International Perspectives on
Early Childhood Education and Development 21

Sue Dockett
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Families and Transition to School

International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development

Volume 21

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Families and Transition to School

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ISSN 2468-8746 ISSN 2468-8754 (electronic)
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development
ISBN 978-3-319-58327-3 ISBN 978-3-319-58329-7 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017943357

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Springer imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

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Katey De Gioia has recently taken a position as the early childhood teacher programme manager for Goodstart Early Learning NSW and ACT. Prior to this she was a senior lecturer in the Department of Educational Studies at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. She lectured in both undergraduate and postgraduate professional experience units where pre-service teachers are placed across prior-to-school and school settings. Katey's research interests include transition into prior-to-school and school settings, working in partnership with families from immigrant and refugee backgrounds and engaging with practitioner enquiry to create educational change. In her spare time, Katey likes to bake desserts.

Sue Dockett is professor in early childhood education at Charles Sturt University, Albury, Australia. Sue has researched in the area of educational transitions for many years. She continues this focus with current projects exploring pedagogies of educational transition, continuity and change at times of educational transition, curriculum connections and strategies to support positive transitions. Other areas of research interest include children's play and mathematics.

Majdah Dogan née Tahan, was educated as a primary and secondary teacher and finished her first state examination at the University of Cologne in 2013. She was educated in German, English, mathematics and theology. Majdah is currently a research assistant in the Institute for Primary School Education, University of Cologne, Germany. In 2011, Majdah received a full scholarship from the Cusanuswerk Studienförderung. She completed several internships as part of training, most notably at an American International School in Tucson, Arizona. Majdah loves teaching and early education. In her final state examination, she investigated the process of transitioning from kindergarten to the primary school among immigrant children, drawing on her own personal experience. Shortly after her graduation, she started to work as a research associate in the project WirKt, a project in which she has been involved since 2011 as a student assistant, during which she obtained valuable insight and experience in research methodology. In order to complete her teacher training in Germany, Majdah is currently completing her traineeship in a primary school.

Wendy Goff is a lecturer from the University of Southern Queensland. Her current research interests include adult interaction and the implications of this interaction for children's learning, supporting mathematics learning across and between different contexts and the transition to school. Wendy shares her life with her four children, Lisa, Bradley, Joshua and Jacob, and their cat Yaya Touré.

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Wilfried Griebel is a senior researcher at the State Institute of Early Childhood Research (IFP) in Munich, Germany. Together with Renate Niesel, his main work has been transition research and development of the IFP transition model for educational transitions and its implementation in national and international early childhood education programmes. He co-constructed an EU curriculum "Transition and Multilingualism" for children and parents with migrant backgrounds entering the school system. Building on that, research on refugee and asylum-seeking children and their families in several European countries is his current interest.

Petra Hanke after teacher training for primary and secondary schools, received her PhD at the University of Leipzig in the field of didactics of teaching German. Within the scope of habilitation, she carried out a long-term study on the effects of several didactical principles of linguistical ways of learning how to read and write. Petra Hanke has taught at several universities in Germany. After her postdoctoral qualification, she worked at the University in Vechta before she became a professor at the University in Münster. Since 2010, Petra Hanke has been a professor at the University of Cologne in the Institute for Primary School Education.

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Catherine Kaplun is a research fellow working at the Translational Research and Social Innovation (TReSI) group based at the Ingham Institute for Applied Medical Research, Sydney, Australia. Her initial work with children and families in early childhood settings and primary schools developed her passion for research in the area of transition to school, particularly focusing on children's experiences. Her honours research focused on a child with specific language impairment and feelings about school, social interactions and adjustment to school. Her doctorate extended

on the experiences of transition to school for families and children and developed a greater awareness of issues of equity in health and education from a human rights perspective through her research work in disadvantaged communities. Cathy was involved in a longitudinal research study focusing on the health, development and education of Australian urban Aboriginal children and their families at UNSW. She is continuing her research work at the interface of health and education with an emphasis on translational research in her present role at TReSI. Personally Cathy is kept busy with an active and evolving household consisting of her husband and four children (and friends) and the menagerie of entertaining animals: Cody (labradoodle), Nala (Korat) and Chips and Chops (rabbits) along with various native Australian animals and birds that also call their bushland dwelling home.

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Bob Perry is recently retired from paid university work; emeritus professor at Charles Sturt University, Albury-Wodonga, Australia; and director of Peridot Education Pty Ltd. Bob's current research interests include powerful mathematics ideas in preschool and the first years of school; ethical tensions in researching with children; transition to school, with particular emphasis on starting school within families with complex support needs; preschool education in remote Indigenous communities; and evaluation of educational programmes. Bob shares life with his partner, Sue Dockett, and their son, Will.

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Susanne Rogers is a retired educator who worked as an early years educator, project manager and educator coach with prior-to-school and school-based educators. She has recently completed doctoral studies in the transition to school of children and families living in complex circumstances and the establishment of family-educator partnerships during this period.

Marc Schulz has been a professor of sociology of early childhood and family at the Cologne University of Applied Sciences since 2015. He has been dedicating his

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transitions into each new role easier. Personally Natasha has a love and talent for Aboriginal art and has been involved in several art projects in her community. Both Natasha and her husband have a hectic schedule raising their four children and have found a happy balance between work, home life and their sporting commitments.

Karen Wickett lectures on the BA and has master's in early childhood studies programmes, at Plymouth University, England. Originally she qualified as an NNEB and later trained as an early years teacher. Between 2003 and 2012, she worked in a Sure Start Local Programme/Children's Centre (SSCC). During 2008 and 2012, she worked part-time in the SSCC and part-time at Plymouth University. Her aim was to narrow the divide between practice and theory and the community which she worked and higher education. In 2012 she embarked on her professional doctorate in education (EdD) and successfully completed her thesis and passed her viva in 2016. Her doctorate research explored parents, ECEC practitioners and teachers' beliefs and relationships as they prepared and supported children during the transition to school. Her other research interests include outdoor learning and creativity in the early years.

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Chapter 1
Transition to School: A Family Affair

Sue Dockett, Wilfried Griebel, and Bob Perry

1.1 Introduction

Transition is an elusive concept. Within the English language, we use the term *transition* to describe the passage from one state or stage to another – whether it be for individuals, organisations or systems – across fields as diverse as education, music, science, economics and politics. Transition in all of these areas involves the notion of change. In educational contexts, transition generally refers to the movement of children from one stage of education to another. Examples include the transition to school, transition from primary to secondary school, and the transition from school to work or tertiary study.

It is not only with English that variation in the understanding and use of the term transition is to be found. While terms such as *övergång* (Swedish), *übergang* (German), *pārejas* (Latvian), *transição* (Portugese), *transizione* (Italian) and *прелазак* (Serbian), translate to the English term *transition*, some of our colleagues note that these terms fall short of capturing the complex processes that together constitute transition experiences in education. For example, the Polish term *przejscie* translates as 'passage', though the term *adaptacja* (adaptation) is sometimes used to describe children's transition to school, even though it tends to refer to a one-way, rather than a reciprocal, process.

We highlight these variations as a way of foregrounding diverse approaches towards, and interpretations of, transition. With chapter authors drawn from several different countries and different language backgrounds, we appreciate the different

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S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_1

voices and nuances used in describing the experiences of transitions. As educators, we hope this exploration can contribute to further transitions research in other contexts.

Several points can be drawn from the linguistic exercise of exploring the term *transition*, its translations and the significance of the term *transition to school*. The first is that the term often is used to refer to movement – the passage – from prior-to-school experiences to school. This sense conveys one-way, sequential movement from one stage or setting to another, often accompanied by expectations that children must adapt to the new educational environment. Secondly, the term is used widely in English-based publications, but much may be lost in translation – both by using the English term and by failing to acknowledge other terms that may provide a more nuanced perspective of educational transitions. An example of the latter is the Swedish term, *övergång*. When used as a noun, *övergång* refers to a zone or overlapping arena, an intersection with only one direction. However, when used as a verb, the term implies a back-and-forth process (Helena Ackesjö, personal communication). A similar focus comes from the Australian Aboriginal term 'fire-stick period':

> We not only use the term 'transition' which can imply a one-way journey towards something better, but also the term 'fire-stick' period (an Aboriginal term for a stick that is kept alight to ensure the availability of fire). This highlights the way in which culture is not something to be left behind, but is an integral part of lives...[Children] need to adjust to an extra range and layer of experiences, demands and expectations…the 'fire-stick' period equates with the time needed for [children and families] to learn how to navigate between their home and school cultures. (Clancy et al. 2001, p. 57)

Much of the research literature related to educational transitions emphasises the element of change – be it change of context, environment, experiences, expectations, roles, identities, and/or status – for those involved. Indeed, many of the chapters in this book draw on a range of theoretical perspectives to highlight the element of change and its centrality to educational transitions.

However, educational transition is not only characterised by change: there are also elements of continuity, as referenced by the 'fire-stick' period and the notion of overlapping contexts. Further, it is not only children who experience both continuity and change at times of educational transition. While recognising the importance of change, in this chapter we emphasise educational transitions as times of both continuity and change. From this position we explore the importance of families within educational transitions, particularly the transition to school. We do this on the basis that families provide one of the consistent contexts for children as they – and those around them – experience the transition to school.

1.2 Defining Transition

The concept of transition appears in and across many theoretical frameworks. Current perspectives draw on anthropological (Turner 1969; van Gennep 1960), sociocultural (Elder 1998; Rogoff 2003), ecological (Bronfenbrenner and Morris

2006; Weisner 1984), as well as psychological (Cowan 1991; Zittoun 2008) traditions and tenets. Each of these frameworks is utilised in the reports of research in this book.

What then do we mean by transition? Broadly, we define transition as times when 'individuals change their role in their community's structure' (Rogoff 2003, p. 150). This definition locates transitions within social and cultural contexts and highlights the interactions of individuals and institutions as sources of potential support and tension. Transitions impact on the individual and their social contexts (Beach 1999). Role changes often occur as a result of specific events – such as starting school – but also involve 'subtle, complex processes of 'becoming somebody'' (Ecclestone et al. 2010, p. 7). Integral to transitions are changes to identity, agency, role and status – a change in the 'sense of self' (Beach 1999, p. 114). When children start school, they construct their identity as school students, adopt the markers of a school student (such as the uniform and school bag), experience a change in their agency as new factors influence their actions and choices, and participate in the institutional context of school. At the same time as they construct a school identity, children retain their home identity – moving regularly between home and school identities. Families, too, undergo transitions as children start school. Parents experience a role change as they become parents of a school student; the requirements and expectations of schools often result in changes to their agency, influencing choices and actions about what can or should be done in particular circumstances. Their status within the community or educational groups may change as they respond to changed roles and expectations.

1.3 Transition in Context

Major life events provide the impetus for people to change their sense of who they are and where they belong in the world. Transitions can be times of risk, uncertainty and anxiety; they can also be times of excitement and pleasure, as well as times of mixed, sometimes conflicting, emotions. Educational transitions – particularly the transition to school – have become a feature of policy attention in many countries around the world. Primarily, the focus has been on efforts to manage or ease transition experiences (see for example, Jindal-Snape 2010; Laverick and Jalongo 2011; Perry et al. 2014). This attention is tied to broader policy agendas, such as moves to increase educational participation, promote educational outcomes and respond to concerns about educational disadvantage and exclusion. The target groups for many transition policy initiatives are those described as vulnerable or disadvantaged. For example, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) (2009) has argued for increased attention to the transition to school as a strategy to improve 'educational, employment, health and wellbeing outcomes' (p. 4), 'reduce inequalities in outcomes between groups of children' (p. 6) and disrupt cycles of social and economic disadvantage.

