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ABSTRACT

A study traced the experiences of Australian working families as their children started formal schooling. Each family faced the prospect of moving their child or children from the intimate environment of a child care center that operated from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. to a large elementary school with a 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. school day. The study focused on: (1) children's experiences during the transition; (2) characteristics of preschool experiences that predict successful school adjustment, and (3) parents' experiences in planning, negotiating and managing the transition, and their management of family and work responsibilities. Children and parents were interviewed on two occasions during the transition period. Findings from interviews indicated that the transition was affected by the diversity of the working families, which provided no typical pattern of transition. In almost all cases, mothers assumed the major responsibility for managing the transition. Children found the transition to be a generally positive experience. They were excited about going to school and regarded school as the logical and natural next step after child care. Of major concern for parents was the lack of coordinated provision for formal out-of-school care, difficulty in finding and accessing what care was available, and a perception that the schools had little regard for working families. Families with two professional working parents, one of whom had flexible working hours and generous leave provisions, and with strong existing community and family support networks reported the most positive transition experiences. Contains nine references. (AA)

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Family experiences of transition from child care to school

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 1995, San Francisco.

This study was conducted with the assistance of Roslyn Elliott from UWS Nepean and Elizabeth Ferrier and funded by the Australian Institute of Early Childhood Educators.

The attached paper outlines major findings from the study. It is a modified version of a paper that will appear in a 1995 issue of *Education Australia*. The full report on the study is available from the author.

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Abstract

There are increasing numbers of children entering school who have spent most of their preschool years in full-time child care. Little is known, however, about their experiences of the transition from child care to school, factors affecting the transition, or the impact of the transition on family dynamics.

This paper reports on a study that traced the experiences of Australian working families as their children started school. Each family faced the prospect of moving their child/children from the intimate environment of a child care centre that operated from 8 am to 6 pm to a large elementary school with a 9 am to 3 pm day. The paper provides a picture of the transition process and the way it affected families and children. Specifically, it focused on: (a) children's experiences of the transition, (b) characteristics of preschool experiences that predict successful school adjustment, and (c) parents' experiences in planning, negotiating and managing the transition, and their management of family and work responsibilities.

Children and parents were interviewed on two occasions during the transition period and interview transcripts analysed to provide detailed descriptive, interpretative, and evaluative information on experiences and perceptions of the transition.

Findings from the study highlight the *processes* and *systems* of the transition and *relationships* between various processes and systems. At the interpretative level they assist in: (a) understanding the complexity of the transition, (b) heightening awareness of factors to be taken into account when planning for children's transitions, and (c) drawing attention to the social and systemic processes that are likely to affect parents' management of the transition and influence children's adjustment to school.

The study is important because it provides information on what happens, why it happens, and with what consequences. It provides a picture of the transition process which can be used as a basis for strengthening policies on home-school cooperation to effect more successful transitions for all participants, and for further research.

With growing numbers of mothers participating in the work force there has been a large increase in the numbers of children in child care. The work force participation rate for women with children under school age is now 48% and participation rates rise to 68% during children's early school years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1993). It's estimated that there are some 600,000 formal child care places across Australia. Children are cared for in a variety of contexts - Child Care Centres, Family Day Care homes and by friends, relatives and nannies. Indeed, informal care provides the biggest source of non-parental preschool care.

Mothers' (and fathers') work requirements mean that many children need care for the five years prior to school, for 40 to 48 weeks a year, 10 to 12 hours a day, for five days a week.

Long-term child care means substantially different experiences from those encountered in sessional preschool. Special planning is needed to manage the transition to school, especially where both parents (or one sole parent) are in full-time employment. Not only must working families facilitate adjustment to school in the psychological sense, but they must deal with new transport arrangements, changed expectations of the environment, and out-of-school hours care.

In recent years there has been some interesting debate on the process of starting school, "school readiness", and the antecedents and concomitants of early social and academic success. Predicting the success of children's school adjustment is not easy. Studies indicate that feeling comfortable in the new setting, rich verbal experiences, including story reading, the use of cognitively challenging questions and parent-child interaction enhance early educational experiences. Conversely, reaction such as anxiety, avoidance, or negative attitudes toward school may manifest as adjustment difficulties that hamper social and academic progress (Ladd & Price, 1987; Morrisett, 1993).

