Important ingredients for a successful transition to school

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The transition from the home environment or an early childhood setting to formal schooling is an important turning point in a child's educational journey. Research literature has identified that the manner in which a child experiences the transition to school has significant implications for children's future social and academic success at school (Cassidy, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2007). This article presents some of the findings from a recent study that examined the interwoven nature of children's transition to school. This qualitative case study examined the perceptions of key adult stakeholders about the processes involved in a seamless transition to school. The stakeholders who were involved in this study were parents, early childhood educators and primary school teachers. The study was carried out across three kindergartens and three primary schools in inner suburban Melbourne. The findings from this component of this study indicated that all key stakeholders vary in their views about the necessary ingredients that contribute to a child's transition to school, although it is significant that their ultimate and common goal is for children to experience a successful transition to school.

Key words: transition, teachers, parents, early childhood educators

INTRODUCTION

The first year of school marks a significant educational transition for children as it involves a child encountering and engaging in different events in comparison to those experienced in their prior-to-school or home environments. For example, children have to cope with a physical environment that comprises various buildings and facilities, such as classrooms, outdoor play areas, library and toilets. There are also social demands placed on children as there are a large number of children in the same class with one teacher and participation within a new peer group. This demonstrates that starting school is a major transition in the early years of a child's life.

Given the significance of starting school as an important milestone in children's educational journey, research has affirmed logical arguments which highlighted that children need to be given the opportunity to experience a successful transition to school. According to earlier research (for example, Briggs & Potter, 1999; Hausken & Rathbun, 2002; Dockett & Perry, 2007 and Pianta & Kraft Sayre, 2003,) a positive start to school is closely linked to positive social and academic outcomes throughout a child's schooling experience. It is imperative that children are provided optimal support in order to allow them to experience accomplishment at both social and academic levels throughout their formal education.

Earlier national and international research indicates that the way in which a child experiences the transition to school has long lasting impact on their social and academic success at school (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Hopps, 2004; Margetts, 2002; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Globally, there is extensive recognition of parents, primary school teachers, early childhood educators and children as important stakeholders involved in promoting an effective transition to school (Chun, 2003; Hausken & Rathburn, 2003; Pianta & Cox, 2002; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2000). In the Australian context the key longitudinal study performed by Dockett and Perry (2001), known

as *The Starting School Research Project* (SSRP) has contributed immensely to better understanding Australian children's, families' and educators' views on the transition to school. This project explored the perceptions of all stakeholders through extensive interviews. A key theme that emerged from this study is the important role that all stakeholders play in the transition to school; as a result starting school is not an event for the individual child, but an experience that involves the whole community (Dockett & Perry, 2001). This is further supported by research demonstrating that starting school remains the responsibility of families, teachers in the primary school and early childhood sectors (Hopps, 2004; Dockett & Perry, 2007 Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). This further suggests that the transition to school is a community matter and communities need to develop networks for children to make a positive start to school, and to make children aware that support is available for them during the shift to formal schooling.

Research has further demonstrated that parents, educators and children involved in the transition to school have an array of expectations and perceptions regarding the factors that contribute to a positive transition to school. A study undertaken in New Zealand with a range of the stakeholders involved in children's transition to school illustrated that each group of participants had diverse expectations and beliefs about the shift to school (Podmore, Sauvao & Mapa, 2003). In particular, parents were concerned about schools offering their children intellectual challenges and encouraging children to maintain their home language and culture. With respect to effective transitions to school, such findings illustrate that all stakeholders vary in their expectations about school and it may further imply that all stakeholders need to develop a positive relationship to support one another and become aware of each others' beliefs and expectations (Cassidy, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2006).