These commitments assume that educational transitions will be problematic for some groups of children and their families and that, unless addressed, such difficulties

will be perpetuated in cycles of intergenerational disadvantage. As a consequence, policy documents tend to focus on transitions as problematic and identify specific groups in need of support (Dockett 2014; Perry 2014). Further, they emphasise the potentially negative aspects of transition, rather than the opportunities generated by new and different experiences and the possibilities of creative risk (Biesta 2006; Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group 2011). As several chapters in this book attest, it is important to critique the universality of these assumptions and to question expectations around the transition to school and the ways in which children and families manage this. In recognising the strengths of particular individuals, families, and communities, the chapters in this book move away from the deficit perspectives that drive many approaches to transition policy and instead highlight the strengths of refugee and immigrant parents (Chap. 3); parents of children with special needs (Chap. 4), and families described as 'vulnerable' or living in low socio-economic circumstances (Chaps. 5, 6, 13, 14, and 16).

1.4 Exploring Transition

In providing an overview of the chapters in the book, we explore conceptualisations of educational transition and the ways in which these are utilised by chapter authors. We follow this overview with examination of the ways in which families position themselves, or are positioned, as children make the transition to school. In concluding, we highlight the integral involvement of families in the transition to school.

Several elements contribute to conceptualisations of educational transition. These include a focus on some form of movement, identification of events that mark transition and recognition of the processes that constitute transition. Each of these is underpinned by a range of theoretical perspectives.

1.4.1 Transition as Movement

Movement is an explicit element of many educational transitions as individuals physically move between contexts, such as between an early childhood setting and school, from primary to secondary school, or from one grade to the next. Some educational transitions (sometimes described as 'transfers') are expected to occur only once and reflect the expected progression of life experiences. In this sense, the transition to school – signified by the first day of school – tends to be an age-related experience that occurs only once in a lifetime, reflecting the definition of transition as a 'passage'. Life-course theory (Elder 1998) posits such transitions as key points, associated with changes in the roles, status and identities of individuals. From this perspective, transitions are considered sequential, one-way, vertical movements. In the case of educational transitions, it is expected that transition to preschool is

followed by transition to school, transition to middle school or secondary school, transition to university or work and so on.

The timing of vertical transitions varies in different social, cultural, economic and political contexts. As chapter authors report, the age at which children start school varies, with children in Germany, Poland and Sweden typically starting school at a later age than children in England, Canada and Australia. This has implications for both the nature of experiences and the expectations associated with that transition. For example, Chap. 12 reports the strong focus on children's academic readiness for school within England as children start school at age 4, and the pressure this generates for families to ensure that their children are "ready" for school. While the Swedish parents involved in Ackesjö's study (Chap. 10) also referred to elements of school readiness as their children made the move from preschool to the preschool class, both emotional and academic attitudes were highlighted.

In contrast to vertical transitions, horizontal transitions such as the daily movements between home and school, or transitions between school and school age care, occur on a regular basis and serve to connect different spheres of interaction and influence (Kagan 1991; Lam and Pollard 2006). While much of the international research focus on educational transitions addresses vertical transitions – for example, starting school – and the significance of this for later educational engagement (Dunlop and Fabian 2007; Perry et al. 2014; Pianta and Cox 1999), there is growing attention to the horizontal transitions experienced by children and the adults who support them (Hughes et al. 2010; Johansson 2007; Petriwskyj et al. 2005).

Horizontal transitions occur as people are simultaneously members of more than one community of practice, conceptualised by Wenger (1998) as groups of individuals participating in a communal activity, and constructing a shared identity through contributing to and experiencing the practices of that community. Moving between communities of practice requires recognition and crossing of the boundaries that separate these. In a "communities of practice" framework, transition occurs not only for the individual as they establish new identities and come to understand the new context, but also for the community itself, as new members influence practices. The same phenomenon is reported for families (Chaps. 2 and 15), as they make adjustments to their practices in response to children starting school; as parents navigate the perceived border between preschool and the preschool class in Sweden (Chap. 10); and as parents of children with intellectual disabilities work to provide a bridge between home and school environments to assist in the border crossing experiences (Chap. 4). These chapters also illustrate the ways in which horizontal and vertical transitions can occur concurrently and influence each other.

1.4.2 Events That Mark Transition

Vertical transitions may feature specific events which themselves are marked by special rites. In many instances, transition to school programs both mark the move to school and consist of events signified by special rites. In Australia, such events

include visits to the new school, purchase of the school uniform, meeting the principal and classroom teacher, and a tour of the school.

The first day of school is one event marked by special rites. Though it constitutes only one part of the transition process, the first day of school is marked by rites that hold both individual and social significance. For example, as part of the ceremonial start to school, German school starters are presented with *Schultüte*, a cone filled with sweets and/or school supplies before engaging in celebrations with family. New school students in Russia participate in *The Day of Knowledge*, the official start of the new school year, characterised by the exchange of flowers and balloons (Gessen 2012). In Australia, family traditions often include multiple photographs of the new school student in their new uniform.

Framing transition to school as a significant life event has prompted several researchers to draw on van Gennep's (1960) anthropological reports of 'rites of passage' and associated rituals. His structural model of transition rites included three phases: the preliminal, where the individual separates from their present status; the liminal, in-between phase, where the individual is between states; and the post-liminal phase where the new status is incorporated. Using a rites of passage framework, starting school involves children separating from prior-to-school experiences, waiting to start school (often during the summer holidays), and then joining a school community (Ackesjö 2013; Garpelin 2014). The various rites inherent in the transition process act as a social markers – recognising the movement of individuals from one status to another.

The liminal phase – described by Turner (1969, p. 95) as a time of being "betwixt and between" – aligns with the notion of a bridge between contexts (Huser et al. 2016; Lam and Pollard 2006), and the processes of border crossing associated with transitions. While researchers have questioned the nature of children's experiences *on the bridge* as they wait to start school (Garpelin 2014), and examined children's learning journeys across borders (Peters 2014), the research reported in this book also considers the bridging experiences of families and their negotiations of border crossing. Chapter 10 describes the potential of borders as both barriers and meeting places – with the latter notion explored in Chap. 14's use of the Cultural Interface (Nakata 2002) framework to conceptualise the spaces where people come together. Considering transitions as processes of border crossing generates opportunities to consider the movement involved in vertical transitions (such as when children start school) as well as the web of horizontal transitions navigated by children and their families as they move between the linked contexts that characterise their lives.

The notion of rites marking change also featured in the work of Bourdieu (1991), who addressed the social function of rituals as well as the boundaries identified and crossed during transitions. In describing institutional rites, Bourdieu emphasised their separating function as they marked a fundamental division in social order, delineating those to whom the rites pertained from those to whom they were inaccessible. Bourdieu described the process of investiture, whereby the individual adopted a changed representation of him/herself and the behaviours that accompanied that changed representation. As a result of investiture, others also changed their representation of the individual and the ways they behaved towards them. When

considering transition to school, markers such as school uniform, school bag, and homework signify to children, and those around them, that they have become members of an institution. There are also marked changes for parents, as they adopt new roles and behaviours associated with being the parent of a school child and respond to the changed expectations of themselves and others.

The changes in status, identities and roles that accompany transitions are also a feature of life-course theory (Elder 1998). While recognising that individuals make a range of transitions throughout life, life-course theory highlights the importance of linked lives and social ties. Individual lives are interdependent, linked by social contexts and shared relationships. This is particularly relevant when considering the role of families within transition, as an individual transition often has implications for the experiences and relationships of others within the family. Recognition of life course perspectives generates opportunities to explore not only the experiences of children as they make the transition to school, but also the experiences of other family members. For example, Chap. 2 notes that change is stimulated for parents at times of educational transition, just as it provokes change for children, and Chap. 8 explores the role of grandparents and transition to school.

1.4.3 Processes of Transition

1.4.3.1 Proximal Processes

Life course theory links transitions with social context and social history. While history is created by the actions and interactions of individuals and groups, historical conditions – including family history – also influence children's experiences (Elder 1998). Chapter 8 examines one set of contributors to family history, reporting the influence of grandparents sharing their educational experiences. The positive reciprocal interactions between grandparents and grandchildren outlined in this chapter are framed as proximal processes – interactions that "occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006, p. 797), which contribute to family capital – a form of social capital characterised by access to intergenerational knowledge (Coleman 1988). Family capital is entwined with habitus (Bourdieu 1997), as family stories, traditions and expectations shape a set of dispositions that support particular practices and guide decision-making within families. Decisions related to educational transitions – such as school choice – are influenced by family habitus (Chaps. 6 and 9).

Attention to proximal processes and recognition of the importance of historical time connect life-course theory with bioecological approaches to the study of educational transitions. Bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) emphasises the importance of social and cultural contexts and the significance of patterns of interaction (proximal processes) among and between those involved in different contexts, over time. The best known element of bioecological theory relates to the identification of nested systems – microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems

and macrosystems – and the temporal element of transitions, reflected in reference to the chronosystem. Alongside these systems, bioecological theory emphasises the role of proximal processes and their interaction with the characteristics of individuals, including their experiences, resources, temperament and motivation, as well as their agency. Taken together, the elements of person (P) characteristics, proximal processes (P), contexts (C) and time (T), combine to form the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006), which provides the theoretical grounding for several chapters in this book: Chap. 3 examines the microsystems of family and schools and the potential mismatch between these as children from refugee and/or immigrant backgrounds make the transition to school; Chap. 11 identifies gender as a demand characteristic of individuals and explores the link between gender and expectations as children start school; Chap. 8 emphasises the contribution of grandparents to proximal processes; and Chap. 16 uses the PPCT model to analyse communication, information sharing and relationship-building between family members and educators across the transition to school.

1.4.3.2 Routines as Processes

Proponents of ecocultural theory have been critical of the broad approach of bioecological theory, arguing that the proposed web of interconnections obscures, rather than clarifies, research investigations and analyses. They advocate the adoption of ecocultural theory, which combines ecological theory and cultural perspectives (Weisner 1984). This approach regards each family as occupying an ecological niche, defined as the 'larger sociocultural environment surrounding the child and family' (Bernheimer et al. 1990, p. 223). Ecocultural theory pays particular attention to daily routines as a means of families adjusting to, and changing, their ecological niche. As a framework, ecocultural theory has been used in studies of families with children with special needs to explore the accommodations made in order to build sustainable routines which balance the needs of all family members. Chapter 4 draws on ecocultural theory to explore the ways that families adjust, assimilate and accommodate their daily lives to meet new demands as their children start school.

1.4.3.3 Transformational Processes

Rather than defining transition by the events that mark them, Cowan (1991) has argued for an approach that recognises the qualitative shift in the view of the individual, or family, and the changes of roles and relationships that accompany this, as the essence of transition:

> For a life change to be designated as transitional, it must involve a qualitative shift from the inside looking out (how the individual understands and feels about the self and the world) and from the outside looking in (reorganisation of the individual's or family's level of personal competence, role arrangements, and relationships with significant others). Passing a life marker (e.g. entering school)…does not in itself signify that a transition has been completed. (p. 5)

The changes associated with life transitions can produce a period of instability, yet, according to Cowan (1991, p. 19), 'individuals and families do not become unrecognisable' as a result of transitions. Rather, transitions amplify processes already in motion. In other words, the additional stress that may be associated with times of transition can heighten particular patterns of action and interaction with families (Dockett et al. 2011). This perspective considers both the stress and the coping models of individuals and families as key factors in transition outcomes (Lazarus and Folkman 1984).

The transformation generated by transition also features in the work of Zittoun (2008), who conceptualises transition in terms of the processes that follow a particular rupture, or disruption. According to Zittoun, transition applies to the processes that follow change, rather than to the change itself. These processes generate new ways of being, operating and interacting to meet the changed demands of the new context. In generating this new 'sense of self' (Beach 1999, p. 114), Hviid and Zittoun (2008, p. 126) note that

> A transition process always requires leaving some old conduct, ways of thinking or of defining oneself. That process of leaving behind things, relations or aspects of oneself, the dying out or loss of interests, goes hand in hand or followed by a process of move towards a new form of acting, defining or sense-meaning.

During the transition to school, children experience changes in identity, status and expectations. So too do parents experience changes, as they position themselves, and are positioned, as parents of school students. Parents and children are required to make sense of the new school contexts and their roles and places within it. It is these sense-making processes – transformational processes – that characterise many of the explorations of transition reported in this book.