Child care *per se*, does not seem to predict positive adjustment to school, but quality of care is important to children's intellectual development, especially their language (McCartney, Scarr, Phillips & Grajek, 1985) and social competence (Chin-Quee & Scarr, 1994). Factors such as parental values, maternal education and IQ, are important in predicting children's social and academic outcomes (Chin-Quee & Scarr, 1994; Kontos, 1991; Morrisett, 1993).

To this point few schools acknowledge that children are moving from anything but the traditional pattern of home care and preschool. They rarely take into account needs of children with working parents when planning school functions. Orientation activities are frequently run on weekdays between 9 am and 3 pm. Few schools have seriously dealt with the fact that working parents can't attend the traditional parent/child involvement activities (concerts, sports days, assemblies, morning teas) that seem an integral part of many infants' schools. Many schools, in attempting to cushion the "tiring" effects of a six hour school day, dismiss Kindergarten children earlier than those in the rest of the school. They fail to recognise the complications this action causes for working parents. Few schools acknowledge that increasingly large numbers of children are used to a long day away from home and need to be cared for until their parents finish work. For many children, a ten to twelve hour day away from home is the norm and the six hour school day is but one part of that period. Rarely is out-of-school hours care an integral part of the services provided by schools. Indeed, provision and funding for out-of-school hours care services are limited and services are often of indifferent quality and inappropriately housed (Elliott, 1994).

With mothers' increasing workforce participation school-aged care services are considered an essential component of Australian children's services. Yet, nationally, only about 20,000 out-of-school-hour care places are provided and funded through the relevant Government department (Department of Health Housing and Community Services, Feb. 1993). Hundreds of additional non-subsidised places are provided by a range of organisations, such as independent schools. Most working families, however, have to rely on private out-of-school hours care. The national unmet demand out-of-school hours care is currently estimated to be 60,000 places (Australian Government Senate Estimates Committee, 1993).

While there is considerable pressure from child care organisations for increased school-aged care provision, there is less community and political commitment to providing care for children outside school hours. This care is still regarded as a private, individual family responsibility.

Issues and questions

This decade will witness increasing numbers of children with long term child care attendance starting school. The current study was designed to explore the transition process and the way it affected children and their families. Specifically, it focused on (a) children's experiences of the transition, (b) characteristics of preschool experiences that predict successful school adjustment, and (c) parents' experiences in planning, negotiating and managing the transition, and their management of family and work responsibilities.

Probing family experiences

Details of children's transition experiences and ways in which parents negotiated and managed the transition were obtained from interviews with parents and children. Participants were 18 families (19 children) from suburban and regional New South Wales and Canberra whose children had used predominantly centre-based child care since they were babies or toddlers. Families represented a range of "middle Australia" socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. All families had both parents or a sole parent in the workforce.

Children and parents were interviewed on two occasions as children made the transition from child care to the first year of school: the first interview was two to three months preceding the transition; the second, two to three months into the new school year.

Interviews were conducted by two experienced researchers in family homes, child care settings and parents' workplaces. Child interviews lasted between 15 and 25 minutes. Parent interviews were of 20 to 40 minutes duration. Interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule; all questions were open-ended. Parents and children were encouraged to elaborate their responses.

Parent interviews

In the first interview parents were asked about their perceptions of children's day care experiences (such as satisfaction with program quality, assessment of children's peer relations), expectations of schooling, arrangements for out-of-school care, their planning and management of the transition process, and their feelings about children beginning school. Demographic information on children's day care history, parents' occupations and work patterns was also sought. The second interview focused on experiences and perceptions of the transition including children's initial reactions and adjustment to school and out-of-school care if used, school expectations, school initiatives to facilitate the transition, arrangements for and satisfaction with out-side-school hours care, and the impact of the transition of family functioning particularly at the home-work interface.

Children's interviews

In the first interview children were asked about their relations with carers, and peers, their attitudes toward school, and their expectations of school. The second interview focused on their perceptions of the transition, their adjustment to the new school, including presence of familiar peers, and experiences of out-of-school hours care arrangements.

Transition experiences

Results of the study indicated positive transition experiences for the 19 children (including twins) in the group. Children's views and expectations of school were very positive. They were excited about the prospect of attending school and well informed about the purposes of school, what would happen there - "learning to read and count" and "proper drawing"- and about moving from day care to school. Interestingly, most children recognised that preschool was designed to help them get ready for "big school" and was a stepping stone to the real event. As one child said in amazement at the second interview: "You know Patrick (referring to a boy in her class). He didn't go to preschool and he can sit up straight-even though he didn't go to preschool!"

