ways in which parents might feel children are not ready for school and the half year group by age. A significant relationship was present (chi square = 8.703, significance < 0.02, df = 2), in that more parents of older half year were confident that their children were ready for school, whilst more parents of the younger half year children identified specific concerns over readiness. No parents of the older group had such concerns. Further, a quarter of the younger half year parents had reflected over a period of several months about whether their children were ready for school and had ultimately decided they were. Consequently they remained concerned about what factors would support a smooth and happy transition to school.

When their children started school they were concerned to know about the approachability of the teacher, the pace of learning, changes in teacher style from nursery school, whether the curriculum would be play based in the early months of school and what opportunities there would be for them for them to be involved in school. They knew little about the curriculum in primary school, and less about what would happen during the first few days except in very general terms, such as that the children would become familiar with the school, would be grouped, maybe socially, and that the teacher

would assess the children. 29% said they did not know at all what the first few days would be like "I would just be guessing" was said more than once.

Whilst numbers are small it may be concluded that such concerns in the Focus children's parents may be a reflection of the whole cohort, given that more than half of that year's entry fell into the younger six months.

Contingency table analyses were also carried out with data from 'educationally active' parents. This group expressed more worries about their child's entry to school than did 'educationally inactive' parents. They were also more specific about their worries and expectations.

Expectations about school start, n= 22	No worries	Specific worries
Educationally active	N = 6	N = 7
	43 %	87.5%
Not educationally active	N = 8	N = 1
	57%	12.5%

Chi-square=4.197, df = 1, p = < 0.05
Table 2. Educationally active parent worries on school start.

Parents expressed a range of particular concerns which have been themed with the help of NUDI*ST:

- Pace of learning: not wanting children to be pushed too fast, nor to be bored;

- Worries about their child's attitude to school entry, their ability to fit in, and to sit still;

- Concerns about whether the nursery and primary communicated effectively to the benefit of the child;

- Concerns about whether the preschool setting knew about the primary school so they could share that realistically with the children;

- A wish for more guidance about what parents could do to support the transition into school;

- Concerns about being a 'young starter';

- A desire to know whether the school would take account of individual children's interests and use these to motivate their interest in learning: especially important the younger the child;

- A need to know how the classroom and the day would be organised because of worries that a child might unintentionally disrupt others;

- Wondering how children are disciplined; and

- Hoping that children would be in a class with friends, or at least sit beside someone they know.

Taking the example of pace of learning, this group gave specific illustrations of their expectations over the pace of learning in early primary school.

Expectation of pace of learning	Number of responses	Percentage response
Quickly with basics	N = 7	29%
Worries regarding pace	N = 3	13%
Slowly at first then speedily	N = 7	29%
In time/no rush	N = 6	25%
Oral first, then recording	N = 1	4%

Chi-square = 13.943, df = 4, p = < 0.01
Table 3: Pace of learning: patterns of expectations and concerns.

The main thrust of the parents' expectations is that children shouldn't be rushed, that a slower pace to start with is appropriate, and that given time, the pace of learning will accelerate appropriately. Whilst analytical about their children's learning the parents of the focus group children also had an emotional agenda about starting school. 38% of them were happy about their child starting school, 14% were not very happy, 43% had mixed emotions and one parent felt his child was in for a shock and he was therefore going to feel it too.

Family transitions

For families the transition to school is one of a number of transitions which may be occurring in their lives. Like other transitions it has an impact and demands attention, and family transitions equally have an impact on children (Fthenakis, 1998). A small majority of parents, 54% , felt they experienced typical family transitions in terms of work, school and family events. The remaining 46% had experienced what they felt to be unusual transitions which included more difficult transitions to parenthood for older and younger first time parents, changes in family composition through divorce or separation, separation because of work, and also combinations of more than one change at a time, whilst several families had pronounced problems and consequently little capacity to reflect on this particular transition in their child's life. Nevertheless 100% of the sample saw themselves as having a home learning role, with 55% viewing themselves as the prime educator , only 10% feeling that was the part played by the school and the rest (35%) holding mixed views about where the primary role lay and anticipating responsibilities would change.

