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[Author's note – p.141 in the published version includes a diagram- attached separately]

### **CHAPTER 12**

#### **CURRICULUM AS A TOOL FOR CHANGE IN TRANSITIONS PRACTICES:**

#### **TRANSITIONS PRACTICES AS A TOOL FOR CHANGING CURRICULUM**

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Transitions research often emphasises the differences children experience as they move from preschool to primary school. The most dominant of these differences are often catalogued as differences in settings, in relationships and in curriculum. A focus has been made on the need to prepare children for school, to support them in their adjustment to school and more recently to advocate the need for schools to change their practices to be 'child ready' so that the changes children need to make to accommodate new experiences are better matched by practices in the new school. Such changes within school may mean a more individualised approach to children and families, an appreciation of differences between children and parents as well as between systems. The age of transition to school varies across countries and children's capacity to cope with change may develop as they grow older, or in the light of how change has been experienced previously. Where preschools and schools operate together in more tightly coupled systems it is expected that

the demands placed on children are more manageable for them. This chapter considers whether curriculum itself can be a tool for change in transition practices – or perhaps the converse, that transitions are a tool for changing curriculum that has not been serving young children well.

## **Introduction**

Transitions research frequently emphasises the differences children experience as they move from preschool to primary school. Observable differences can often be seen between preschool and school settings, for example in terms of resources, the classroom environment, the emphasis on play-based or paper-based activities, the routines followed, and the expectations placed on children. The nature of adult-child relationships also change during the transition period: parents often raise their expectations of children and day-to-day experiences in school may move along a spectrum of child-centred approaches, negotiated experiences and teacher-centred, teacher-led experiences. Pre-school curricula are often more process oriented, whereas school curricula may emphasize knowledge content and skills more (Dunlop et al. 2007).

Children are the link between these systems: it is the children who travel on and so research and practice applications have focused on the need to prepare children to cope with change (Peters 2010), but systems may be able to connect better or differently allowing us to consider if the continuity between prior to school settings and school may be improved.

School entry is a time when “... different contexts, systems, curricula, philosophies and

approaches meet" (Educational Transitions and Change Research Group 2011: 1). The nature of schooling will determine if school start is likely to be easier or more difficult for school entrants. It has been argued previously that where preschools and schools operate together in more tightly coupled systems it is expected that the demands placed on children are more manageable for them (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Such demands exist in both socio-emotional and cognitive domains: how change has been experienced previously and whether children are able to respond to discontinuities not only as a challenge (Griebel & Niesel, 2009), but also as an opportunity (in itself a definition of socio-emotional competence or resilience), will determine how children navigate school entry and engage in new learning with increasing academic confidence and arguably, competence.

For the author therefore curriculum is a powerful influence on what happens for children in both pre-school and school settings and a focus on transitions between these settings is potentially a powerful tool to influence the enactment of curriculum.

### **Curriculum Definition, Enactment and Experience**

Development of frameworks, guidance and curriculum for young children is now commonplace: curriculum has become something that is written down, sometimes conceived of as a process and sometimes viewed through a content lens. There are arguments that curriculum definition has underlined and therefore safeguarded the minimum entitlement of our youngest children to an education. There are counter

arguments that the nature and quality of the curriculum guidance and what it promotes should be critically evaluated.

The systems within which curriculum operates may also determine how curriculum is put into action. Where connections between teachers and settings are strong then shared working towards improved continuity for children is more likely, where early childhood settings are distinct, geographically separate and very different in approach then there is less room for negotiation. Where the child's voice is valued, the curriculum is a much more negotiated and there is more opportunity for children to experience agency (Dunlop, 2003a; Reunamo, 2007).

The need to interpret curriculum continuity from the child's point of view and experience rather than always from a teacher perspective, to recognise and value children as learners and the ways in which they learn best (Carr, 2001; Dweck, 1999), and to build on their working theories and 'funds of knowledge' upon who they are, what they bring, how they go about things, are all central to ideas about how curriculum may have an impact on transitions. How practitioners use their knowledge of the child to provide experiences and opportunities is important so that children are given entry points to engage and to display their competence: their funds of knowledge that they bring with them from home or early childhood settings (Peters, 2010).

