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Chapter 12 – The developing child in society: making transitions.

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Chapter Overview

In current early years educational practice there is a greater awareness of children's transitions than ever before. The knowledge base is increasingly well informed by research from a range of perspectives, including those of practitioners and the children and families with whom they work. Transitions studies may be grouped broadly into three paradigms – those that focus mainly on the individual development and readiness of the child for the 'next stage'; those that, on the other hand, look more at early years and early school contexts, systems and structures to find answers to ease transitions; and those that combine to consider development in context with a focus on the interpersonal and socio-cultural, thus creating 'transitions capital' (Dunlop, 2013). This chapter will support early years practitioners to heighten their awareness of the significance of transitions in children's lives, to evaluate their own transition practices and to interpret children's and families' experience through a more critical theoretical lens. It will consider why some children are vulnerable in transition and will propose that transitions can be turned around so they are no longer considered as problematic, but rather as vehicles for change that can equip children well so that they become 'transitions ready'. The chapter finishes with a focus on professional roles and responsibilities in supporting positive transitions for all.

Introduction: change and transition

This introduction aims to: heighten awareness of the significance of transitions in young children's lives; ask how transitions may affect and/or be embraced by families and professionals surrounding the child and to show by illustration from relevant research literature how greater knowledge helps and is needed to improve awareness. Mutually embedding research and practice can help in this venture: intersections between children, families, practitioners, settings, evidence, policy and changing practices are shown through reference to an ecological model of transitions.

In contemporary society change can be understood to be part of everyday life: but changes are experienced differently, according to individual circumstances, the way people are positioned in society (Davies & Harré, 1990), how this affects what they do, why they do it and how they may feel (Harré, et al, 2009), and through personal attitude to change. Some transitions are very common, such as the transition to parenthood, starting day-care, preschool or school, undertaking a course of study, starting a new job, experiencing loss and bereavement: each new experience will make its own demands and provide particular opportunities. Increasingly we all manage change, including young children who may experience some or each of family, childcare, preschool, school, after school, across a given day. Why then, when so many changes occur in daily life do we describe some changes as transitions?

Change is easier to navigate when those involved are prepared, have confidence and experience or are given relevant support. Young children will benefit from others focusing on the changes happening in their lives: by attending well to such changes well-being, positive interactions, learning, social opportunities and engagement with others will be developed and sustained. For some time now there has been a growing recognition that attending to change as a process, rather than an event, means thinking of changes, even everyday changes, as transitions that children and their families are moving through rather than one-off happenings. Using the term 'transition' brings a renewed emphasis to this change process.

While there is a healthy development in transitions research and publication (Keinig & Margetts, 2013; Perry et al, 2013), much of this research in recent years has focused on the educational transitions in young children's lives. The broad reach of early childhood services is becoming more integrated and as it does, and to promote this integration, it is essential that transitions research and practices widen to embrace the scope of professional practice and policy ambitions in the early years. For the purposes of this chapter the term 'early years practitioner' includes the diversity of titles given to those working with young children and their families pre-birth right through to the early years of school, including teacher, educator and pedagogue. A raised profile of publication in this wider field of early childhood transitions and a growing emphasis on the contribution different disciplines can make to improving understanding of what works at times of transition can only be positive.

A model for thinking about transitions

In order to take account of the transitions that can affect children it is useful to have a model to aid reflection – for many transitions researchers Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems approach (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) continues to prove helpful. It is not the only way of considering transitions, but it is a useful and practical approach as it lends itself to seeing the inter-relationships between the different influences on child and family experience. We will look at how this approach can be used in practice and make use of my own interpretation of bio-ecological systems in that process.

Research into Transitions

In the field of early childhood transitions researchers from across Europe and beyond have written on different aspects of the transition to school: promoting continuity, considering ways to support children through discontinuity, and placing an emphasis on improved relations and collaboration between sectors, sharing of knowledge across the home/early childhood and early childhood/school borders and developing shared approaches: always paying attention to the child in context. Many such researchers lean to an ecological model of transitions as such a model allows for children's development, the influence of the

environment and the interrelatedness and interaction of the individual with environment and with the people that populate the environments through which children, families and practitioners travel.

Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems model (1994) addresses human development in context over time, the dual analysis of material through looking at the influence of at least two micro-systems and those that populate them upon each other, human agency and capacity to act, developing or developmentally instigating experiences: all in an interaction of interrelated elements. Within this ecological systems view it is interesting to embrace the work of informing others in order to understand early childhood transitions better, for example Corsaro and Molinari (2000) consider the whole of the pre-school experience is a priming for later learning, where the anthropologist van Gennep (1960) teaches about rites of passage – a concept that lends itself well to understanding transitions as a process, Campbell Clark (2000) writes of border crossing and Bourdieu's work in sociology (2001) reminds us of the part played by rites of institution and social capital. In terms of children's daily experience and the challenges for children in functioning in new environments the situated nature of children's learning (Lave and Wenger 1991), their intent to participate (Rogoff et al. 2003) and the importance of learning in companionship (Trevarthen 2002) have all been argued as important knowledge for participating adults in guiding and supporting children's transitions (Dunlop 2013).

What ecological systems theory does very well in its many interpretations is straddle development and environmental contexts through bringing these together in an interrelated and dynamic systems approach. Other disciplines too have much to offer, for example anthropology, educational history, pedagogy, psychology and family studies. It can be argued that in order to ensure educationally successful children we also need competent systems (Urban et al. 2011) to ensure continuity and progression of educational, social and emotional experience for children supported by transition aware professionals.

The diagram that follows shows these interlocking systems with the child at the centre traversing systems and being influenced by the wider exo- and macro-systems which in turn influence each other.

INSERT DIAGRAM – ‘Transitions as an Ecological System’ (©Dunlop, A-W, 2012, adapted from 2002 version)

Thinking about models of learning

A report (BERA, 2003) that focused on pedagogy, curriculum and adult roles, professional development, training and the workforce, promoted “a proactive and interactive role for practitioners, which was more in tune with the socio-cultural theories of Vygotsky (1978:15) than with the traditional laissez-faire ideologies of play.” Such a model of learning and teaching led to what has been called a negotiated curriculum – a model which takes account of the voice, interests and curiosities of the child by creating meaning together with others and matching and anticipating possible routes to learning. This continues to resonate as pedagogies of transition are considered. Seeing transitions as a proximal process helps to dilute negative child-deficit models and promote continuous learning across different settings.

The Importance of Leadership

The relationship between the early childhood sector and the school sector can be affected by the relative status afforded to each. Too often the younger the child the lower the status of the professional appears to be. This makes for unequal relationships between sectors and challenges in working together in the best interests of children and calls for focused leadership in both sectors if the experiences and learning children have achieved at home and in the prior provision is to be built upon in preschool and in school. Informed leadership can work towards continuity of teaching, learning, pedagogy, curriculum and relationships. Tied into such discussions is the role the early childhood world might play in leadership of change in early primary schooling by relating early childhood leadership to the early years of primary school (Dunlop 2008).

The contribution of research

Research has brought about a greater awareness of childhood transitions than ever before. Current research explores a range of perspectives: children, families and practitioners, and is sensitive to new policy initiatives. How accessible are research findings to practitioners? It is possible to find *advice-literature* for all involved in childhood transitions, but to what extent is this backed by research generated knowledge or experience generated research? There are a number of examples of strong links between research findings and practical guidance for families and practitioners – writers such as Fabian (2002) and Dockett and Perry (2006, 2007) make strong connections through a research–practice cycle, where Hartley et al (2012) co-construct understandings of transition locally through researcher and educator based enquiry and make recommendations based on real world examples such as using portfolios and developing ‘mutually interesting projects’ between stages.

Where practice meets local and national policy

The Transition to School Position Statement developed by the international Educational Transitions and Change Research Group (2011:1) “reconceptualises transition to school in the context of social justice, human rights (including children’s rights), educational reform and ethical agendas”. The strengths of research, policy and practice working together to promote young children’s opportunities, expectations, aspirations and entitlements at times of transition drives this statement.

In the same year the Council of the European Union was drawing conclusions on the future direction of early childhood education and care policy and included the following statement as a measure that could improve equitable access and the quality of provision by “Promoting cross-sectoral and integrated approaches to care and education services in order to meet all children's needs - cognitive, social, emotional, psychological and physical - in a holistic way, as well as to ensure close collaboration between the home and ECEC and a smooth transition between the different levels of education.” (Council of the European Union, 2011: page 5).