1.5 Families: More Than Context

Much transitions research explores these elements of movement, events and processes as children and their families start school. While the roles of families often are recognised, there remains a heightened focus on the individual transition experiences of children. The chapters in this book aim to move beyond consideration of family as context in the transition to school, exploring the dual roles of families as they provide a sense of continuity to support children but, at same time, undergo their own transition. The research reported in the chapters examines the interactions of families and contexts, regarding families as active participants in building the relationships that support children at times of transition, and drawing on their resources and experiences to guide interactions with schools. While each chapter outlines a range of challenges for families, the underlying theme of family strengths prevails. As a consequence, families are not positioned as deficient if their accessible capital does not match that normalised in much research concerning family-school engagement.

In the following section, we explore the research base that connects families and schools, with a particular focus on the transition to school. Much of this literature presents family involvement with schools – and transitions – as a straightforward process, dominated by the role of the family in preparing children for school and promoting the educational agenda of schools in home contexts. The discussion concludes with a second underlying theme of the chapters in this book: the recognition that family roles, responsibilities, expectations and relationships – as well as those of individuals – change at times of educational transition. Key to understanding the dual roles of families is the theoretical base developed by Griebel and Niesel (2009) that derives from studies of family developmental psychology. This framework prompts a nuanced consideration of families and educational transition, recognising the multi-faceted roles and functions of families at this time.

1.6 Families and Transition

The transition to school is a major event in the lives of children and families. As with other transitions, the transition to school occurs within and across social contexts. While a great deal of research attention has been directed towards the experiences of children as they make this transition (Corsaro and Molinari 2008; Dunlop and Fabian 2007; Perry et al. 2014), focus on the transitions experiences of families at this time is relatively sparse (Griebel and Niesel 2009). This is despite many studies investigating what families do *for* children as they start school, particularly in terms of preparing children and promoting children's school readiness (Holliday et al. 2014; Lau et al. 2011; Sheridan et al. 2010; Walker and MacPhee 2011), and evidence that the construct of school readiness involves not only elements related to children, but also derived from family and school contexts (Centre for Community Child Health 2008; Dockett and Perry 2009).

Family involvement in supporting children as they enter and engage with school has been identified as a critical element of educational success – so much so that promoting positive family engagement with schools has been hailed as a means to reduce educational achievement gaps between children from diverse backgrounds in several countries (Bull et al. 2008; Harris and Goodall 2007; Kendall et al. 2008; McWayne et al. 2013). Times of educational transition – such as the transition to school – can be pivotal in the establishment of positive home-school connections.

1.6.1 Home-School Connections

A wide range of research supports the view that family contexts and resources influence children's preparedness for school, notably their school readiness skills (Holliday et al. 2014; Isaacs and Magnuson 2011). This extends throughout the school years as family participation has an impact on educational outcomes (Barnard 2004;

Henderson and Mapp 2002; Jeynes 2012). For example, the resources provided within the home (Kiernan and Mensah 2011), home routines that structure family interactions (Wildenger et al. 2008), home learning environments (Melhuish et al. 2008), language/s spoken within the home (Holliday et al. 2014), family income (Isaacs and Magnuson 2011), parental education (Davis-Kean 2005), and parental expectations (Jeynes 2012), have all been designated as influencing children's school readiness, their engagement in school and long-term educational outcomes.

These studies highlight the context of the family in children's educational experiences. Of particular importance are the resources that families draw upon to support the transition to school – their social, economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). Families have varying levels of access to resources and activate capital in different ways. Families from marginalised groups, or those described as disadvantaged – such as families with low socio-economic resources, who speak a language other than the dominant one, who are migrants or refugees, or who experience a wide range of complex circumstances – generally are positioned as having limited capital, or capital which is not compatible with dominant social contexts, including school. Several of the chapters in this book challenge these positionings, arguing for recognition of the strengths families bring from diverse social and culture backgrounds (Chaps. 2 and 3); affirmation of the family as an educational environment in its own right (Chap. 7); validation of the funds of knowledge accrued by children and families in diverse circumstances (Chap. 12); acknowledgement of the contributions and commitments of families living in complex circumstances (Chaps. 5, 6, 13, and 16); and highlighting some of the possibilities for collaboration among families and educators when such strengths are acknowledged (Chaps. 4, 14 and 15).

Much of the research exploring contextual issues of family participation is concerned with improving educational outcomes by promoting home-school connections (Pomerantz and Moorman 2010). To this end, a number of models of family involvement has been developed. These include: Epstein's (1995, 2011) framework of six types of parent involvement – which range from parenting (helping families establish home environment to support children) through to collaborating with community (integrating community resources into educational programs); Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) emphasis on parental sense of efficacy and parent role construction; the enabling and empowering model outlined by Dunst et al. (1992); and the shared responsibility model of Rosenberg et al. (2009). The models of partnership and participation promoted by these different models vary (see Chaps. 5, 14, and 16). However, the consistent aim of such programs is to promote dispositions about the positive value of education (Edwards and Kutaka 2015). Sometimes, this extends to programs of parent education that prioritise the educational agenda of the school. While families may regard the establishment of relationships between home and school as part of their responsibility (Edwards and Kutaka 2015), focus only on what families can do for schools fails to recognise the family as a dynamic unit, itself undergoing changes as family members (parents and children) partake in diverse experiences. This is particularly the case during the transition to school, when adults have opportunities to build and strengthen relationships that support the ongoing educational engagement of children.

Throughout this book, chapter authors recognise the importance of the family contexts and histories and the ways that families shape, and are shaped by, both history and context, including family history. They also acknowledge that – in educational contexts – the predominant view of family involvement privileges the actions of the dominant social group (Lareau 2000). Hence, in the Western world, families who support academic learning through reading to their children, checking homework, having regular interactions with teachers, helping out in the school classroom, and participating in school functions are deemed to be involved in their children's education (Kimelberg 2014). Such "good parenting" is considered the basis for children's educational success (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). The corollary is that those parents who do not engage in these activities may be considered uninvolved, disinterested, or simply not "good" parents (Henderson et al. 2007), unable or unwilling to offer appropriately cognitively stimulating environments for their children (Quiocho and Daoud 2006). Notions of "good" parenting and the provision of supportive home environments are reviewed in explorations of school choice reported in Chaps. 6 and 9, and in discussion of the family as an educational environment (Chap. 7).

Families categorised as uninvolved often include those with economically, socially, culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds (Henderson et al. 2007). When educators perceive families as disinterested, they tend to make few attempts to build relationships, with interactions limited to addressing problems (Zarate 2007), or identify families as the source of problems and seek to provide parenting classes to improve their levels of engagement with schools (Daniel-White 2002).

Throughout the book, questions are asked about the meaning of terms such as parent involvement, parent engagement and parent partnerships, in the light of multiple interpretations and uses of the terms by different participants across a wide range of studies (Edwards and Kutaka 2015; Fan and Williams 2010; Sheridan and Kim 2015). While educational policy around the world emphasises partnerships with parents, what is meant by partnership remains open to interpretations which position parents and educators in different ways. The notion of partnership suggests "equality" of input and interaction, where both parents and educators are involved directly in decision-making and the actions that support this (Edwards and Kutaka 2015). Partnerships reflecting these features are unique – established between specific educators and families for the purpose of supporting specific children – and can be particularly powerful supports for all involved. Yet several examples provided by chapter authors indicate that not all partnerships are valued or positive, supporting existing research noting that such "equal" levels of participation are rarely achieved (Calabrese Barton et al. 2004; Lareau 2000). The notion of collaboration is posited as an alternative (Chaps. 2, 5, 7, 15, and 16), with a focus on meaningful and cooperative relationships between families and schools that reflect specific contexts and the strengths of those involved.

The research reported across the chapters recognises that parental participation – whatever the label – consists of more than *what* parents actually do as their children

start school. *Why* parents become engaged and *how* this occurs are critical elements in understanding what happens within families during times of education transition. In their investigations, researchers note that critical reflection on the intersection of families and children's experiences of educational transition requires movement away from a 'laundry list of things that good parents do for their children's education' (Calabrese Barton et al. 2004, p. 3). In other words, chapter authors problematize the position that the prime role of families at times of educational transition is to prepare children to meet the demands of the educational institution. One of the ways this is achieved is by considering the perspectives of parents during the transition to school.

Regardless of the circumstances experienced, the families who have participated in the studies reported across the chapters demonstrate commitment and willingness to engage with their children's education – not only at times of transition, but throughout their educational journeys. Several studies indicate that educational transitions generate additional demands for families, as they encounter new and different institutional environments (Chap. 3). This is particularly so when children have special education needs (Chap. 4).

1.6.2 Families in Transition

Rather than focusing only what families do and the contexts they provide for children during the transition to school, much of the research reported in this book highlights the dual role of families as they support children and manage transitions in family life. This perspective owes much to the ongoing work of Griebel and Niesel (2009), who highlight the transformational nature of transition for families, as well as the individuals within them (children and parents). They note changes in family life at the individual, interactional and contextual levels. At the individual level, parents adopt the role of "parents of a school student" and negotiate the associated responsibilities and expectations. Family members experience changes at the interactional level as some relationships are lost and others generated, and relationships between family members change. For example, the interactions between children and parents change when expectations of greater independence and autonomy are enacted. Further changes are noted when parents respond to the involvement of other significant adults (teachers) in the lives of their children. At the contextual level, the routines and responsibilities of family members change as the family adapts to integrate home, school and work lives.

Recognition of the transformational nature of transition for families underpins several chapters in the book: Chap. 2 explores the coping mechanisms of parents as they participate in the transition to school; Chap. 15 extends this to consider the impact of collaboration with educators as parents cope with and manage transition; and Chap. 13 emphasises the processes of changing identities, roles and relationships for parents as their children start school. Each of these chapters reminds us

that the transition to school is an emotional – as well as a social, intellectual and physical – experience for parents as well as for children and educators. They confirm the commitments of parents to supporting their children during the transition to school, even when family circumstances present a range of challenges. They also indicate that the considerable attention to children's preparedness for school negatively positions families experiencing vulnerable or disadvantaged circumstances in terms of expectations for children, potential collaboration opportunities, and support for their own transitions.

1.7 In Summary

The chapters in the book make a major contribution to understandings of the impact of families on the transition to school and of transition to school on families. Contributing authors draw on a range of theoretical frameworks and research projects to provide multiple perspectives of family involvement in education, parent-educator partnerships, the nature of collaboration, issues for families in marginalised or complex circumstances as well as the multiple intersections of families and transition processes. The projects reported range from in-depth case studies to the analysis of large-scale data sets.

While the context of the research, participants, foci and analytic frameworks differ, the chapters are united by themes that emphasise the potentially transformational nature of the transition to school, the commitments of parents – regardless of their circumstances – to support their children, the influence of family habitus and capital on the ways such support is activated, and the significance of collaboration between educators and families at this time. This combination of international studies, approaches and perspectives links to, and extends, the extant research base around transition to school.

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Part I
Experiences and Expectations of Families as Children Start School

Chapter 2
Transition to Being Parents of a School-Child: Parental Perspective on Coping of Parents and Child Nine Months After School Start

Wilfried Griebel, Andreas Wildgruber, Andrea Schuster, and Julia Radan

2.1 Theoretical Background

Within a sociological-anthropological tradition in researching transition to the formal educational system, children are regarded as learning agents in transition to school and their parents as factors of influence, representing various cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. This approach refers to Pierre Bourdieu, Arnold van Gennep, Urie Bronfenbrenner and Jerome Bruner (Dunlop 2014; Peters 2014). Following this tradition, the criterion for a successful transition is, apart from continuity and progress in learning, the child's wellbeing in the new situation (Brooker 2008; Fabian 2013).