Parental beliefs and expectations with regard to successful transition to school were also evident in other studies. Westcott, Jones and Dockett (2003) conducted their study with parents of children commencing school. Through semi-structured interviews, the study found that most of the parents in their study believed that their children were ready for school. The parents sensed that their children were ready to join the academic and social contexts of the primary school. This indicates that parents are aware that their child is ready to embark upon new challenges and develop further independence. The diversity in parental beliefs was further evident in the study by Podmore et al., (2003), discovering that parents with children already at school were not anxious about their child's transition to school. Similarly, Peters (2003) interviewed parents, children and teachers in a large primary school in New Zealand about the nature of friendships in the transition to school. This study indicated that parents who already have a child at school were generally not concerned about their respective younger child's transition to the same school, given that the child had an older sibling at school (Peters, 2003).

The role of parents as partners in their child's transition to school demonstrates that early childhood educators and primary school teachers have an important role in supporting families for the challenges that they may experience when their child begins school. The study conducted by Sanagavrapu and Perry (2005) specifically examined the concerns and expectations of Bangladeshi parents as their child started school. Elements of a successful transition for this group were their child having proficiency in the English language and children exhibiting self-help skills. This study is an expansion of previous studies, as parents' views of readiness for school may be influenced by their cultural and linguistic background. The findings from this study support conclusions reached by Podmore et al., (2003), that knowing the dominant language of the community is a concern for families from culturally and linguistic diverse backgrounds. This indicates that further research is required in allowing culturally and linguistically diverse parents to share their views on their child's transition to school. Such research may also benefit communities comprising families from diverse backgrounds, as it may assist in developing transition practices that reflect children from minority

groups. This may further enable families from non English speaking backgrounds to be important partners in their child's transition to school and within their community.

Early childhood and primary school educators play a significant role in children's transition to school. Research has demonstrated that early childhood and primary school teachers differ in their beliefs about children's successful transition to school. The study by Timperley, McNaughton and Robinson (2003) for example, found that the early childhood educators felt that it was their role to assist children to develop their social skills and establish routines with children. This finding indicates that early childhood educators consider themselves as important participants in children's transition to school. This further illustrates that a successful transition to school is dependent upon the establishment of relationships amongst the key stakeholders (Dunlop, 2003; Hopps, 2005; Petriwskyj 2005).

The transition to school is an eventful experience for teachers in the primary school sector as well, as they are required to build upon children's past experiences. Research has found that teachers in the primary school domain also have various expectations of new entrants. In particular the study by Chun (2003), found that teachers had high expectations of children's academic abilities, such that, children who did not appear to cope with academic curriculum were considered as failures by their teachers. The diversity in teacher expectations was also evident in Podmore et al., (2003), finding that teachers expected children to be able to write their own names and have language, mathematic and social skills upon commencing school. By contrast to Chun (2003) and Podmore et al (2003), it appears that the SSRP (Dockett & Perry, 2003) found that teachers did not have high expectations of children's academic abilities, but more so the children's social and independence skills. Such findings demonstrate that teachers may have varying beliefs about children's transition to school. This further indicates that beliefs and expectations that teachers have in regard to transition to school may further shape their approaches to teaching and learning and other professional practices (Cassidy, 2005). This further implies that the differences in the teachers' beliefs across the three studies (Chun, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2003; Podmore et al., 2003) are perhaps due to the teacher's teacher education training experiences.

THE STUDY

The methodological approach that was implemented for the purpose of this research project is the case study approach to research. The case study research is a form of qualitative research which involves the in-depth study of one or more instances of a phenomenon within the real-life context, revealing the view of the participants engaged in the phenomenon (Lodico et al, 2006).

In case study research the researcher interacts with the participants of the study in their natural settings and, in situations where it is not conducted in its natural setting, the underlying aim is to learn about the phenomenon from the perspective of the participants (Yin, 2003). This further indicates that undertaking the research project in its real life context plays an important role in qualitative case study as the participants are not removed from the setting when seeking their view of the case under investigation. With respect to children's transition to school, children, early childhood educators, primary school teachers and parents participated in the interview in their natural settings. Therefore, parents were interviewed prior to picking their children up from kindergarten; children were interviewed during their kindergarten session, as well as the early childhood educators and primary school teachers who were also interviewed in their work environment. As a result, this provided the researcher with the chance to develop a deep insight into how the participants perceived the transition process by engaging with them in their real life contexts.