In the UK policy initiatives in relation to transition vary from country to country: in Scotland the strongest lever for educational change is the 3-18 curriculum's Early Level 3-6 (Scottish Government, 2007), matched by a rights based approach to children from Pre-birth to three (Scottish Government, 2010) which places an emphasis on the rights of the child, relationships, responsive care and respect. In wider social policy affecting children 'Getting it right for every child' (Scottish Government, 2008) takes a holistic child world view approach. In England and Wales the EPPE study (Sylva et al, 2003) found the beneficial effects of having attended a pre-school between the ages of 3-5 remained evident at age 7, although some outcomes were not as strong as they had been at age 5 when children entered primary school: this trend to quantify the impact on early experience has generated economic models of early childhood provision, but it is not unreasonable to reflect on how the gains afforded by preschool might be best sustained in the primary school through attention to transitions.

Siraj-Blatchford et al (2011) help us to understand better how some children succeed against the odds: in considering 'protective' and 'at risk' factors related to the child, the home and the pre-school and school environment they explore the influence of relationships with peers and friendships as well as relationships external to home and school, while Dockett et al (2011)'s work on 'Complex Families' encourages us all to take a strengths based approach: working from what both children and families do well, rather than positioning them in a deficit model based on weaknesses or what they can't do. Siraj-Blatchford et al (2011) identify children's motivation, learning dispositions, being seen in a positive light, effective emotional and practical support, encouragement from parents, sensitive, authoritative and interactive practitioners and good relationships with other children who have positive learning dispositions all provide protective factors for school success: these factors translate well in terms of supporting all children in transition.

Part of the responsibility of policy makers is to understand how policy is played out in communities (Press, 2007) while it is the responsibility of practitioners to have vision about

the affordances policy offers them and to be aware of how their own local knowledge and experience intersects with what policy may propose.

Transitions themselves can be understood as intersections between prior and new experiences: combining this understanding with the idea of transitions as a process encourages a view of transitions as key opportunities to look again and to understand what is happening for all stakeholders – in this process points of similarity and difference become clearer and as a result spaces for action are opened up. Many authors have highlighted the importance of supporting young children through transitions by ensuring there is enough that is familiar and recognizable in the new situation, and yet avoiding ‘more of the same’.

Transitions come in many guises – watching a baby who is strong enough to sit up for the very first time, and taking the baby’s perspective allows the observant adult the chance to understand this new view of the world, the quest for understanding and the need for encouragement and support that comes with each new physical transition the baby makes. The route from babyhood to school, from within the family to the community and wider culture, from home care to group day care, from a few close familial relationships to many beyond the family as the child learns and develops, each challenge us to think more deeply about the processes that involve children in transition.

No transition happens in a vacuum: the family, cultural, community and social contexts of transition need to be properly understood: to do so we return to Bronfenbrenner’s systems model which also provides context for understanding three paradigms that group transitions research – individual child development and readiness; the pre-school or school context and development in context – this was Bronfenbrenner’s journey and led him to look firmly at human development in context and to understand the mutual interaction and interrelatedness of development and context and the importance of interacting, intersecting, systems.

Where the emphasis is on getting children ready for school, in isolation from the school making sure it is ready for the diversity of children in every entry group, the focus is on changing the child. Study of such approaches reveals the success and effectiveness of transition resting on the positioning of the child in terms of personal readiness which quickly labels children as successes or failures in the new system. Study of systems approaches allows us to focus on the nature of early childhood and school systems, curriculum, training of staff, policy influences and structures. Such findings argue for bringing together the knowledge about individuals with the knowledge generated about systems, in ways that inform the development of approaches able to adapt and change in order to respond to differences in children, their experience, their interests and their family cultures. From this we can focus on development in context: ensuring that attention is paid to both.

In the international research group currently studying pedagogies of transition we see strong and informing connections between child, systems, professionals, research, ethical approaches, expectation, entitlement, aspiration – now rather than thinking about school readiness my work is moving towards a concept of ‘transitions ready’ children. To equip children to make transitions with ease we need to ensure they have positive experiences of transition – that they are supported to bridge into new relationships, can navigate their way in different physical environments, have experienced the different mores and terminologies of a variety of situations, can articulate their prior experience and recognise enough that is familiar in the new environment in order to make use of their own strengths. These ideas work for all of us as we navigate change.