Another tradition in transition research stems from family developmental psychology. Cowan's (1991) concept of family transitions is adaptable to the multiple demands concerning transitions between the family and educational institutions (Cowan et al. 1994; Griebel and Niesel 2009). It is not the event itself, but the coping process that makes it a transition. In Germany an approach to the study of educational transitions has been developed that derives from family developmental psychology (Griebel and Niesel 2009). Theoretical strands of the model are (a) Bronfenbrenner‘s (Bronfenbrenner 1979) eco-psychological systems theory that postulates development in context, (b) the interactive stress theory according to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) who take into consideration the motivation for coping with change as a strain or as a challenge, (c) the model of critical life events (Filipp 1995) saying that coping with changes in the fit between person and environment requires a reorganization of inner homeostasis, and (d) the constructivist approach emphasizing that coping with transitions needs communication and participation of stakeholders (Rogoff 2003; Valsiner 1994). Development over the life span takes

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S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_2

into account that not only the development of the child, but also the development of her/his parents is stimulated by transitions. Adults are agents of their own development (Brandtstädter 2007) to being well-informed, conscious and reflective competent parents of a school child. On the basis of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), Perkonigg (1993) developed a model for processing social strains and support that emphasizes 'realized social support' in its effects on coping with demands.

Transitions are phases of complex biographic processes of change that take place on an individual level, on the level of interactions and relations, and on the level of context (Griebel and Niesel 2015). Not only children, but also parents make a developmental change in transition to school; educational transitions are family affairs (Griebel and Niesel 2013).

2.2 State of Research

Two reviews of international research on transition to school covering the periods 1990–2004 (Petriwskyj et al. 2005) and 2005–2012 (Dockett and Perry 2013) have been published. Petriwskyj's et al. review of the first time period shows a central interest in school readiness and trends towards a more complex understanding of transition, with a special emphasis on continuity in the child's experiences, cooperation of all involved and coherence of the educational system. In the second reviewed time period large amounts of published research dealt with school readiness. Nonetheless a growing amount of research on transition was found. In general, there was an increasing interest in transition management, participation of families and the educational system opening up for families and communities.

Quality of interaction between educational institutions and parents is important for the achievement of children (Pianta and Cox 1999). So, continuous communication between teachers and parents that begins before school starts has positive effects (Dockett and Perry 2007; Pianta and Cox 1999). Parents' participation in transition management can ease children's school start (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005; Margetts 2006), as well as contribute to better relations between institutions and parents (LaParo et al. 2003). This fosters parental satisfaction (Cloos et al. 2011). Poor communication with and participation of parents correlates with less positive effects and leads to the perspective of the parents involved also of those who might not feel fine with the transition.

Experiences of all stakeholders, including parents, in transition and their perspectives on transition activities are of importance (Dockett and Perry 2007; McIntyre et al. 2007). The parents' individual level of coping with changes – self-concept, emotions, competences – is linked to the interactional level of relations and the contextual level of socioeconomic background: Parents viewed support of their child as their task and experienced strong emotions in the process of transition to school; being informed about transition activities for their children reduced their own stress (Reichmann 2011/2012). To (learn to) support their child in transition to school and with homework was seen as a coping strategy with transition (Lichtwardt

2012) and as relevant for parents feeling competent (Dockett and Perry 2007). The parental self-concept in cooperation with school is affected positively by continuous exchange of information and fostering of reciprocal relationships, if the parents are convinced that they may contribute to their children's success by engagement for school and for child's learning (Sacher 2012). Parents thought that relationships between pedagogues and parents from educationally disadvantaged background should not be characterized by asymmetry, a lack of recognition and inadequate attempts to instruct the parents (Graßhoff et al. 2013; Petrakos and Lehrer 2011). These parents did not experience how these pedagogues worked as supportive. In Germany, parents were interviewed about their perception of the transition to becoming parents of a schoolchild and about the social support they experienced during transition management (Griebel et al. 2013a, b; Wildgruber et al. 2011). Parents in general felt well supported by nursery schools regarding transition to school, but less well supported by schools. Parents with a migrant background experienced less support (Griebel et al. 2013a). Other, versed school-parents might be a resource to support 'new' parents on their way in transition to school, especially if they speak the 'new' parents' family languages (Griebel et al. 2013b). In general, parents reported that their personal circumstances on the contextual level, like working conditions, in relation to participation in transition activities were considered and they felt supported (Griebel et al. 2013a). On the contextual level, higher education and socioeconomic status of parents leads to them being more likely to provide good conditions for the learning and development of their children in nursery time and for success in school (Burger 2010; Hair et al. 2006; Melhuish 2010). In research, parents have mostly been seen as supporters of their child's transition to school and favored conditions have been identified.

In this chapter, we will present data about a more or less effective transition to school by parents, defined by their own view, and depending on the experienced support through participation in transition activities before school started.

2.3 Research Questions – Hypotheses

In this study we explored coping with transition to being a parent of a school child, from the parents' own perspective. We were especially interested in exploring possible differences among parents in relation to experiences of their own transition. Specifically we considered the extent to which they felt they had coped well.

Against the background of current research results and our theoretical position, we expected differences between parents with positive and with difficult coping in respect to variables on different levels of demand in transitions: On the individual level, we looked for differences in the feeling of self-assurance and wellbeing, feelings of being informed about school and appraisal of success of the child's transition. On the interactional level, we compared aspects of support and information from school that parents realize, and contact with teachers. On the contextual level, we checked differences in participation in school and in socio-demographic variables.

We examined the following research questions:

Individual level:

Do parents with successful transition and parents with less successful transition differ in respect to

- how positively they rate their own feelings of wellbeing and self-assurance as a mother/father of a school-child, and
- their rating of level of information?

Interactional level:

Do parents with successful transition and parents with less successful transition differ in respect to

- how well they feel informed and supported by school,
- rating their relationship with teacher, and
- their statements how well their child coped with the transition to school?

Contextual level:

Do parents with successful transition and parents with less successful transition differ in respect to

- rating their opportunities to participate in school life?

2.4 Method

2.4.1 Sample

The analyses reported here are based on survey data from 108 mothers or fathers who had their first child enrolled in school. We will report results that focus on these 108 parents, because transition from a pre-school institution to school is a new experience to them. Furthermore we interviewed 98 parents who already had experience with a child starting school.

This study sample was drawn from a larger sample of originally 706 parents from seven German Laender. We interviewed these 706 mothers or fathers 3 months before school start in 2011 about their experiences with cooperation with nursery school and school to get prepared for being parents of a school child. To collect this sample, we contacted relevant nursery school providers. They informed early childhood institutions, which, in turn, handed written information about our study and a request to participate to all parents whose children would enter school in the same year. It was guaranteed to the parents that the interviews were taken anonymously. In the beginning of the interview, the parents were asked for their consent to audio record the conversation.

Nearly all parents agreed to be interviewed a second time. Randomly we selected 261 parents from the original sample for second interviews 9 months after school had started. Two hundred and six interviews (79% participation rate) could be con-

ducted with parents from three Laender (Bavaria, Hesse, Lower Saxony) about their experiences with transition to school. One hundred and eight mothers or fathers (52.4%) had their first child enrolled in school. Data from the second survey/interview with these 108 parents is reported here. Of these parents, 31.5% had a migration background defined by a generational concept that takes into consideration the country of birth of parents and grandparents of our interviewees (Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland 2009). According to their highest level of education, 55.6% of participating parents had a general qualification for university entrance (Abitur), 28.7% had a GCSE (Mittlere Reife), 14.8% had a CSE (Hauptschulabschluss) and 0.9% of the parents in our study had no graduation.

2.4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Guided interviews were carried out by phone with one parent in the family. Interviewers were pedagogically qualified (social pedagogues, early childhood professionals, school teachers) who had also had training for parent courses. Some of them had – except for German – native speaker competence in Russian or Turkish. Parents could choose the language they were interviewed in to be German, Russian or Turkish. The interviews contained closed questions in form of Likert-Scalings: some with four-point scales from 1 (very well (++)), 2 (rather well (+)), 3 (rather badly (−)) to 4 (very badly (− −)); some with three-point scales, and some with dichotomous ratings (yes/no). In these questions parents were asked to give an evaluation of, for example, ‘experienced support’. There were also open questions which allowed parents to tell more about their feelings and thoughts.

Audio recordings were transcribed and, if Russian or Turkish, translated by the interviewers. The researchers, supported by language experts, controlled ranscriptions and translations. After the description of the quantitative data, nonparametric tests for nominal categories (dichotomous ratings) and ordinal scales (Likert-Scalings) were conducted by using SPSS 20.0. Non-parametric methods were used (fourfold chi square test, Mann-Whitney-U test), as we considered the ratings to reflect an ordinal meaning. In addition, a normal curve of distribution was not given. Mean ranks (MR) are shown in Table 2.2, which report the distributions of the ordinal data and thus provide indications of the direction of differences. These means reflect the rank scores of each tested group and they are used in the comparing processes of the Mann-Whitney-U tests. Phi (φ), one of the effect sizes of the r-family, was calculated as an approximated effect size of the Mann-Whitney-U test. For the chi-square test, Cohen’s *w* was used as an approximated effect size (Cohen 1988).

2.5 Results

2.5.1 *Parents' Awareness of Own Transition*

Descriptive results are given in Table 2.1; beginning with the four-point scaled data, followed by the three-point-scaled data and the dichotomous results. The interviewees were asked for their own transition to being parents of a school child: "How well have you coped with your transition as a mother/father of a school-child?" A large majority of parents said that they had coped well or very well with the transition. Among 108 interviewees, there were but 12 mothers/fathers (11.1%) who said that they rated their transition to have been rather bad or very bad.

A similar proportion of parents rated their own wellbeing and self-assurance as a mother or father of a school child positively. Compared to the last weeks before

Table 2.1 Descriptive results

	N	Missings (%)	+ + (%)	+ (%)	− (%)	− − (%)
Coping with transition of mother/father	108	0.0	42.6	46.3	8.3	2.8
Well-being of mother/father of a school-child	108	0.0	46.3	42.6	8.3	2.8
Feeling self-assurance as a mother/father of a school-child	107	0.9	46.7	45.8	6.5	0.9
Insight in every-day school life	107	0.9	21.5	46.7	24.3	7.5
Informed about learning objectives of first year	106	1.9	37.7	41.5	14.2	6.6
Informed about parental support of child's homework	104	3.7	35.6	53.8	8.7	1.9
Feeling supported in own transition by school	107	0.9	24.3	49.5	15.0	11.2
Feeling informed about own contribution to child's school success	105	2.8	25.7	45.7	23.8	4.8
Content with parent-teacher contact	108	0.0	52.8	36.1	8.3	2.8
Trust in teacher	106	1.9	41.5	48.1	8.5	1.9
Teacher's understanding of situation as a mother/father of a school-child	92	14.8	44.6	46.7	6.5	2.2
Well-being of child in school	108	0.0	56.5	35.2	7.4	0.9
Rating of child's transition to school	108	0.0	59.3	34.3	4.6	1.9
	N	**Missings (%)**	**+ (%)**	**o (%)**	**− (%)**	
Well-being of parent compared to time before school-start	103	4.6	49.5	38.8	11.7	
Feedback about first-graders	107	0.9	81.3	15.0	3.7	
	N	**Missings (%)**	**Yes (%)**		**No (%)**	
Opportunities to participate in school life	107	0.9	75.7		24.3	

school had started, only 11.7% of parents said that their well-being was worse (−), 38.8% rated it as being as good (o) and even 49.5% as being better (+). In respect to parents feeling informed they were asked (a) how well they rated their insight into everyday life in school, (b) how well their knowledge was about learning objectives in the first year, and (c) how well they felt informed about how they could support their children's homework. Insight in every-day routine in school was rated lower (68.2% ++/+) than knowledge about learning objectives (79.2% ++/+) and parental support of homework (89.4% ++/+).

Parents were asked how well they felt supported by the school in respect to transition to school and how well they felt informed about what they could contribute to their child's school success. More than 70% of parents answered that they felt either very well (++) or rather well (+). Regarding their relation to the teacher a) 88.9% parents were either very (++) or rather (+) content with the parent-teacher contact, b) 89.6% said they felt either very much (++) or rather much (+) trust in the teacher, and (c) 91.3% the teacher expressed either very much (++) or rather much (+) understanding in respect to their situation as parents of a school-child. Three quarters of parents said they could participate in school (yes/no question).