For the purpose of participant selection, a certain criteria was employed in order to ensure that information rich participants were engaged in the study. It was also a requirement from the early childhood educators to be eighteen years of age and above, hold a Diploma in Children's Services or a relevant early childhood degree, and be the main teaching staff member in the room. The primary school teachers had to have an approved relevant teaching degree and to be currently or have previously taught as a preparatory teacher. There was an implied requirement from parents, as they had to have a child attending preparatory the following year.

This study was carried out across three long day care centres and three primary schools in inner suburban Melbourne, Australia. The three long day care centres all provided a funded kindergarten program for children three to five years of age. Children were able to attend the settings on a full time, part time, half day, hourly or sessional basis. There were twenty individuals who had direct involvement in this particular study as there were six children in their last year of kindergarten, all ranging from four to five years of age, their early childhood educators and each child's parent. There were two children selected from each long day care kindergarten centre and one of their early childhood educators. In the primary school sector there were five teachers in total. Two of the primary schools each provided two teachers and from the other primary school one teacher participated.

According to Yin (2003), interviews within the case study context are a crucial source of evidence when the interviews are associated with events involving people. Burns (2000) further contends that the purpose of a semi-structured interview is to guide the discussion that the researcher may have with their participants. Therefore, the researcher derives a set of questions that will be implemented in the interview, but the discussion is not restricted to the questions alone. In relation to the present study, the type of semi structured interview designed differed across each participant group; given that each group of participants play a different role in the transition process. When the interview was employed with the participants it provided greater flexibility as it was open-ended and conducted in a conversational manner in order to unveil participants' perceptions about effective transitions to school.

The data collection process took place over a two month period. The interviews that were conducted with each participant were audio-taped and the audio-taped interviews were transcribed into a Microsoft word program. The transcripts for each participant group (parents, primary school teachers, early childhood educators and children) were analysed using a computer software program (NVIVO 7). The data was imported into NVIVO 7 and it was coded. The coding of all of the interviews were reviewed a number of times to ensure that data was analysed appropriately. With the aid of NVIVO 7 the researcher was able to seek for themes that emerged from the interview transcript.

The study of children's transition to school from long day care kindergarten to primary school was informed by three main research questions. The research question that is explored in this paper is the following:

What are adult stakeholders' beliefs about the processes in an effective transition to school?

FINDINGS

The interview sessions with the parents of children commencing school the following year, early childhood educators and primary school teachers resulted in the unfolding of four main themes with respect to stakeholders' roles in children's transition to school. This paper reports and discusses one of the key themes and two of its sub-themes that have emerged from the study, this

being the contexts that were seen to relate to the key factors that facilitate effective children's entry to primary schools.

The theme of 'contexts for effective beginnings' has further stemmed from the adult stakeholders' discussion about what they believe may assist children to effectively start school. Indicators that the stakeholders would look for to know that a child has made a successful transition to school and children's readiness skills were embedded in this theme.

Image of a successful transition to school

Parents shared their views on what signs they might look out for in their child in order to understand that their child has made an effective transition to school (Table 1). All parents in this study stated that they would know that their child has made an effective transition to school if their child is happy to attend school. Three of the parents in the study also added that the enthusiasm demonstrated by their respective children about school would illustrate to them that their transition is successful. Michael also contended that he would know that his son Anthony had made a positive start to their schooling if there were no negative changes in Anthony's behaviour before and after the commencement of his schooling.

The early childhood educators also shared their views about the signs that they may look for in a child who has made an effective transition to school. This group of participants believed that the social aspect of a child's development demonstrates whether the child has made an effective transition to school. Therefore, the participants stated that a child who displays confidence and happiness, is enthusiastic about learning, has a go and is able to develop relationships with others is a child who is making a positive progress through their schooling (Table 1).