## **Transitions**

Transitions need to be considered not only in a pastoral sense but in terms of children's learning. Such an approach will mean looking at how learning is similarly or differently

framed in prior to school and school settings, at how the learner is viewed and what the dominant pedagogies are in each setting. While not universal, the enormous shift of recent years in many countries when considering transitions has been twofold – how to bring the worlds of early childhood and formalised schooling closer in terms of their relative familiarity to the child and how to build children’s resilience to change. Many contemporary curricula are based on learning outcomes with strong messages about what children should know or be able to do. Too often these targets are blanket age-related criteria that neither take account of individual difference, nor of adaptive teaching approaches but put faith in taking children through curriculum without being able to guarantee the learning aimed for. This gap between policy and practice is the central problem of curriculum development (Kelly 2004).

Curriculum based on stage and age theories of development perhaps no longer apply when now conceptions of learning are more focused on socio-cultural approaches. But then biology draws me – the young child is in the process of maturing through learning the culture and other forms of meaning making as language users, story makers, artists, mathematicians in their daily lives – to the extent that experience, emotional and social and physical prowess allow. The young child is enormously powerful, to be respected, and to be nurtured, followed, allowed to lead and have the chance to show capacity, reveal what they know and invent and to understand what is involved in living alongside others. It is then that contemporary outcomes terminology kicks in – we develop models of what children should know, should learn, should be able to do – and these in educational policy are absolutely determined by age and expectation. It makes sense that developmental rather

than socio-cultural concepts tend to determine early years curriculum.

### **Who is curriculum for?**

Yesterday – but any yesterday – I observed two little boys – Archie aged 3½ and his little brother Jack aged 16 months – and I find age does matter in how we perceive children and whether we are surprised, happy or concerned about how they are doing. Archie has discovered recently that he can draw representationally to intent – a recent birthday card has his family and Grannie and Grandpa surrounding a birthday cake with many candles: lucky Grannie who I’m sure has the Beatles ringing in her ears, singing “When I’m 64”! He has also discovered that he can build with lego and has recently started swimming lessons. Observing and listening as I heard Archie’s story making unfold – he built a street of houses and placed a lego person in each, he built a shop with the remaining lego and made sure all the people came one by one from their nearby houses by car, motor bike and “on their own legs”, and returned home. Then I heard him say “this isn’t a shop anymore it’s a beach. Everybody is going to the beach, they need to get their clothes off first” – of course lego people have their clothes printed on – his solution was to separate heads and bodies – the heads went off to dive and swim and got dressed (re-assembled) again afterwards. His script took them through conversations, shopping, swimming, putting their washing machines on, reading favourite stories and going to the zoo to see the ‘manimals’. He is moving from the systematising of his earlier enveloping schema to a more open imaginative narrative.

Meantime his little brother is cruising the kitchen making announcements about everything

he sees from DOG to MAMA to CAR!...the sounds are much the same – the meaning is clearly defined by expression, place and timing.

These are the people we write curriculum for – do they need it to guarantee their learning – or the kind of learning our culture wants to induct them into – or do we write it for adults as Bruner once implied when he said 'A curriculum is more for teachers than it is for pupils. If it cannot change, move, perturb, inform teachers, it will have no effect on those whom they teach. It must first and foremost be a curriculum for teachers' (Bruner, 1977:xv). And this because not all adults engage with children in ways that bring spontaneous learning about, not all children have the luxury of discovering what they are able to do. Some children don't have the chance to develop funds of knowledge or the communicative and thinking tools to reflect on what they know – and so we talk of getting children ready for learning because some young children have already lost out.