Three questions were asked about the children's coping with transition. 93.6% parents said their child had coped well (++/+), and 91.7% rated their child's well-being in school positively (++/+). 81.3% of parents answered that their child had got a positive (+) written feedback from the teacher after 6 months at school.

2.5.2 Characteristics of 'Positive Copers' vs. 'Negative Copers'

Parents experienced their own transition and the support they received during this process differently. Therefore group differences were analysed. On the basis of parents' answers to the question "How did you cope with your transition to being a mother/father of a school-child?" the sample was divided into one group who had indicated that their transition was "rather bad" or "bad" (n = 12), called "negative copers", and another group who had answered the question with "very well" or "rather well" (n = 96), called "positive copers". The question was positioned as one between two other final questions at the end of the follow-up interview. The comprehensive communicative context of the two interviews allowed this summing-up question to be considered as understandable by the parents.

Group differences were found on three levels of coping with transition.

2.5.2.1 Individual Level

Clear differences between “positive copers” and “negative copers” were found in respect to their own well-being and their self-assurance as being mothers/fathers of a school child. Table 2.2 contains data on the distribution of values that indicate for the direction of differences. “Positive copers” showed higher values in well-being and self-assurance than “negative copers”. Calculations of values of parental well-being showed significant differences between groups, when the conditions before and after the school-start were compared. 94.5% (n = 86) of “positive copers” indicated that at the time of the second interview they felt better or equal, compared to 41.7% (n = 5) of “negative copers”. A bigger proportion of “positive copers” said that they felt better informed about what their child would have to learn in the first year, about the every-day school routine, and about how they could support their child with homework.

2.5.2.2 Interactional Level

Somewhat smaller differences between groups were found in respect to school related variables. A larger proportion of “positive copers” than “negative copers” said that they had felt supported by school in everything associated with the transition. The same tendency was true for the question if the parents felt informed by school about what they could contribute to their child’s school success. Also, a larger proportion of “positive copers” than those designated as “negative copers” said that they were content with their contact with the teacher, and that they felt trust in the teacher.

The greatest difference was found in the rating of the child’s transition to school. Furthermore, the written feedback by the end of the first half year in school, and the well-being of the child showed differences of values. A significant higher proportion of parents who coped positively with their transition also indicated positive values for the transition of their child than “negative copers”.

2.5.2.3 Contextual Level

Furthermore, group differences arose in questions about the extent of parental participation in school-life, (e.g. by bringing in their own ideas and proposals and playing a part in school). A larger proportion of “positive copers” answered in the affirmative compared to parents who rated their transition negatively. In respect to socio-demographic data, there were no group differences found between the educational backgrounds (highest educational degrees) of parents.

Table 2.2 Differences between 'positive copers' and 'negative copers'

	Distribution (MR/%)[a]		Test statistics[b]	Significance[c] (two-sided)	Effect size[d]
	'positive copers'	'negative copers'			
Well-being as a mother/father of a school child	49.99	90.54	z = 4.66	.000	φ = .45
Well-being compared to time before school-start	48.93	75.29	z = 3.18	.001	φ = .31
Feeling self-assurance as a mother/father of a school child	49.76	87.54	z = 4.44	.000	φ = .43
Insight in every-day school life	50.54	81.38	z = 3.47	.001	φ = .34
Informed about learning objectives of first year	50.05	80.50	z = 3.46	.001	φ = .34
Informed about parental support of child's homework	49.48	75.63	z = 3.16	.002	φ = .31
Feeling supported in own transition to school	50.48	81.83	z = 3.56	.000	φ = .34
Feeling informed about own contribution to child's school success	49.96	76.54	z = 3.04	.002	φ = .30
Content with parent-teacher contact	51.94	75.00	z = 2.68	.007	φ = .26
Trust in teacher	51.63	68.13	z = 1.94	.05	φ = .19
Teacher's understanding of situation as a mother/father of a school child	45.55	58.00	z = 1.32	.19	φ = .14
Rating of child's transition to school	49.77	92.33	z = 5.12	.000	φ = .49
Feedback about first-graders	50.72	80.00	z = 4.55	.000	φ = .44
Well-being of child at school	50.24	88.54	z = 4.53	.000	φ = .44
Opportunities to participate in school-life	80.00	41.67	X^2=8.51	.000	*w* = .28
Parent's highest degree of education	54.83	51.83	z = 0.35	.73	φ = .03

[a]For ordinal data Mean Rank (MR) is reported, for dichotomous data the percentage of parents that reported, "yes", they have the opportunity to participate

[b]z as test statistic for the Mann-Whitney-U test, X^2 as test statistic for the *four-field chi-square test* (df = 1)

[c]To counteract the accumulation of the alpha error the data were corrected according to Bonferroni-Holm. For the *four-field chi-square test data the significance is asymptotic*

[d]The interpretation of the effect sizes φ and *w* is guided by the criteria that *w* = 0.1 might be a small effect, *w* = 0.3 a medium effect and *w* = 0.5 and higher might indicate a large effect (Cohen 1988)

2.6 Discussion and Conclusions

In this contribution we studied the perspective of parents as agents in their own transition process and pursued differences between interviewees who said that they had coped well with their transition to being parents of a school-child and a group of others who said they had not. Parents reported subjective ratings of their own well-being, coping etc. within a communicative process of telephone interviews. In future studies objective data about psychosocial strains or special activities within transition management and preparation for school could be complemented. For a complete picture about transition to school and the cooperation of all stakeholders, further instruments and, most of all, putting the different perspectives into co-construction of the process will be needed. Nevertheless the view of parents is essential to throw light on their important contribution to the long-term educational success of their children.

The cross-sectional results show that a large majority of interviewees in their own perception coped well with the transition to being parents of a school-child. But a marked proportion of about one tenth (11%) rated their transition to be negative – this should draw the attention of pedagogues and stakeholders on different levels. The relatively small absolute number of 'negative copers' in the sample has to be taken into critical consideration in respect to the informative value of the results, though. Contrary to our expectations, the educational background of parents did not play a role in differences between parents´ perception of having had a positive or a more difficult transition. Attention should be directed to the quality of activities and relations within the family (Melhuish 2010; Melhuish et al. 2008) and with institutions (Graßhoff et al. 2013; Hanke et al. 2013).

Results confirm the expectations that feelings of self-assurance and well-being as parents of a school-child, feeling supported and informed by school, quality of contact with teacher, and participation in school life make a difference between a positive and a more difficult transition. In concordance with theory, a successful transition is related to these variables. Future studies should answer questions for causal or reciprocal relations. The approach taken could serve as a basis to develop scales for the quality of coping with parental transitions that hitherto do not exist. Other transition research also indicates that well-being, information, contact with teacher and participation in school-life are important for parents' coping with the transition. If parental attitudes about child's learning and about tasks of parents and teachers are in concordance with corresponding attitudes of school and teachers, a successful start in school is facilitated (Mashburn and Pianta 2006) – especially if parents and teachers put the child and his/her needs in the middle, foster autonomy and have positive relationships with the child (Barbarin et al. 2010). Exchange of information between parents and teachers about their attitudes in this respect therefore seems very relevant (Daniel 2015). Dockett and Perry (2007) found that from the perspective of the parents support of their child's homework was seen as a core task for 'good parenthood', and contact and communication with teacher was important. Some felt insecure about their own knowledge how to support their child in a competent way, and were afraid that teachers could consider them to be poor parents, if their child had problems at school. Andresen et al. (2013) confirmed in their interview study of parents that school-start of the child was a very emotional event. There is much evidence that parental commitment at home affects children's learning in school (Sacher 2012).

Nine months after school had started, most of "negative copers" felt worse compared to the end of nursery time. But there were also some parents within this group who reported that they felt better now than before. Likewise, some parents in the group of "positive copers" reported that they felt worse than by the end of nursery time. Although that might be due to many more factors that we did not consider in our study, this may be taken as a hint, that there could be differentiated transition "trajectories", like they were found with children in educational transitions (Beelmann 2006).

Variables that reflect the child's coping with transition showed relatively high magnitudes of effect between the group of 'positive' and 'negative copers'. The correlations also indicate the effect size, quantified by the size of the correlation (see Table 2.3, Appendix). Group differences were found as well in subjective variables like rated well-being of child as variables, which include another perspective like parental reports about written feedback by the teacher. Again, these group differences showed high magnitudes of effect. In the view of parents, their own evaluation plus the feedback of teachers that the child makes progress in learning, was an important criterion for a successful transition to school (Dockett and Perry 2004). If parents view an effective support of their child as a developmental task for themselves in transition to being parents of a school child, a correlation between their own coping with transition and child's coping with transition is plausible. Following the systemic approach in our transition model, parental and child's coping with transition are interdependent (Griebel and Niesel 2013, 2015). Multiple reciprocal influences of parental behavior, expectations and attitudes on the one side and child's attitudes, motivation, and achievement also suggest systemic assumptions (Grolnick et al. 2009; Sacher 2012) – leaving room for much more research about directions of influences.

Results of our study indicate a need for action. In the continuity of education from nursery school to school, parents have to be involved in a continued dialogue that supports their knowledge and certainty about the home-based commitment for the educational success of their children.

Nearly all parents want to participate in school-life of their children. In order to make parents feel welcome and to provide mutual confidence with teachers, it is crucial to realize and respect the parental perspective in transition to school and their share in "transition capital" (Dunlop 2014). Parents are actors in different life situations compared to pedagogues within the institutions, who are acting professionally and moderate the families' transition. There also exist differences in power between families and institutions. And last but not least the cooperation between institutions and families is limited in time, according to the segmented national educational systems. Therefore we propose that instead of an idea of "educational partnership" a term "educational coalition" might better depict their joint efforts, negotiations and relationship in co-constructing the child's education. Despite the developmental transition approach being multi-perspective in order to explain the transition process more holistically, we are convinced that the restricted information we are able to give about the parents' perspective in this study may add to a more effective participation of them in transition management and allows a better exchange, understanding and bringing in of resources.

Appendix

Table 2.3 Correlations and effect sizes

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1 Coping mother/father	1.00														
2 Well-being mother/father	.40**	1.00													
3 trend of well-being mother/father	.06	.32**	1.00												
4 feeling of self-assurance	.49**	.32**	.09	1.00											
5 Insight in daily school-life	.17*	.43**	.30**	.22*	1.00										
6 Knowing learning objectives	.13	.34**	.15	.20*	.37**	1.00									
7 Knowing homework support	.24**	.38**	.10	.26**	.35**	.47**	1.00								
8 Child's coping with transition	.53**	.35**	.05	.35**	.19*	.18*	.22*	1.00							
9 Child's well-being	.32**	.52**	.17	.21*	.30**	.25**	.20*	.34**	1.00						
10 written feedback first-grader	.25**	.39**	.15	.16	.26**	.16	.14	.32**	.39**	1.00					
11 experienced support from school	.24**	.31**	.23*	.25**	.34**	.37**	.30**	.34**	.41**	.27**	1.00				

12 Information from school	.18*	.30**	.30**	.19*	.43**	.42**	.33**	.23**	.35**	.10	.54**	1.00			
13 Kontact with teacher	.20*	.43**	.18	,14	.42**	.40**	.30**	.18*	.26**	.24**	.40**	.45**	1.00		
14 Confidence in teacher	.16	.27**	.07	.10	.33**	.27**	.27**	.23*	.25**	.37**	.48**	.30**	.52**	1.00	
15 teacher's understanding of parent	.09	.35**	.06	−.04	.25**	.27**	.29**	.15	.36**	.25*	.36**	.38**	.53**	.62**	1.00

*p < .05
**p < .01

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Chapter 3
Giving Voice to Families from Immigrant and Refugee Backgrounds During Transition to School

Katey De Gioia

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will consider Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner 1994; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998), the interplay of interactions and environment for families during the transition to school and overlay this with the notion of dominant cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). The potential implications for families and children from immigrant and refugee backgrounds during the transition to school process in Australia will be explored.