The primary school teachers were also invited to share their views in relation to the signs that they may look for in a child, as a way of determining whether the child's transition to school is successful (Table 1). The primary school teachers strongly believed that a child who copes effectively with the social aspect of school is a child who has experienced a successful transition to school. The primary school teachers suggested that a child who engages in experiences with other children, expresses their needs, is able to relate to their teacher and is able to resolve conflict shows signs of experiencing an effective beginning to schooling. The emotional aspects of a child's development that the primary school teachers discussed were a child's happiness to come to school and whether they were also able to separate at ease from their parents. The primary school teachers also mentioned that they may know that a student has effectively commenced school when they contribute to classroom experiences and participate in the learning experiences offered. This indicates that the primary school teachers in this study believe that effective transition to school also includes children's capacity to cope with the academic facet of attending school.

It was further evident from the interview with the primary school educators that children's level of independence may further ease their transition to formal schooling. For example, Linda mentioned that:

> Probably more just their levels of independence and socialising skills, I think. Academically I don't think that that's such a big deal because the children when they come to school, you know we get some children who don't know how to write their name, how to do pretty much anything, but they pick it up really quickly when they're in at school and most children by the end of prep will be you know working at a good level, that's good enough. So yeah it's more just the ability to socialise and the independence, and they know when they need to go to the toilet, and they say that and go and do it by themselves, you know get their lunch out, peel their own orange or whatever, yeah.. its more socialising skills and independence.

This indicates that children's show of independence within the classroom is considered by these primary school educators as an important characteristic that they observe in children to assess children's transition to school.

TABLE 1

Sub Theme 1.1	Concepts discussed by parents	Concepts discussed by early childhood educators:	Concepts discussed by primary school teachers:
Image of a successful transition to school	*Child is happy to attend school* *Child exhibits enthusiasm about school* *No change in child's behaviour*	*Exhibits happiness* *Enthusiastic about school* *Displays confidence* *Has a go* *Develops positive relationships with others*	*Happy* *Engages in experiences with other children* *Expresses needs* *Relates to teacher* *Resolves conflict* *Separates at ease from parents* *Contributes to classroom activities.*

School readiness skills
The issue of readiness for school was also discussed by parents as they spoke about the types of skills that they believed children required in order to make an effective transition to school (Table 2).

A widely expressed skill that parents believed that children require for a successful entry to formal schooling were skills related to children's social development, such as developing positive relationships with others. The ability to be disciplined, exhibit confidence, language and communication skills and being able to concentrate were also considered as important skills that children require as they commence school. The following comments were made by the parents who stressed the importance of their child's social development in order to make a successful transition to school:

> just socially, you know I think social development is really important too, the more confidence she has, the more assertive she will be and the confidence she has will allow [her] to ask people for what she wants (Maria).

> Mainly I think social interaction um that he gets on, he easily meets new kids and makes new friends, I think that's one of the important things. I think they're happy being there and if they're happy then they are enjoying themselves (Michael).

> To be socially adept, to be able to get along with friends, to make new friends (Valery).

This suggests that for this group of parents their child's transition to school will be further effective if their child has social, language and behavioural skills.

The skills that children require prior to commencing school were also discussed by the early

childhood educators in terms of a child's social development. The following comments were made by the three early childhood educators:

> If you've got social skills you can um make new friends, um you know I think that those are really important skills to have (Susan).

> Mostly it's the social skills they're really, really important. Child that just cannot cope with anything they'll cry at the drop of a hat, they're snatching toys still or they're breaking other people's things they're aggressive those kinds of things we have to be looking out fairly seriously (Natalia).

> well my most important focus will on social, children's social development and I guess if they're emotionally ready or not to go to school (Larissa).

These comments illustrate that these early childhood educators place strong emphasis on children being socially ready for school in order to socialise in the classroom. The other skills mentioned by the kindergarten educators were related to children's independence such as dressing themselves and managing their toileting, as well as children's ability to recognise their own names (Table 2).