Partnership in transition

Finally parents were asked about their views of partnership with the education system. 25% thought this was a meaningless concept, however 75% defined partnership, with 35% feeling it meant working together in the best interests of the child. Factors which were important in this liaison between school and home were a good level of communication, a real desire to involve parents, a good rapport and mutual respect, shared aims and time to see each of these through. At transition the relationship needed to be three way: parents, preschool and school: to this end 68% of parents thought information should be passed on from preschool to school, and felt "it could only be helpful".

DISCUSSION

Educational transitions

Parents often saw nursery itself as a transition time: it bridged the transition from home to school and offered many 'priming events' (Corsaro and Molinari, 2000), without specifically preparing children for school. Preschool built confidence, introduced routine and helped children to play and learn in the company of others. Many studies of parental involvement have found that parents focus more on the social aspects of preschool education and entry to school (Howe, Foot, Cheyne, Terras and Rattray, 1998). In this study it was clear that a majority of parents were educationally active and had aspirations for their children's future learning that were at the same time appropriate to the children's

present dispositions. "A good year of pre-school preparation with a wide choice of subjects and opportunities." and "I would like to have felt there was more information passed into primary about the children's learning and to know nursery class knew about primary school" echo this interest.

Emotional and social challenges

Parents were aware of the social and emotional challenges of entry to school for their children. They believed that mixing with other children would ease the child into the classroom situation. Being in a group, following instructions from the teachers, forming relationships and strengthening social contacts were all important. Some parents had found the move to 5 mornings a week far too quick for themselves, feeling that much can be learned at home. However the significance of having friends and a peer group was not underestimated as they looked forward to school: parents hoped that at the very least their child would move with friends and would sit next to someone they know in the new class.. This idea of going to school with a friend is strongly supported in the literature on transitions (Ladd, 1990): one child in the study had commented that " I looked at the other children and they were alright… so I was too."

Cognitive challenges

Parents in the study had a good grasp on learning through play. In Watt and Flett's early study (1984) parents had undervalued play as a means of learning. Now, with increasing pressures on the primary school to raise standards and lower ages of achievement in school there is a concern from these parents that there should be "No pushing".

Recognising that children's progress over the preschool year had been excellent and that children were in some ways "ahead" they wanted to reserve judgment about the pace of learning, often recognising in the words of one parent, that "the move from oral to written would be the greatest demand".

The following diagram attempts to pull together the key challenges expressed by parents about the transition phase between preschool and primary education.