Australia's demographic landscape has been shaped by successive waves of immigration. The 2011 Census recorded that 26% of Australia's population (5.3 million people) were born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014). In 2013–2014, total overseas migration of 212,700 people was recorded (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015). Included in this number were 13,768 visas granted under the Humanitarian Programme. These included 11,016 offshore component visas and 2752 onshore component visas (545 granted to 'illegal maritime arrivals' (IMAs) and 2207 to non-IMAs) (Australian Government Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2014b). Of the offshore component visas, 4730 were granted to refugees, 4515 granted under the Special Humanitarian Programme,[1] 1052 were provided to women at risk and 717 were in-country Special Humanitarian visas (Australian Government Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2014a). Between 2000 and 2014, at total of 203,157 people arrived on humanitarian visas,

[1] The Special Humanitarian Programme has operated since 1981 within the offshore Humanitarian Programme, providing visas for persons who are facing human rights abuses within their home country and are sponsored by a 'proposer' in Australia (an Australian citizen, permanent resident or organisation, and eligible New Zealand citizens).

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S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_3

with the countries most represented being Iraq (35486), Afghanistan (26383), Sudan (24140), Burma (14936) and Iran (14072) (Australian Government Department of Social Services 2015).

More recently, the Australian Government announced an intake of 12,000 refugees in excess of the current numbers. This intake was solely for the purpose of supporting those affected by conflict in Iraq and Syria, with priority to be given to displaced children, women and families currently situated in refugee camps (Henderson 2015).

Whilst the number of children and families from immigrant and refugee backgrounds is quite small in comparison to the whole population, there have been and will continue to be children from these backgrounds entering the school system. Their experiences of starting school and the transition process may differ from their peers, partly because they have arrived in a new country. In Australia the start of the school year occurs at the end of January/early February. For new arrivals, some will commence with their peers at this time although it is more likely that these children will be transitioning throughout the school year at times determined by their arrival into Australia.

Experiences prior to arrival in Australia may be significantly different for families from refugee backgrounds to those from immigrant backgrounds. Nonetheless their transition to school is marked by similarities. Both groups are faced with the need to understand new dominant cultural practices, potential language barriers, inexperience with the Australian curriculum and unfamiliarity with expectations of families' role in schools (de Abreu and Hale 2014; Graves and Brown Wright 2011; Riggs and Due 2011). In this chapter, these experiences are explored.

3.2 Theoretical Perspectives

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner 1994; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998) provides a theoretical underpinning for much of the transition to school literature (see, for example, Dockett and Perry 2007; Peters 2014; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000). The interplay between the interacting systems within the model has implications for the development of the individual. Bronfenbrenner (1994) also discussed the notion of time as a system that extends beyond the environmental boundaries. Time is a factor that impacts in complex, multi-dimensional ways on children and families from immigrant and refugee backgrounds. The interrelationship between Bourdieu's (1986) conceptions of cultural capital and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model also provides meaningful connections to understanding implications of transition to school for families and children from immigrant and refugee backgrounds.

The child and family from the immigrant or refugee background live within microsystems. Their interpersonal relationships incorporate cultural practices and dispositions that are both innate and learnt through family connections. These relationships also include intricacies from their experiences before arriving in Australia.

The child from a refugee background may have a family that has been linked through loss. As they transition into their new country they may be exposed to new social mores. Their level of exposure will be determined, in part, by the family's level of immersion and acculturation into Australian society. The number and nature of interactions that families will initiate and be involved in will be dependent on the sense of power they feel about their situation (Bronfenbrenner 1994; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998). In relation to transitions into school, families that seek out the school setting or find support structures to understand their new environment, for example, through a migrant resource centre or enrolling their child in a prior-to-school setting, are more likely to possess this sense of power and begin to navigate and interact in their new world.

Families' interactions bring two interconnecting systems together: family and school. Encounters with the school will heighten the focus on the dominant culture through the nuances of the school environment. Classroom teachers' experiences with families from immigrant or refugee backgrounds can position the child in a deficit mode (Sirin and Ryce 2010). The manner in which this system interacts with the family is critical in determining successful transition to school. Bourdieu described the social world as a 'performance' with 'practices' being the execution of 'roles' and 'plans' (1990, p. 52). In such a formulation, individuals have access to or possess resources or capital. These resources exist as three forms of capital: cultural; social; and economic capital (Bourdieu 1986). This chapter focuses on cultural and social capital in relation to the school and classroom environment.

Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital can be considered through three states, each of which can be translated into the school environment (Bourdieu 1986). He identified the notion of embodied cultural capital through the dispositions possessed by individuals. Culture is dynamically formed and reliant on background experiences significantly determined by the family and their access to the dominant culture (Bourdieu 1990). Whilst there are opportunities for embodied cultural capital to be acquired, it is dependent on a number of factors including length of time in the dominant culture and level of access and exposure to dominant cultural practices.

The second form of cultural capital is the objectified form. This is the 'cultural goods' or artefacts that hold significant importance (Bourdieu 1986). In the classroom setting this would include items such as prior curriculum knowledge, understanding of text books, access to and understanding of technologies and information exchange between home and school.

Institutionalised cultural capital incorporates the reproduction and reinforcement of dominant culture and is attributed to the role played by schools and classroom settings (Bourdieu 1973). Education systems through their pedagogic actions implicitly promote the dominant culture. They require the student to be familiar with and have a level of capital in the education system, includes linguistic and cultural competence, in order to be able to operate effectively within that system. This state also (Bourdieu 1973). Children from immigrant and refugee backgrounds can be positioned as deficient as a result (Dooley 2012).

Whilst all families bring significant strengths from their dominant culture, the predetermined cultural capital of the school system can overshadow this as children

start school. Children and families may not have the linguistic capacity assumed by the dominant cultural (Cranitch 2010; Dooley 2012; Major et al. 2013) to feel confident in their interactions with the school, in particular in terms of the Australian interpretations of “parent engagement”. School readiness for immigrant children is discussed by De Feyter and Winsler (2010) who highlight the need to build upon their strengths, pointing out that these strengths may not fit within the expectations of the school or system. They emphasise the notion of “othering” and marginalisation that can creep into the classroom if teachers do not find means to determine and work with the cultural capital the child brings into the setting. New et al. (2015) share African background refugee mothers’ concerns in relation to children’s readiness for school. They identified the mothers’ increased anxieties for their children when leaving them in unfamiliar spaces with unfamiliar adults. They draw on the experiences of the mothers to identify concerns about not being able to connect meaningfully with their children’s experiences during this time. Support structures, such as playgroups are seen as important in order for mothers to feel connection and gain understanding.

The macrosystem indirectly impacts on the children and families in transition to school. System level decisions and policies will impact on supports that the school is able to provide. Government policies and processes impact on access to funding, professional learning for teachers and required support staff equipped to facilitate transition of these children and families into school.

The dominant cultural practices of Australia fit within the macrosystem of the children and families starting school. Here broader societal perspectives become part of the landscape with weighty repercussions. For example, deficit representations of ethnic groups in the media can arouse unfounded feelings of suspicion and worry in the general population. Those feelings can be targeted towards families from refugee and immigrant backgrounds. The school can provide opportunities for families to develop social capital within the new dominant culture through membership of school networks. The level of membership or acceptance into these networks helps determine the level of social capital developed (Bourdieu 1986). Generally, families from the dominant culture are able to build social capital through group membership at the commencement of their involvement with the school and are able to accumulate social capital throughout their years of connection to the school. They are advantaged in having the linguistic capital and cultural capital amassed from their prior school knowledge and experiences in addition to that which they build during the transition process and their child’s school career. This may not be the case for families from immigrant and refugee backgrounds. Their access to social capital may be significantly hindered when they start their relationship with the school as they will not possess the other forms of capital that support acquisition of social capital (New et al. 2015: Sirin and Ryce 2010). When connecting with the school, these underlying tensions can contribute to families feeling isolated from the very school community activities that have been developed to promote belonging and inclusion.

The chronosystem encompasses the environmental factors of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model and incorporates the notion of time. Components of this factor

of time include change, consistency and inconsistency. Here, Bourdieu (1990) reinforces that access to and understanding of dominant culture is reliant on time. Families arrive in Australia and one of their first duties is to settle children into school. These children may not have had sufficient opportunities to be immersed in their new culture to gain understanding and perspectives of expectations of how to share their cultural capital. Their commencement at school will happen alongside numerous changes occurring in the lives of their families. There are many interacting transitions happening in a short space of time.

Through listening to the experiences of teachers and giving voice to families from immigrant and refugee backgrounds, we are able to gain an understanding of ideas and suggestions for assisting them to develop relationships during the transition process and in the classroom context. Consideration has also been given to school-wide and broader community strategies to move beyond a deficit mode and to recognise and value the strengths that families from immigrant and refugee backgrounds bring.

3.3 Backpacks and Transitions

Families' arrivals in Australia are marked by trepidation of the new life, new experiences, hoping to feel safe; wanting to provide a better life for their children; and, perhaps, starting again. The notion of a "metaphoric backpack" (Thomson 2008) can be applied in this situation. The backpack is associated with starting school. Young children usually have their "physical" backpacks and practise carrying these, filled with a myriad of different things that they will need throughout the day and into their new school career. Children from immigrant and refugee families will have their "physical" backpack. However, they will also have their "metaphoric" backpack representative of Bourdieu's cultural capital and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model. Each individuals' backpack will be quite different, dependent on their prior experiences. What is retrieved or encouraged to be shared from the backpack can impact on the child's experience of the transition to school.

Expectations of what is contained within the backpack will be determined through the interactions with *dominant* cultural representatives of the school. They may determine that the backpack is too light and will not enable the child or family to function effectively within this context. For a child from a refugee background, missing from this particular backpack might be the cultural artefacts required for school entry such as the enrolment form and supporting documentation. They may not possess these due to a fear of being identified or needing to flee without opportunity to gather important documents. It may not contain a jumper representing warmth and security but rather be weighed down by trauma concerns and separation anxieties. The backpack will not contain house keys, as displacement has been an ongoing factor in the lives of the families (Cameron et al. 2011; Christie and Sidhu 2006; Pugh et al. 2012). The backpack may be missing a lunchbox containing recess and lunch due to unfamiliarity with food types or perhaps language barriers in the

purchase of food or perhaps not having packed lunches as an expectation or personal experience for families. When a lunchbox is included, it will likely be filled with a variety of smells and perceived delicacies that differs greatly from the stereotyped Vegemite[2] white bread sandwich associated with Australian children's lunches. The backpack may also be missing a BYOD – Bring Your Own Device (a laptop or tablet now becoming a significant part of the Australian education vernacular).

Children and families from immigrant backgrounds also bring their "metaphoric backpack" with them during their transition to school. This backpack may contain the myths and misconceptions so often associated with families who immigrate. These myths include, that these children and families know people or have family here and are part of a broader connected community and that the children are excited to be in a new country having had some choice in this decision (De Gioia 2013).

These laden backpacks are carried through transitions to school. For each family and child, the backpack is a different size, colour and shape, representing their own context and culture (De Gioia 2009). Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998) takes into account the impact of contexts, relationships and interactions, all of which will influence the weight of the backpack during the transition to school. Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural capital also elicits implications. The significance here is the underlying strengths these families and children bring into the school context and their own cultural capital. These need to be considered in order for positive transitions to occur.

3.4 The Study

This paper reports on part of a larger study that explored the perceptions of families from immigrant and refugee backgrounds in the transition to school. This study used a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences for these families. It also considers the experiences of teachers receiving children into their classroom environment (van Manen 1990).