TABLE 2

Sub Theme 1.2	Concepts discussed by parents	Concepts discussed by early childhood educators
School readiness skills	*Social skills* *Disciplined* *Exhibits Confidence* *Language and communication skills* *Ability to concentrate*	*Social skills* *Recognition skills* *Independence skills*

DISCUSSION

Children commencing school bring with them a wealth of skills, curiosities and needs that have been built upon in their experiences in their prior to school settings. The types of experiences that children engage in their years prior to commencing formal schooling can influence their transition to school.

In order to develop an understanding of a child's successful transition to school observations of children's emotions about school in the home and school contexts can contribute to developing an awareness of their level of adjustment to their formal education. The assessment of a child's transition to school can involve a range of measures and strategies by all adult stakeholders. In the present study, the adult stakeholders were invited to share the types of characteristics that they would look for in a child in order to appraise the extent to which a transition to school had been successful. This finding is significant to the present study, as in the review of the literature such findings were not apparent. Table 1 illustrated that there is a similarity between all adult stakeholders in regard to the image of a child who has made a successful transition to school, as they all stated that such a child would exhibit happiness. This indicates that the adult stakeholders sense that a child who has adapted emotionally to school is experiencing an effective transition to school. The child's happiness about school was further emphasised by the parents and the early childhood educators, indicating that when children are talking about aspects of their schooling in a

positive manner, this is also a key sign of a successful transition to school. This emphasises the notion that a child's emotional stability in the transition to school is highly significant, given that a child's emotional appraisal of a particular situation leads to action (Berk, 2006). This can lead to a cyclical effect, in the sense that a child who is happy at school is likely to take part in experiences offered at school and thus give themselves even more opportunities to adapt effectively to the new environment. The similarities identified in the findings of this particular study further suggest that the ultimate goal for all adult stakeholders is for children to feel happy and excited in the commencement of their formal schooling.

Parents' expectations that their child's positive behavioural patterns will remain unchanged during the transition to school suggest that positive behaviour is an indicator of a child's successful shift to school. A child's ability to be able to recognise themselves as autonomous and separate beings who direct their own actions is significant in the development of the child's self control capacities (Berk, 2006). A finding that was significant to the present study illustrated that parents consider positive behaviour as an important characteristic in the transition to school. According to Michael, his son Anthony behaves appropriately at home and at kindergarten, as Anthony interacts with peers and adults in a positive manner, follows directions and expresses his needs. In commencing school Michael appeared to be confident that Anthony would adapt effectively to school as long as he continued to behave in this manner. This suggests that the transition to school is a significant leap in a child's educational journey and adult stakeholders are required to work collaboratively in ensuring that children transfer and extend their effective behavioural skills from kindergarten to primary school.

Coping with the social discontinuity that is evident in the transition to school was also deemed important by the educators in the early childhood and primary school fields. A child's ability to cope effectively with the changing climate of kindergarten/long day care and that of their primary school was acknowledged by primary school and early childhood educators as a key indicator of children's successful transition to school. The characteristics that both groups of educators discussed encompass children's capacity to adapt to the social environment of the preparatory classroom. This further indicates that these adult stakeholders recognise that commencing school successfully requires amongst other things the need for children to adapt effectively to the social surroundings of their new environment (Dockett & Perry, 2007).

The types of skills that children require that may support them in being ready for the transition to school further shaped stakeholders perception of factors that underpin a successful transition to school. The early childhood educators and the parents in this study discussed as key concepts the skills that children need to have prior to commencing school. The evident similarity between the parents and early childhood educators suggests that both of these groups place strong emphasis on children's social capabilities as an important group of skills that determine children's readiness for school. A study undertaken by Cuskelly and Detering (2003) made similar findings, as the early childhood participants placed exceptional importance on children's social skills. Thus the finding of the present study complements the results of the study undertaken by Wesley and Buysse (2003), as the parents in that study believed that children's socio-emotional skills are important for effective transition to school. The resemblance in the findings of the present study and previous studies about the transition to school suggests that early childhood educators and parents conceive of children's transition to school in terms of children's adjustment to the social and physical demands of the primary school environment. The evident similarity between the parents and early educators may be due to the strong relationship that parents and early childhood educators have when children are in kindergarten. However, the shift to school results in a relatively weaker teacher-parent relationship. This further implies that perhaps primary school teachers need to develop strong relationships with parents and staff in the early childhood sectors, as a strong

relationship is essential in establishing expectations and better understanding of the transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Hopps, 2004).