We can also learn from Bruner (1977) not to wait for 'readiness' but to realise with him that children can learn anything at any age, if it is presented in 'the child's way of viewing things' at the time. This means building upon what they already know through fostering what Siraj-Blatchford (2010: 86) refers to as 'self-learning and learning to learn'. Central to this in curriculum for transition is the continuity of experience that can be achieved for children through the transfer of principles between the involved adults, through respecting and fostering children's agency, and through collaboration (Bruner, 1996).

If indeed curriculum is for the adults that implement it as suggested by Bruner, then we can right away see how curriculum reform is about changing practices – as well as about the

ambitions to change outcomes and to even up the odds – the gaps - that occur in child populations. This is where it is important to consider curriculum as a tool for changing transition practices.

If policy at pre-school/school, local government or national level is aware of the ways in which transitions may affect children then curriculum enactment provides an opportunity for teachers to recognise what children bring to school, to resist top down approaches and be more open to combining teacher planned activity with children's self-directed learning, so extending children's thinking, moving them on as learners and supporting their changing identity as they become school children.

### **Transitions Practices as a Tool for Changing Curriculum**

Research into transitions has shown key differences for children as they make the transition into new educational settings. Children engage in social and emotional interactions, in relating to other children, in becoming knowledgeable about the new class or school and in building upon what they already know as they constantly relate to the new. There have been many Scottish initiatives to make transitions smooth for children: the new curriculum offer the potential for transition experiences to focus on continuity within change, rather than on more of the same.

Important factors I have identified in the transition to school in Scotland include teacher collaboration across sectors; parental participation in the transition process; children's agency and voice; and the sharing of information about curriculum and social experiences.

Typically pre-schools and schools arrange visits for new entrants, work hard to build relationships between pre-school and school settings, share information about teaching and learning approaches, and ensure positive experiences for children and families in the lead up to school. Patterns of a gradual school start have been replaced in some Local Authorities by a same day start for all new entrants but there is an improved awareness of the benefits of cross-sector collaboration, the sharing of knowledge and the importance of creating opportunities for children to build on what they already know, can do and have experienced.

This focus on improved transition experiences has caused reflection on curriculum itself. A transitions working group was set up by Education Scotland to develop transition practices further (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2010). Their report on pre-school to primary transitions emphasises the positive impact of the new *Curriculum for Excellence Pre-school into Primary Transitions* (Education Scotland 2010) on such transitions but recognises the continuing need to focus on transitions. It is this focus on transitions practices that will ensure an impact on curriculum and on its implementation. It is essential that children are supported to demonstrate and actively use what they know, and that their skills, their sense of worth and their self-directed learning, so that they bridge into new opportunities constantly and confidently. The glass ceiling of the past, the expectation that all children should be at the same stage in the same in class, the view that curriculum is contained and written down, has the potential to shift in a new climate that allows transition experience to influence curriculum and that consequently ensures that curriculum develops in ways that will have an impact on transitions.

Bronfenbrenner's (1989) work continues to be helpful here in stressing the interrelationships between the different contexts or systems that the child occupies – there is a dynamic potential in these system interrelationships. In the following three sections the relationships between curriculum and transitions are further explored for their impact upon each other as shown in the diagram: firstly in terms of how curriculum changes may have an impact upon transitions, then how transitions practices can influence curriculum and finally to consider the benefits of combining approaches to curriculum and transitions in practice.

### **Curriculum as a tool for changing transitions**

Where systems are tightly coupled under the same administrative departments there is a greater likelihood of a shared administrative agenda. Through proximity or intention preschool providers and schools can develop positive communication around a shared curriculum. Interpretations may vary in how that shared curriculum is implemented, and that is entirely appropriate. The potential to develop shared and mutually understood descriptions of the enactment of curriculum, and how it is experienced by children and teachers, potentially creates a good climate for transition.