PRESCHOOL SETTINGS

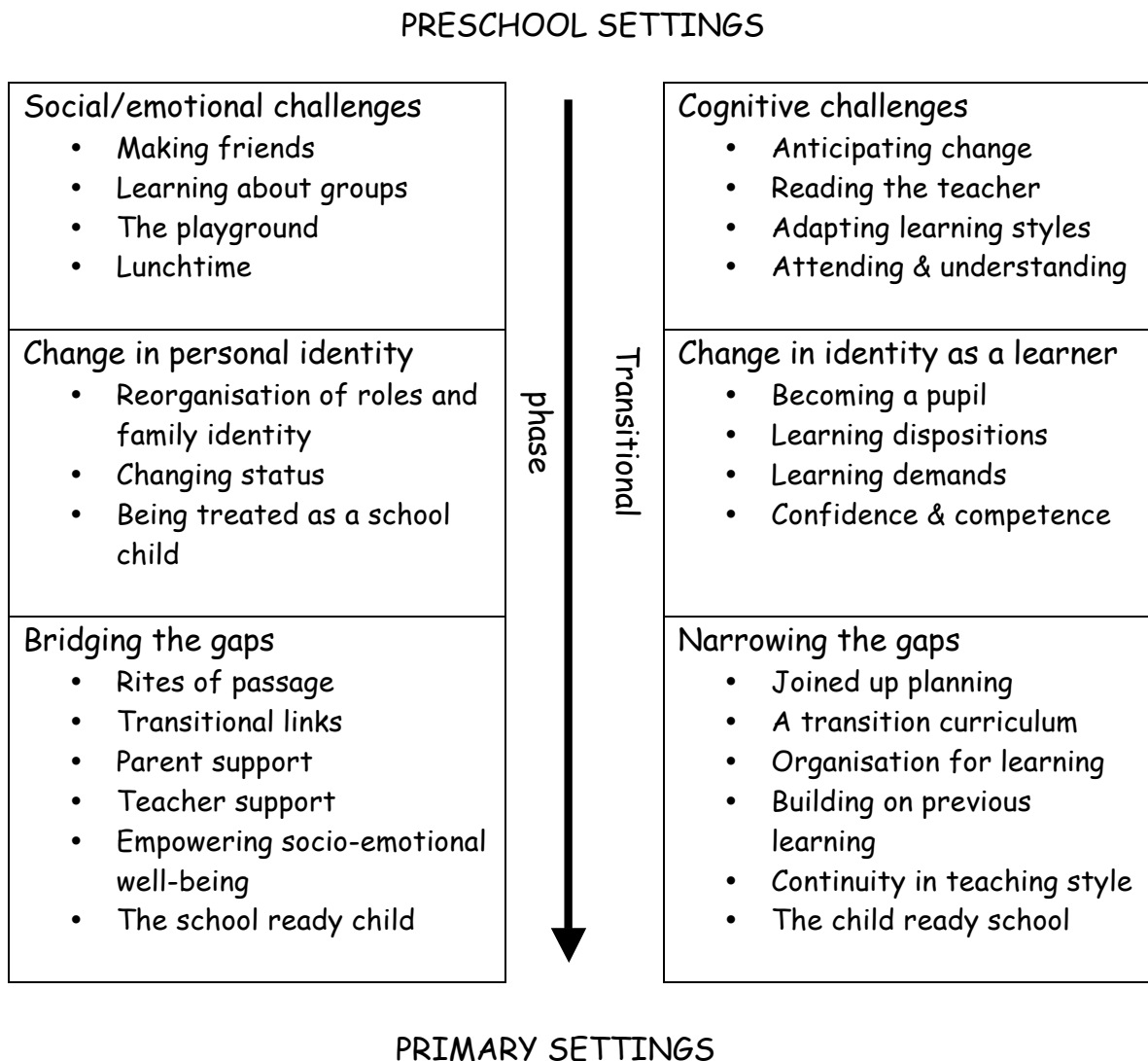| Social/emotional challenges	Cognitive challenges
• Making friends • Learning about groups • The playground • Lunchtime	• Anticipating change • Reading the teacher • Adapting learning styles • Attending & understanding
Change in personal identity • Reorganisation of roles and family identity • Changing status • Being treated as a school child	**Change in identity as a learner** • Becoming a pupil • Learning dispositions • Learning demands • Confidence & competence
Bridging the gaps • Rites of passage • Transitional links • Parent support • Teacher support • Empowering socio-emotional well-being • The school ready child	**Narrowing the gaps** • Joined up planning • A transition curriculum • Organisation for learning • Building on previous learning • Continuity in teaching style • The child ready school

Transitional phase

PRIMARY SETTINGS

Diagram 1: The social/emotional and cognitive challenges of transition to school.
(Dunlop & Fabian, 2002)
A parental shift in focus from social to cognitive competence appears as school entry

nears (Griebel & Niesel, 2002), this can be seen as preparation for change. Parents

experience changes in role expectations and in relationships with their child. The

philosophies of preschool & school can be contradictory as can those of home and

school.

Child identity shifts

Shifts in children's identities occur at three interrelated points: in the family, at preschool

and on entry and induction into the culture of the school.

Study parents found that concepts of friendships and friends and of knowing adults

outside the family were matched by development of interpersonal skills. There was a

growth in 'wordly wisdom', in seeing themselves as helpers, as learners, as decision

makers, as independent and as growing up. Several parents remarked on being able to

learn from their child, and on their emerging personality. Many parents commented on

the quality of conversations with their child, on the time spent talking and the rich nature

of the talk. Those with older children saw the focus child increasingly relating to the

school experience of older siblings. Within the family these changes were viewed with

pride.

At and throughout preschool parents felt acutely that learning moves beyond the home.

Many remarked on their child knowing "about things that she hasn't done with me".

Children were becoming independent, were choosing, were more sociable. There had

been definite progression and a number of parents admitted to beginning to feel

displaced, to "losing their baby" and to having mixed feelings about the process. A

pleasure in their child's learning tempered these ambiguities to some extent. It was a

good thing that preschool encourages and teaches children to do things by themselves.