Key Aspects of Transitions

Outcomes of a longitudinal study of transitions emphasise ideas of professional collaboration, parental engagement and children’s agency as key elements to take account of when working on/preparing for transitions/building transitions readiness. The elements have been discussed in more detail elsewhere (Dunlop, 2013), here, using the lens of critical reflection it is appropriate to look at professional collaboration across the borders that exist between

systems. Early Years practitioners need strengths in communication and dialogue, self-knowledge and a thorough knowledge of the new settings their charges will access. They can be mindful of helping children to feel familiar with the environment, encouraging adult: child talk with children, knowing the new setting properly – never using “when you go the pre-school, reception, primary one you mustn’t do that”, but rather ensuring the relationships, handing over, following through all build on strengths as children move on (Dunlop, 2011).

Transitions in Practice

What then is a ‘good’ transition and why are some children more vulnerable with change? Before answering that question certain values need to be considered. Consider the value you and your colleagues place on quality, ethical approaches, advocacy, partnership with parents, children’s play, and then ask, as the Transitions Position Statement document suggests, what opportunities, aspirations, expectations and entitlements flow from your values base. Ask too how it is for children as they make transitions: try looking at the transition for children settling into your setting through the eye of the child and then think about what you are happy with and what you might want to change and why. For children some of the considerations include feeling familiar or feeling strange; recognising a familiar face or not knowing anyone; getting to know the new situation, environment, people, things they’ll find there; understanding the way in which people speak. The ‘new’ ideally will seem interesting and different: how do you make your setting both interesting and accessible so children know quickly not only what to expect (in behavior, contribution, taking part) as they make the transition into your setting, but also recognise the familiar.

By getting to know the situations or systems children occupy over the day and week, and what they move onto when they leave your charge you can help them to build transitions readiness. Professional responsibility means more than adults making decisions, it means co-constructing experience with children through books, social story making together, play situations, practical first hand experience, using photographs, making visits, taking time to

link children who are going on to a new setting together, inviting the new adults in the next setting to visit, preparing parents similarly, knowing what goes on at the next stage yourself.

Conclusions

In reflecting on why we bring emphasis to normative changes by referring to them as transitions, this chapter has proposed that through critical reflection on what is meant by transitions in early childhood it is possible to turn away from seeing transitions as problematic and begin to view them as vehicles to equip children in a supported way to be able to handle change: being transitions-ready is a needed skill in our society where transitions have become part of day-to-day experience.

How we position both children and families at times of transition can be very influential on their subsequent experience. Sometimes children are positioned as the noisy child, the quiet child, the able child, or even ‘the perfect day care child’ (Duncan, 2005). Practitioners may identify some children as competent and capable, others as creative and others yet as more vulnerable, slow or needing help. This active construction of children’s identity may extend to the family – “No wonder he’s fretful his mother’s always late” – child positioned as anxious, mother positioned as letting him down – rather than reaching out to find out if ‘the late mother’ needs help, has work issues, needs extended hours.

As children and families build experiences of successful transitions they have more to draw on to make subsequent transitions into positive opportunities, the dips that may occur are soon dealt with and the process of transition can become much easier and better understood. The building of experience is like having tools to draw upon – I have called this ‘transitions capital’, but theorizing does not stand still and so I have challenged the idea of “school readiness” which so many writers make the focus of a successful start in school, in that we could argue like Corsaro that the whole of life is a preparation for each next stage or phase. In replacing current concepts of school readiness with a concept of ‘transitions-ready’ children and combining this with the growing idea of ‘ready’ early childhood settings and schools: we

can build capacity for the significant transitions children make in terms of relationships, identity, role, status, curriculum, communication, learning and development, and also be ready for families whose child's move to day-care, preschool or school means they are also in transition.

Critical Learning Activity

Think about your own experience of transitions – how positive are transitions for you? Now consider your workplace transitions practices:

Arrange to meet with a colleague (if possible someone working in another setting) – compare and contrast your work-based approaches to the transitions children and families make into your settings – what can you learn from each other?

What do you each see as important in preparing children for transition, in easing children's transitions and in building their capacity to gain positively from transitions in the future (transitions readiness, transitions capital and transitions ease). The further reading below should help with this activity.

Further reading

Although the following texts have been referred to in this chapter, they appear here as accessible recommendations for further reading.

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