At the same time, there was a strong sense of attachment to the child care centre and individual staff for some children. This was especially true if a child was cared for by the same person for most of the time in care; a similarly strong bond existed with some peers and with younger children (babies and toddlers), particularly in the case of three children without siblings who had attended the same child care centre for more than three years. Two of these children had commenced child care when they were under 12 months of age. Eight to ten weeks into the school term six children reported missing preschool peers and carers and thinking about them very often.

All children found the day to day experiences of school during the first few weeks positive. Children recalled feeling both excited and apprehensive about starting school and most commented on the presence or absence of friends and siblings at school. Five children reported crying on the big day.

Parents confirmed children's reports of both anxiety and excitement on starting school. They reported that schools generally made a good effort to ease children into new routines, although several were critical of the uncertainty regarding assignment of teachers and classes during the first four weeks. Eight to ten weeks into the school year children reported feeling comfortable and happy at school, although three indicated indifference and two claimed they were bored and didn't "really learn anything new".

Most parents agreed that children had "settled well". One parent though, whose child had been particularly keen to start school, who had attended a high quality child care centre, was well prepared for school by his mother and had a sister at the school, was most concerned that once the novelty value had worn off her son was unhappy at school. He had nightmares and felt sick each morning. Her enquiries to the classroom teacher had elicited a non committal - "he'll settle down."

Analyses of children's experiences highlighted a number of characteristics consistent with previous findings on factors that influence early adjustment to school. Firstly, all children had attended good quality child care programs for at least three years and had participated in varying activities designed to prepare them for school. These activities were complementary in nature and initiated by parents, child care centres and to a lesser degree by schools.

Most children knew at least one or two other children at their new school, including siblings. Seven children went to a setting where they knew no other children, but even for these children the few days and weeks were easy and comfortable. That centre-based child care is believed to facilitate the development of high levels of social competence might help explain this finding.

Although children's experiences of school were generally very positive, some children who also commenced outside school care at the same time found adjustment to this environment far more difficult. Difficulties were most pronounced for children without peers or siblings at the centre and who attended a non school-based centre. While all children had been well prepared for school, there had been far less opportunity to familiarise them with the out-of-school care centre. In some cases, parents were not advised until a few days before school commenced that they had obtained a place. Further, parents reported that centres were far less sensitive to the needs of beginners than were schools. Kindergarten children simply had to "fit in". In the cases where children had to catch a bus to out-of-school care the experience, especially if they were travelling alone, proved overwhelming. For two children in the study the combination of having to catch a bus and not knowing any other child at the centre proved quite traumatic. In both cases mothers took time off work to meet their children, ride with them in the bus, and stay at with them "until they settled." Fortunately, by week ten, these children were catching the bus like experts. Neither child, however, liked after-school care and both reported being intimidated by older children.

Overall though, children's experiences of the transition could be considered positive. At the same time, each child had a different set of experiences, mediated by his or her particular circumstances including characteristics of the environment such as familiarity with the setting and presence of peers; support from family members; and the timing of the transition. Children's responses suggests a complex relationship between preschool experiences, the school setting, individual cognitive and social development and temperament, and parents' management of the transition.

Negotiating the transition: Family perspectives

That the transition was relatively smooth for children could easily have masked difficulties and stress experienced by some parents as they planned the move to school. Indeed, for several parents transition experiences were far from positive. Negotiating and managing the 6 hour school day in the light of work responsibilities proved most difficult; and it fell mainly to mothers to negotiate this situation.

Parents selected children's schools on the basis of a combination of factors such as proximity to home and/or work place, accessibility of out-of-school care, and cost; mediated by the perceived quality of the educational program, or at least absence of a negative view of the school. In the few cases where schools had school-aged care on site parents planned to use it. Others opted for care in local out-of-school hours care programs, or from neighbours or relatives. Some parents with flexible or short work hours planned family-based care for their children.

All schools ran some sort of orientation activity. Most mothers and a few fathers attended with their children. Those who attended reported the session's general value from the child's perspective, but commented on the limited parental value because of emphases on "school uniforms and fundraising" while parents wanted to know about curricula, teachers and school policies. Most orientation activities were held during the school day, usually for half a day. This was particularly inconvenient for working families. Most parents had to take time off work or "juggle work" to attend sessions. Several suggested that weekends would be more suitable for orientation.

Some parents saw the daytime orientation session as the first of many school events that they would need to coordinate with work or simply not attend. They were critical of the growing school and community expectation for "parent involvement" and the pressures it created for working families.