The study was conducted across four primary schools in Western Sydney, New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The schools were identified via the Multicultural Unit within the NSW Department of Education and Training. They were deemed to have increased numbers of enrolments of children from immigrant and refugee backgrounds and were receiving funding as a result of these increased numbers. The local migrant resource centre also identified that they worked with these schools due to the increased number of families from immigrant and refugee backgrounds. Teachers and key support personnel of children from Kindergarten (the first year of school) to Year 2 were invited to participate in focus groups (n = 30). Four focus groups were held, one in each school. Parents were invited to participate in an

[2] Vegemite is an Australian savoury spread made from yeast usually used on bread, toast and cracker biscuits.

interview or focus group through the migrant resource centre. This was deemed the most appropriate place to source parent perspectives as the centre held support groups for families. Four focus groups were held with a total of 24 mothers who had children ranging in age from 3 months to 22 years of age. Their ethnic backgrounds were Afghani, Pakistani and Sudanese. All of the focus groups had an interpreter present.

Whilst the focus of this chapter is the voices of families, teachers' perspectives have explicitly been included. This is to provide the perspective of the dominant cultural representatives from the school setting and enable considerations of implications of these perspectives for children's transition to school.

3.5 Perspectives

3.5.1 Sharing Teachers' Perspectives

Decisions made at the macrosystem level will impact microsystems and sometimes result in approaches determined through levels of funding which are necessary for support systems to be established. Two principals confirmed the importance of funding to support children and families from refugee backgrounds,

> We have lots of refugee children enrolled in our school. They seem to have mostly come from The Sudan. When families first started arriving in [our area] a few years ago we were not prepared and we didn't know that we had become part of a resettlement area. We had no supports or additional funding to put any programs in place. The first few years were quite hard. (Principal A)

> My school used to get a lot of funding for refugee children; it is a numbers game for dollars. More recently there seems to be a shift and families are accessing the school around the corner [Principal A's school]. We have worked very hard to support these families however as our numbers decrease so do the programs we can offer. (Principal B)

Teachers are at the frontline of assisting families in their transition to school. Their overwhelming sense of empathy for families who had transitioned into this new country was shared on many occasions, often highlighting personal experiences,

> When I came I wasn't a refugee; I wasn't having financial difficulties … but I had so much, so much difficulties. There was no help in those days when I came. There was nothing. But still I experienced that life was so hard, that's why I swore to myself never, ever bring anybody from my family and put them through all that much pain. And I was young – I didn't have children. Now imagine if you have got a family and you don't know [anything or anybody]. (Teacher, School A)

> For me I knew the language but I 'bumped my head' many times because there are so many differences and it's a very lonely process. The only thing that really fixes it is time. (Teacher, School B)

> It is very hard. That just takes time, there's no quick fix. As an immigrant it takes a while to learn the new culture. (Teacher, School B)

A clear theme of default positioning against dominant cultural capital emerged from the data. The teachers' personal experiences reinforced the perception of ascribing to dominant cultural capital over time in order to experience belonging. The selected comments highlight isolation and look to the children and families fitting into existing systems.

Teachers did identify they had made decisions to move beyond what they perceived as usual teaching expectations to assist children to feel comfortable and connected in the classroom. This was particularly referenced to children from refugee backgrounds who entered the classroom and exhibited high levels of trauma and stress. Teachers adapted strategies during this transition time that would assist the child but also take into consideration the remaining children in that classroom.

> There are a lot of issues that came with them [children from refugee backgrounds], because there was – they came from a lot of trauma, huge trauma. (Teacher, School C)

> I notice the difference because when he's upset – he seems to be getting upset every morning, the same routine – I let him go to home corner and he takes one of his friends with him. He's made good friends with Georgio, so he'll stay with Georgio in the home corner. And then if he feels okay you can see the change in him, because he'll come past me and he'll say, 'Teacher', and then he'll give me a cuddle. So it's like he's accepted that okay, if I can go to home corner … (Teacher, School A)

> You've got to win their trust and often to do that …… And I had a kid that came and he finished Year 6 a couple of years ago, but I had him in Kindergarten, and the only way that I could get him to stop crying was to nurse him and rock him to sleep. And that is not in my role as a teacher, but that helped me to help him. So I think you're exactly right, who should do this, where should we turn? Obviously for survival for this poor little kid, that's what I was going to do and blow the rest of them. But it raises all sorts of child protection issues and stuff like that which as a professional you think of, but … But you still do it because you know it all helps in the end to help him and help his family. (Teacher, School C)

Social emotional maturity is key for children transitioning into school (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000). The complex life families from immigrant and refugee backgrounds live and have experienced may not have enabled development of this key component of transition to school. The teachers acknowledged that the best way to support families from refugee backgrounds in the transition to school was to provide for the children. They acknowledged that the family members were themselves dealing with high-level issues of stress and anxiety; attempting to work; provide for the family; and adjust to a new dominant culture. Initially with an influx of children from refugee backgrounds transitioning into the school and into a number of classes across grades, the teachers felt unprepared and unsupported. They identified that the interrelationship between the families and their communities was critical in ensuring support and understanding of schooling. As one principal (School C) stated

> [it] doesn't seem to be as bad now, because the community has done a lot to educate the families as well, the support systems exist and we are a part of these community groups.

> This relationship is critical for endeavoring to support families when they are newly arrived in Australia and coming to our school.

Another principal (School D) shared her New Arrival Program, which created connections and attempted to begin the relationships and communication for families and reinforcement for children,

> New Arrival Program. So what I do, every year I have been doing this one with the new arrivals, I do first the school routine things; classroom routine we do; the rules… So it is a lot of time, but worth it.

The notion of time was further emphasised as a necessity in supporting these families during transition. This was particularly difficult when families arrived throughout the year to enrol their child, rather than having had conversations in the year prior to starting school.

> If I could have sat down at the beginning with this family and be introduced to him as his new teacher, that might have set us off on a better foot and then I would have had a better understanding. (Teacher, School B)

Concerns about significant mental health issues for some refugee families, coupled with behavioural issues of children were raised by teachers. When asked to consider the needs of families from an immigrant background, teachers' perceptions were quite dissimilar. One teacher summed up sentiments across all teacher focus group cohorts,

> … it's different, they seem connected or have had educational experiences of sorts either in their home country or here before starting school. Families seem to know what is expected. Sometimes they turn up [to transition to school sessions with their child], sometimes they don't. But, I don't think we need to worry about them so much, sure, there are language issues but we have supports for this.

This statement reinforces the myth that children and families from immigrant backgrounds are more connected and aware of schooling expectations than, perhaps, many of them are.

Family disconnection with school was a key theme identified by teachers during the transition to school process for families from refugee backgrounds. Whilst the teachers were empathetic to the situation, there was also a sense that this concern was bigger than the teaching collective in each school. They valued support staff in the school connecting with the families and the role the community played in connecting with the school, but, for many, communication or relationship with these families was usually fairly minimal. Families suffering mental health and wellbeing issues are not able to function effectively (Schweitzer et al. 2006). This has implications for their interactions and interrelationships at the other levels. Determining methods for developing cultural and social capital are not possible until mental health needs are addressed.

3.5.2 Giving Voice to Families

The mothers involved in the study had children at school or starting school the following year. There was a mix of refugee and immigrant mothers. These mothers had established connections with their communities and through support networks. Families highlighted their feelings at times of helplessness within the new dominant culture and with the English language. They were worried about their role in supporting their children in the transition to school.

Initially all of the mothers spoke about the need for practical information about requirements for starting school such as the information usually provided during an orientation session for families. The issue of language was identified by all groups of mothers as a potentially significant barrier to transition. One Afghani mother (through an interpreter) shared her experience when called to a meeting about her child, *I feel very like intimidated and I don't want to go to that kind of meeting, because I can't explain what I think, and they don't – there's no interpreter, so that's the problem.*

Another mother had the opposite experience of school connections. Through an interpreter, she shared how issues of language were addressed:

> She said, in her school they have somebody like [a] teachers' aide, he speak [the home language]. … The guy will call them from the school say, in their language. They say, okay, the school have this, this and [parents need to…] If they have somebody from the school working with the language to remind them when they send their letter home a reminder on the phone, it's going to be more clear to them. So she's lucky. (Sudanese focus group)

Broader community connections were quite powerful in linking families to school. Many mothers discussed how they had found information out about school or processes for going to school: *she got the information from the family members* (through interpreter, Afghani focus group); … *people in the community and the person who are,* [sponsor] *responsible of your process* (through interpreter, Sudanese focus group); *My relatives lives for 11 months here. So they tell me how to enrol for the school and where is the school, what is the other detail* (Pakistani focus group).

The mothers from the Pakistani focus group also highlighted the importance of the school understanding the differing cultures that were starting school and the implications this had for understanding these children. One mother stated:

> … mostly our kids are not very like you know bold like Australian kids. Our kids are very shy, mostly – Pakistani kids, may be really, I don't know, but mainly shy. Even the boys, not [just] the girls. And because here, kids are very confident, very smart and very independent kind of things, that's why.

Another mother then commented about the need for being considerate of individual cultures:

> Because especially if it's multicultural country, there's so many different nationalities. They should know about that. And different values, different culture, everything. There's so many like – you know schools, there's so many nationalities, multicultural. There's no only Australian kids, so many kids. So the relationship between parent and teacher is very important.

Having this broad understanding prior to the child starting school would aid both families and schools. It would assist in developing the relationship between teachers and families that would be supportive of children during the transition and beyond.

Each group was asked to determine what they thought would be most useful for schools to consider when children start school. Their responses reflect the need for sound communication prior to commencement.

> They should give them [newly arrived families] a time and maybe they can come for not for a day, just for couple of hours. Somebody give them the sheet and tell them what the rules are and what suppose not and know what not to be done to the school, how the child behave, all this things. Give them all this in details, give them paper for reading any question, just give them or to come back and ask us if you didn't understand it. Then they'll know. (Sudanese focus group)

> Okay, everybody says, they will talk to the parents about all the issues whatever they face with their children and what's happening in a school, how school function. Also a good advice about the school which is school and may be closer, better with good contact with parents and all those things. And the problem that they have probably, they will talk to the new parents and all new migrants and explain how they could cope with that. Because it still happening. (Afghani focus group, through interpreter)

> Like you know, they don't have time to know all these things [about their home culture, how their children learn and how their children differ from their peers who are entrenched in the dominant culture]. This what we're saying is, we feel, but they don't feel and they don't have time to know all these things. How they will know? How we can tell them all these things, all these little, little things. (Pakistani focus group)

The final quote resonates with Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital. The mother attempts to dismiss the importance of her child's cultural capital and defaults to the dominant culture being significant for their schooling experiences. Her distress is visible in trying to understand herself how her children will come to possess dominant culture but not at the expense of her own cultural capital.

3.6 Conclusion: Easing the Load?

Weighted or laden backpacks? How can the load be lightened? Children and families from immigrant and refugee backgrounds are microsystems according to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model. During the transition to school process, they bring their own prior knowledge wrapped in cultural capital that has been an innate part of their lives. So, at what point is this removed from the backpack or explored, shared and celebrated? Findings show that with all well meaning intentions, the focus from schools is still on dominant culture and the notion of "fitting in". This is found in both the perspectives of the teachers and the mothers in the study. The struggle to understand how to balance the conflicting cultural capital was evident, perhaps akin to trying to balance the backpack on two shoulders without letting it slide off one.

Having all key stakeholders in the transition process assist with packing and unpacking the backpack, will ease the load. However, making time to take a peek inside will also assist with understanding differing perspectives and determine what can be added or who should be carrying the bag at particular points throughout the journey. A deficit notion of families and children as they start school which describes families as feeling disconnected due to their cultural and social capital differing from the dominant culture of the school has implications for their successful transition. There is a need for time to develop relationships enabling teachers and/or school systems to acknowledge strengths of families and children and how these can be respected and utilized during the transition to school journey. Through the two-way transference of cultural capital, families are more likely to feel empowered and engaged and this will have a positive impact for children as they move into the school environment.

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Chapter 4
Hope, Despair and Everything in Between – Parental Expectations of Educational Transition for Young Children with Intellectual Disability

Jenny Wilder and Anne Lillvist

4.1 Introduction

> We hope there will be more focus on learning, more structure. We do not really have that high hopes, but in some ways I wish that he will find a different context, feel big and that he finds his niche and also that the children are alike and that he will be accepted for who he is.