This notion of enactment is crucial. A thorough curriculum for 3-6 year olds may be designed to provide a common, connected and continuous experience, but unless there are shared pedagogical understandings it is unlikely that transitions are much eased for children. Martlew, Stephen and Ellis (2011) explored the use of play-based pedagogy

through their study of six Primary 1 classes (the first year of school) in Scotland, in which teachers made moves towards an active play based approach. They found that children's engagement in class comes from 'active involvement, autonomy and choice' (p. 71): characteristics espoused in pre-school education. While this may be accepted practice in prior-to-school settings it is often challenging for the single teacher in a primary class with larger numbers of children, to understand, resource and develop playful learning (Dunlop, 2003b). Prior-to-school settings tend to a process oriented and experiential approach to curriculum experience, while school teachers tend to a content and outcomes based approach which Martlew and colleagues- describe as teacher intensive and teacher initiated approaches. Claxton's ideas of intuitive pedagogies (Claxton, 2000) are difficult for school teachers who in letting go pencil and paper find they struggle to gather the assessment data they rely on to demonstrate effectiveness. So while we might hope to see process pedagogies going to school with the commencing child, the risk is that content knowledge curriculum definition will drive more formal pedagogy down: a risk that comes of combining preschool and early primary school curriculum. Goouch (2008) suggests that a play-based approach to learning and teaching in school would allow children's drive to learn, natural curiosities and search for meaning to continue to flourish. Thus the Scottish use of "active learning", although it has been a mantra for change, presents definition difficulties – what in fact does it mean – is it the same as playful learning, or playful pedagogies – is it as Martlew and colleagues query, about active minds rather than – or as well as – being physically active and playful? While the answer to such questions remain unclear it is essential to continue to interrogate them – for curriculum changes to have an impact on children's transitions to school we need to understand the importance of shared

understandings of young children, and what they bring to learning and indeed to school.

The new Scottish curriculum recognises what children bring to school, but do teachers value and build on the concept of children as learners with existing funds of knowledge?

A further tussle is the risk of age related silos and general ideas about ‘readiness’. Children are often judged on their readiness for learning – their ‘school readiness’. Such readiness is a generalised concept that includes skills such as writing, or at least recognising your name, managing clothing fastenings, relating to others, rather than focusing on dispositions and learning strengths. When current policy focuses as sharply as it does on the importance of the early years we can’t wait for or nurture ‘school readiness’ in skills or content knowledge terms, but rather need to focus on what Trevarthen (2012) has called ‘joyful companionship’, learning in the culture and being well-connected with others. The differences in curriculum expectations of the child on entry to school and the shift from child-centred and negotiated pedagogies to what are often more subject based ones needs to be addressed, for appropriate ‘written down’ curriculum expectations could have a significant impact on children’s transition experiences.

### **Transitions Practices as a Tool for Changing Curriculum**

If, on the other hand we consider the development of transitions practices, we may want to ask if such practices have an impact on the curriculum experience. This other side of the coin is what I now turn to.

Key elements in effective transition practice include teacher collaboration, parental participation and children's agency. A number of questions flow from these key concepts: how may teachers be supported to collaborate; in what ways can we make space for parental participation, and; what is meant by children's agency and how does it help? It is argued here that if these three elements inform transition practices then the curriculum experience of children will indeed change – and improve in relevant ways.

The most important concept here is agency – it underpins professional confidence to act; parents will participate if they feel some agency in the process; and if children feel valued, listened to, respected and have opportunities to make real choices they too will experience agency (Dunlop 2003c, 2003d; Vandenbroeck & Bouverne De-Bie2006).

We should not however make the assumption that children necessarily have agency in early childhood settings, nor indeed that children can exert agency at times of transition: sociology has advocated the importance of child participation: the concept of children's voice and the idea of contribution are also important when we consider transitions. Equally, opportunities for parents to participate in their children's educational transitions and to contribute to their 'safe passage' to school gives parents agency in this process.