Many had hoped preschool would enhance their child's confidence: most found it had

done so.

Consequently at the third point of change, on entry to school, parents saw children as

confident people, with flourishing imaginations and noted the differences between the

child at home and child at school and what they choose to do, or skills they choose to

show. One mother commented that "He was used to doing things without us, it was a

normal part of his life, but now we're having to adjust to doing things without him!".

Another noted the increased number of questions her boy asks, and his frustration if she

doesn't know the answer: "Why don't you know? I need to know!" She said "they

become knowledgeable without you for the first time!". Children showed their capacity to

fit in, to cope with the new and to become school children. Parents could easily feel left on

the outside: "Once he goes into primary 1 it's the absolute power of the teacher!"

<u>Parental role in child's life</u>

Anticipating that change would come with school entry and thereafter meant that it didn't

come as a surprise. A major transition was that from being prime educator of their child,

to only being one of many. Accepting this seemed to be a part of parents' adjustment to

their child going to school. A young father who had adjusted to fatherhood at 17, was very conscious of his efforts to complement and support the school: in recognising the turnaround that parenthood had brought, he said "Education is good". He felt that as parents they have the responsibility to ensure education for their child. By creating an atmosphere where learning is encouraged he thought his children would be motivated.

Parents often felt they were representatives for their child: they also foster attitudes which affect the child's sense of achievement. In reflecting on his educational role, one father said "The one thing you can't train for is that wanting to learn: parents can make it fun and interesting. You can tell a child with time spent with parents."

Partnership

Most parents were positive about the idea of partnership with their child's school, but felt ultimately it would be on the school's terms "Rumour has it that the school does what it wants anyway!". Some felt it depends how much parents want to be involved and on how its handled: "I don't think teachers want parents who want to know everything: I think that's understandable". Sessions held in school about working together were morale boosting for parents: "this is where you can help us". How its done: your child will learn best if…". A majority wanted to do all in their power to help their child to learn and the teacher to teach.

Policy implications

Some clear implication emerge for policy on parents having more agency in the transition process. Parents daily place an enormous trust in the system, respect for what they can offer helps make that trust mutual. Starting points which affect policy might be the need to reconsider:

- Relationships: time for parents; being prepared to ask parents if the information they are given is appropriate; careful planning for reporting to parents; the needs of working parents-huge under attended to issues: time, feelings, emotional transitions, school lack of flexibility for working parents for whom the entry to Primary 1 is the hardest thing to miss out on.

- Setting: all families take joy in child talk and play: the analysis of classroom activity and discourse in the present study provides a major marker for continuity and progression.

- Pedagogy: being responsive to children's interests as a motivator for learning: families specifically mention the quality of concentration in relation to self-chosen interests.

- Curriculum involvement and interpretation: having information about what your child is learning at school in the coming year and contributing prospectively.

- Parental role: moving towards better recognition of the potential of parents to be 'educationally active'.

Childhood transitions are also family transitions in that parents and siblings have a vested interest and live with each of the other family members whose experiences affect their lives. Thus the young child entering nursery or primary education is not making the transition in a vacuum, but rather as the focal person whose experiences have a ripple effect and who in turn affects the various interlocking parts of the school and family system (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Parents, who are the continuing factor in both preschool & primary, must have a role in both.

The relationship between how parents are invited into institutions and their empowerment to relate to them is important. Anxiety about repercussions for their children can prevent parents from being critical about any aspect of the school. The challenge for educators and parents is to find ways to work collaboratively on the basis of each other's practice, in the best interests of children. Relationships between parents and teachers should rest on confidence, trust and parents' capacity to influence on the service. (Johansson 2002) Transition is a process, not a static event. Relationships are an important feature of the transition process: between children and teachers; between parents and teachers; between children and their peers and between children & their parents. Understanding effective transition strategies clarifies roles for educators & families in this process. Brooker (2002) emphasises on the importance of early educators in ensuring opportunities are offered to parents . The willingness on the part of professional educators to recognise a new role for parents in the transition to school would be a first step in ensuring the kinds of educational successes children deserve.

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