While most families could use flex days or recreation leave for important school events, the combination of "special days" and "pupil free days", especially with two or more children in the family, "added up". Sometimes, grandparents were available to participate in school events but more often than not they lived too far away, were elderly or sick, or were younger and working.

Preparing for school

Parents seemed especially pro-active in ensuring that children were familiar with the school and school routines and activities. All parents reported preparing their children for school by practising specific social and academic tasks and familiarising children with the concept of schooling and school routines. Nearly half the children in the group already had some familiarity with the school they would attend because of previous family involvement. Families promoted the expectation that school was the next natural step for a five year old and that going to big school was a positive event.

Parents were generally positive about the way child care staff had prepared children for school. They reported emphasis on early academic skills, practising school-like routines and doing group work. Several parents commented that child care centres took particular care to prepare children for the changed expectations of the school in terms of formal and whole group structures and activities. Centres seemed especially sensitive to differences between the informal and intimate environment of child care and the formal structures of the school, emphasising, for example, formal ways of addressing teachers, "standing in lines", bells, "sitting up straight" and using community toilets.

Planning out-of-school care

Planning for out-of-school hours care proved to be the major concern for most families. Generally parents' working hours and family structure were such that they required care after school and to a lesser extent before school. Care requirements depended on factors such as work hours, relative locations of the home, school, work place and the out-of-school care centre, numbers of children in the family requiring care, and existing family support networks.

Care requirements and ways of meeting care needs varied considerably, even within this small group. This illustrates the complexity of working families' needs. Frequently though, provision of child care is seen as a straightforward, if expensive matter. Well illustrated in this study was the degree to which complexity of family situations and limited provision of formal out-of-school care complicated the situation. Yet for families, out-of-school care was of critical importance. If they couldn't find quality, affordable and accessible care they couldn't work.

Specific difficulties encountered in accessing care included the limited provision of and perceived poor quality of care; having to pay for full-time care even if part-time care was required, just to get a place; young children having to catch buses to centres if they weren't located on school premises; families having to use three or four types of care; the high cost of care for families especially with more than one child; and the shortage of places and disorganised wait-list systems employed by some out-of-school care providers.

Of particular interest were parents' perceptions that out-of-school care was the norm and readily available. Clearly, as mentioned earlier, with the limited number of funded places this is not the case. But their recent preschool experiences and community publicity about child care had lulled them into a false sense of security. Most had forgotten the difficulty in obtaining centre-based care, especially for the under twos. As one parent said: "...I'm really shocked...All this talk about child care...and then it just runs out when they turn five...and five's too young to be home alone."

In addition to difficulties accessing suitable care, several parents reported feeling constantly stressed by having to dash out of the office "on the dot" to collect children on time. If they were held up for some reason they felt the out-of-school carers were far less sympathetic to their needs than were staff at the child centre. Not only were there charges for being a few minutes late, but worst of all, was being made to "feel so guilty- as if you deliberately set out to be late and inconvenience the staff...As if I deliberately caused the (traffic) snarl!" said one mother. Fines for late collection of children were reported as being up to \$60 per hour.

For parents who had to collect children from two centres - out-of-school care and Long Day Care, especially if they were some distance apart, the task was especially difficult. "...one slip-up, one traffic snarl, and you're late- for both children".

A small number of families had very positive experiences with out-of-school care. Two mothers using school-based care reported that it was well run and offered appropriate activities. Importantly, its location meant that children had the option to participate in extra curricula activities held after school such as music, choir, gym, and chess groups.

Conclusions

Working families are diverse in terms of their composition, socio-economic status, work patterns, and associated schooling and care requirements. The transition to school was affected by this diversity and complexity; there was no typical pattern of the transition. In almost all cases mothers assumed the major responsibility for managing the transition.

Children found the transition to be a generally positive experience. They were excited about the prospect of going to school and regarded school as the logical and natural step after child care. For many children, transition to school also meant transition to out-of-school hours care and this was more difficult. Children's "smooth transition", however, camouflaged a complex and often frustrating process for parents.

Of major concern for parents was the lack of coordinated provision for formal out-of-school hours care, difficulty in finding and accessing what care was available, and schools' perceived disregard for working families, manifested as expectations that parents should be available to help with school activities or visits schools between 9 am and 3 pm. Parents' difficulties in negotiating the transition were related to complexities in family situations, especially family composition, working hours, distance between home and work place, socio-economic status, and existing community and family support networks. Families with two professional working parents, one of whom had flexible working hours and generous leave provisions, and with strong existing community and family support networks reported the most positive transition experiences.

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