The extent to which educators themselves can exert agency at times of school transitions may be in the hands of prior-to-school setting and school leadership. If, as in the context of the Scottish *Early Level*, collaborating teachers have the gift of curriculum which aims to span the transition to school and to encourage preschool pedagogies reaching into school, they in turn can develop a shared and mutual voice which will foster the sharing of children's strengths through the children's own learning stories and appropriate forms of assessment. In this way children who are able to show their strengths and make use of these

in their learning, instigate and are active in curriculum: they can make a curricular contribution.

If parents, children and educators can work closely together there is the potential to co-construct the transition and to shape curriculum to become a valid transitions curriculum, which considers shared pedagogies, familiar learning environments, and a deepening understanding of continuity in learning to build positively on children's existing funds of knowledge.

Agency thus becomes an essential element of transition – where players have agency, relationships, settings and curriculum potentially change, so too there is an opportunity to see pedagogies changing, environments being considered and the focus of assessment being on the child's contribution rather than on what they can't yet do. It can also be argued that where the players lack agency they simply have to adapt (Reunamo, 2007): in that case it is the child who changes, not the system (Dunlop, 2004)

### **Combining approaches to curriculum and transitions**

Finally, by making transition connections, settings may be linked in new couplings in which curriculum differences have to be acknowledged and curriculum links made. A combined agentic approach to transitions and to curriculum will create opportunities for them to be mutually influential. Working together on relationships, creating connections in environments, developing mutual views and respect between practitioners each places a renewed importance on transitions. Where parents and children participate in the process

through discussion and planning this augments the professional contacts and supports continuity in change – one of the prime roles that parents can fulfill in their children's educational transitions (Bohan-Baker & Little 2004).

For practitioners the expanded thinking that comes through cooperation enhances their efforts to support children to move on as learners, to be focused on the cognitive, social and emotional interaction that contribute to the child's growing identity as a school child and bridges children into new opportunities.

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The impact of transition practices on curriculum change and the impact of curriculum change on transition practices.

Impact on transitions	1 Curriculum changes	3 Combining approaches to curriculum and transitions	2 Transition practices	Impact on curriculum
Systems designed to link potentially provide for curriculum connection and continuity	System curriculum links - Tightly coupled - Loosely coupled - No natural linkages	Working together on Relationships, creating connections in environments, views of children <i>Linking Settings      Acknowledging curriculum differences      Providing for curriculum links</i>	Teacher collaboration and reflection. Visiting between sectors	Teachers working together across sectors to develop continuity and build on prior learning
Process pedagogies going up to school with the child Content knowledge curriculum drive more formal pedagogy down	Differences in curriculum - Process oriented curriculum - Content oriented curriculum		Parental participation  Children's agency- Sharing children's strengths through children's learning stories and various forms of assessment	Parental interest, support and contribution  Children who are able to show their strengths and make use of these in their learning instigate and are active in curriculum: they can make a curricular contribution
Emphasises the importance of shared understandings of young children	An "Active learning" curriculum (A mantra for change, but a definition difficulty)	<i>Social/emotional interaction....Forming identity as a school child ....Bridging to new opportunities</i> <i>Experiencing learning...Moving on as a learner ...Creating continuity...Curriculum change...Cognitive interactions</i>	Transition policy to foster continuity and progression	As sectors work more closely they begin to consider transitions curriculum, learning environments, deepening understanding
Valuing children as learners with existing funds of knowledge	Curriculum that recognises what children bring to school		Shared models of the child	Shared understandings and concepts about young children are helpful in providing appropriately for learning
Risk of age related silos and general ideas about 'readiness'	Direction of curriculum policy Age related Top down Bottom up	<i>Continuity in learning</i>	Shared pedagogies	Collaboration in appropriate teaching approaches shape curriculum offered. Children feel more familiar in similar approaches
More attention given to transition challenges and opportunities for children	Policy that focuses on the importance of the early years		Continuity in learning	More continuous — new opportunities for learning build positively on the 'known'
Child centredness Subject centredness Negotiated curriculum	Differences in curriculum expectations of the child:			