The language skills that children require to make the transition to school a positive experience were also discussed in the study. The parents in the current study considered children's ability to be able to express their own needs and interact verbally with peers and adults as a key school readiness skill. This finding was also echoed by Wesley and Buysse (2003) in their study where parents valued children's language and communication abilities as a central factor towards easing the transition to school. In a study by Sanagavarapu and Perry (2005), parents from a culturally and linguistically diverse community also viewed their children's language and communication skills as an important skill for a successful transition to school. This indicates that possessing necessary language and communication skills is important for children's social and emotional adjustment to primary school, enabling children to make an effective start to their schooling. The similarities in the findings have implications for children from culturally and linguistically diverse background making the transition to school. However, it appears in the research literature that transition programs that are developed by early childhood and primary school settings are designed for the majority group and little recognition is given to families from linguistically diverse backgrounds. Therefore, the cultural beliefs that the linguistically diverse families perhaps subscribe to may be different from the beliefs of the Victorian education system.

The approaches to teaching and learning that are implemented in the primary school environment require children to have a longer concentration span, which further adds to parents' views on school readiness skills. The parents' discussion about the child's ability to concentrate suggests that parents understand the difference in the teaching climate of primary school in comparison to that experienced by their children in kindergarten/long day care. This indicates that in kindergarten the approaches to teaching and learning consist of short time group sessions, whereas in primary school, children are required to sit within a group or at an activity for an extended period of time (Margetts, 2002). This further illustrates the significance of children's ability to behave appropriately and direct their own actions as significant skills that facilitate an effective beginning to school.

The types of skills that children need on an individual basis to better prepare them for the challenges that they may experience during the shift to school were further elaborated by the parents and early childhood educators. Some of the readiness skills identified by early childhood educators include children's ability to exhibit independence and recognise their own belongings in order to function effectively within the preparatory classroom. This suggests that early childhood educators propose that children possess such skills in order to be able to do tasks without heavily relying on their teachers and take the initiative to take care of their own belongings. In the Cuskelly and Detering (2003) study, the early childhood educators also rated children's self care skills as a highly important skill in the transition to school. The complementary findings further stress that children need to have effective social capabilities for a positive start to their formal schooling. The resemblances in the findings imply that early childhood educators are aware of the significant differences in the mode of teaching in primary school in comparison to kindergarten/long day care. In kindergarten/long day care children undertake play based experiences and the student to staff ratio is higher. However in primary school children are engaged in formal structured teaching and learning experiences with a large number of children and one teacher. Therefore, children who are independent may be able to adapt effectively to the structure of teaching and learning in the preparatory classroom.

CONCLUSION

A child's transition to school can pose a range of challenges for the individual children, their parents and educators. This study has demonstrated that all key adult stakeholders perceive children's transition to school as an important turning point for the child and regard early experiences at home and at kindergarten as having an impact on children's successful transition to school. The adult stakeholders also viewed children's skills and abilities as key factors that shaped the manner in which each individual child experienced the transition to school.

Early childhood educators, primary school teachers and parents serve a fundamental role in children's transition to school. As a result, transition to school needs to be based on collaboration between and amongst the key stakeholders to ensure that the experience remains significantly positive for children commencing school.

LIMITATIONS

This study and the ways in which its methodology was designed pose limitation in regard to the conclusions attained. Given that this was a small scale qualitative case study, the results are limited to the participants in the study and generalisations are not made.

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