The quote above illustrates the hopes and expectations of a parent of a young child with intellectual disability (ID) about to make the educational transition from preschool to compulsory schooling in Sweden. Home and school constitute two important, but very different microenvironments for children, where children in different ways engage in living their daily lives by learning and developing in a social context together with parents, siblings, other family members or with peers and teachers (Bronfenbrenner 1999). Recent research has acknowledged the importance of bridging the multiple environments that children are a part of, for example, between home and school in times of transition (Griebel and Niesel 2009). In this chapter we will present results from an ongoing Swedish project focused on understanding the learning journey of children with ID aged 6–7 years. Parent interviews were used to identify findings that illustrated their hopes and expectations for the upcoming educational transition of their children. We will first give an outline of the theoretical viewpoints of this study as well as previous research in the field, followed by a short description of the Swedish school context for children with ID, along with a

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S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_4

description of the empirical data and results. The chapter ends with a discussion of the results in relation to theory and earlier research.

4.2 Theoretical Perspectives

Educational transitions involve changes in the identity and agency of individuals (Dockett 2014). Approaching an educational transition for families with children with disabilities carries many challenges. Research has shown that families with children with ID face more stress in their everyday lives compared with families of children without disabilities (IASSID Families Special Interest Research Group 2014). Furthermore, everyday life is more child-centred and child-driven among families with children with severe ID than families with children without disabilities (Axelsson and Wilder 2014).

According to ecocultural theory, families proactively strive to construct a sustainable, meaningful and congruent daily routine of life (Weisner 2002). In ecocultural theory the family accommodations are used as a concept to explain a family's functional response to the demands of daily life with a child with delays (Bernheimer and Keogh 1995). In seeking stability in sustainability the family members try to balance the internal and external influences on their family's daily routines. The goal is to construct and sustain a daily routine which is satisfying and coherent for the whole family in terms of their views of family and child life. One of the main occasions in family life when accommodations to seek stability in sustainability are greatly challenged is when children start school (Hanson 2005). In a longitudinal study following 102 families with children with developmental delay, Weisner et al. (2005) found that, over a period of 10 years, 75% of the families were fairly stable in their sustainability of daily routines. In general, sustainability was considered to be reasonable at age 3, dipped at 7 but increased again at 13. The dip in sustainability at age 7 indicates that, at times of educational transition, families struggle to balance well-being (Weisner et al. 2005).

From a developmental psychological perspective, Griebel and Niesel (2009) identified three levels of change for both children and families when children make early educational transitions: the individual, relationships and contextual levels. At an individual level the transitions may bring about change in identity, roles and relations in the child's and parents' lives. Apart from more scholastic demands, starting school demands that the child be more autonomous, and demonstrate more self-control and emotional regulation than in the prior-to-school years (Griebel and Niesel 2009). For children with disabilities this can mean that they need to handle activities of daily living and daily hygiene on their own: to be able to feed themselves; to be able to put on a jacket and shoes without assistance; and to know when and how to go to the toilet. Starting school also demands skills of a more cognitive nature: to be able to understand aspects of time; and be able to plan and to have basic executive functions (Janeslätt et al. 2010). Changes in the role of the parents in their child's transition to school can mean that the parents' supervisory control is reduced and that the care of

their child will now be shared with the child's teacher (Griebel and Niesel 2009). For parents of children with disabilities this may not always be the case. Dockett et al. (2011) gave an example of the opposite occurring in their longitudinal study. Parents were expected to be on immediate call to collect their child with disabilities if he or she could not be handled by the teacher. Furthermore, parents of children with disabilities may experience extra strain during the transition as they may be the ones who need to teach others about their child's special needs including their child's communication and health needs (Marshall and Goldbart 2008).

During the transition to school changes may also occur at the relationships level: the schoolchild may first lose some relationships such as those with the preschool teacher and preschool friends. With time, the child will make new relationships and also form new affiliations (Griebel and Niesel 2009). For parents the situation is similar, in that some relationships will be lost and new ones will be made. The difficult part for both children and parents is in losing relationships of trust, warmth and security. The preschool staff are often seen as a very important and helpful source of support for parents (Pianta et al. 2001). In transition from preschool to school, children without disabilities often make the transition together with peers of the same age. It is common that children start school together with the same age peer group and this can assist in preserving relationships. For children with disabilities the transition to formal school can be very disruptive. They often do not accompany their age peers from preschool to regular school, but make other forms of educational transition such as going into special schooling. Furthermore, for children with ID, research has repeatedly shown that they are in more contact with adults than with their peers during their days in either preschool or school (Eriksson et al. 2007; Luttropp and Granlund 2010). As children with disabilities are dependent on adults in educational settings, developing and or sustaining peer relationships should be a focus at the commencement of school. For children with ID it is important that the transition to school be as smooth as possible (Hanson 2005). Hanson (2005) highlights the need for collaboration in the transition to school for children with special needs and, in her model of the transition process, advocates that communication and effective collaboration are likely to be achieved through parental and professional partnerships. Optimal partnerships are those which build on family strengths and foster empowerment or enablement of family members to accomplish their goals and demonstrate competence (Hanson 2005).

The third level of change in educational transitions identified by Griebel and Niesel (2009) is the contextual level. The contextual level signifies changes in the learning environment of children and the actual place and setting of the new school. The learning environment contains both the physical location and artefacts of the new school, including the school curriculum which frames and guides the activities in the new learning environment. Challenges for young children at this level multiply as almost everything is new to them. Children may be expected to cope with a lot of these changes as developmental tasks together with their peers. Children with ID may not have the same developmental readiness to cope with these changes and, on the whole, there may be greater variation in how they cope (Schalock 2013). Thus, close collaboration with the child's parents and the previous educational set-

ting is imperative. Even so Wilder and Lillvist (2016) found that teachers in Compulsory School for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (CSSID) in Sweden used traditional transitional activities for young children with ID (including general parents' meetings) and did not perform any organized individual adaptation. Another aspect to consider for children with ID at school entry is the differentiation that may be required for children with ID to access the syllabus. A positive transition for children with special needs is associated with a differentiation process of, for example, teaching methods and learning activities (Schischka 2011).

At the contextual level (Griebel and Niesel 2009), parents are now challenged to integrate this third area of life, school, together with the family and more often than not, life at work. According to ecocultural theory, families have to adjust, assimilate and accommodate their daily lives to fit these new demands. Hanson (2005) shows that during transition to school, parents must adapt to services which are more child-centred. Before school entry, services are more family centred and with greater family involvement. School is more child-centred because teachers are focused on providing an environment conducive to learning at school and they have a curriculum to follow (Bulkely and Fabian 2006). Bulkely and Fabian (2006) also found that parents generally lacked detailed knowledge about academic expectations and the school curriculum. During the transition, parents' involvement in school has different expressions based on the school's organization and management of parent and professional partnerships, as well as parents' own expectations and beliefs. We now consider the research about parental expectations and involvement in educational transitions for young children with special needs.

4.3 Parental Expectations and Involvement in Educational Transitions – Previous Research

The research field concerning parental expectations and involvement in the educational transition of parents with children with ID is scarce. In order to gain some insight from previous research, the scope of interest was broadened to a general research literature investigation including families of children with special needs and also an overall focus on educational transitions before the age of 7.

Schischka (2011) investigated the practices involved in the transition to primary school for children with a range of special needs in New Zealand. Through retrospective interviews with 17 parents about their experiences prior to and following their child's school entry, several factors emerged as the most important for a smooth transition. Overall, high levels of communication and collaboration which led to good home and school partnerships were emphasized throughout the transition process. Factors which were positive for a smooth transition to school included special transition meetings between parents, early childhood centre staff and the new receiving teacher and/or school principal, as well as several pre-entry school visits. Furthermore, Schischka found that after school entry good communication between

parents and teachers was important for a continued smooth transition. According to this study the parents who dropped off and collected their children used this as an opportunity to meet and exchange information about the child's day.

Janus et al. (2007) investigated issues of transition to kindergarten for children with special needs, including children with ID, in Canada where different agencies are responsible for providing special needs services both before and after school entry. Their findings indicated that interactions with the different agencies could be an obstacle to smooth transitions and that parents of children with special needs were significantly less satisfied with the transition of services than the parents of children without special needs. Another related finding was the increasing role of parents as advocates. Janus et al. (2008) argue that, as parents could not rely on the system to provide appropriate services, they had to become active advocates for their children in times of educational transition from preschool to formal school in order to receive or maintain support.

Similar findings about difficulties in accessing support and parents advocating for their children were found with families and children with special needs from an Australian perspective within the State of New South Wales (Dockett et al. 2011). Twenty-four families with children who had disabilities of different kinds participated in the longitudinal qualitative study. The aim of the study was to explore the transition to school for these families. The themes which emanated from the study were coloured by the added vulnerability of the families: the parents as well as the children were in need of various degrees of special support as a result of a range of factors, including their very low economic status or parental mental health issues. Dockett and colleagues also describe the impact of transition on the family, where several parents were looking forward to the shared responsibility for their children, while others were cautious about this because they felt they were being judged as parents.

In her study about collaboration between parents and teachers in special schools in Austria, Pickl (2011) indicated that parental expectations of school can also be related to their cultural background. She interviewed 24 special school teachers and 12 parents of children with complex communication needs and ID with a different mother tongue spoken at home than the language used in school. The parents expressed unconditional confidence in the competence of the teachers and this resulted in non-interference by the parents. According to Pickl, this non-interference was interpreted, by some teachers, as a lack of interest or passivity. Herein lies an important lesson to be made: multilingual and multicultural backgrounds may have to be treated with extra caution by teachers, especially in times of educational transition when research has shown that this trajectory in the lives of the families already demands sensitivity by stakeholders (Dockett et al. 2014).

Wilder and Granlund (2015) studied stability and change in the sustainability of daily routines and social networks of eight families with children with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities in Sweden. Four of the eight families had children of ages where they made the transition to school; they were 5, 6, 6 and 7 years of age when the study began. To examine the changes, the parents were interviewed twice during the 2 years of the study. For all eight families, there was little overlap between the child and family networks. When the children started school, new rela-

tionships were formed and found in the children's social networks, for example, with teachers and teaching assistants. However, the same people were not noted by the parents as part of the families' networks. The study did not investigate the reasons for this difference, but the results possibly illustrate that parental and professional partnerships may not have been formed for these children.

4.4 The Swedish Context and Project Description

In Sweden there are two forms of school with different curricula: the compulsory school and the Compulsory School for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (CSSID). The CSSID is provided for children with diagnosed ID who are not anticipated to be able to reach the educational goals of compulsory school. The aim of the CSSID is to offer educational practices based on the needs of the individual child (SFS 2010). The CSSID can be organized in different ways, either as separate schools in a community or by separate facilities or classes integrated within a regular school. In CSSID there are low numbers of children and many staff, resources and adapted learning environments. Although children with ID can study according to the CSSID curriculum within inclusive education at a regular school there are also 667 separate CSSID schools in 280 of the 290 Swedish municipalities.

Children can be enrolled in CSSID at different ages, and after eligibility has been established, the decision of where and when to start school lies with the parents. However, the decision is often made in collaboration with educational and care professionals. One area of CSSID is known as the training school; children attending training schools have moderate to severe intellectual disabilities and often additional disabilities. A training school does not have academic subjects, but subjects that relate to the activities of daily living. The number of children enrolled to study according to the CSSID curriculum increases for each grade and peaks in the 6th grade. Thereafter, the enrolment remains constant. Children who are 6–7 years old and who start at CSSID often have a more severe, rather than a mild, intellectual disability (Wilder and Lillvist 2016; Lillvist and Wilder 2015).

Since 1998, it is compulsory for Swedish municipalities to provide a place for every child in a preschool class from the autumn term of the academic year in which the child turns 6, and the majority of all 6 year olds (95%) attend this voluntary form of schooling (National Agency of Education 2014). One of the intentions for the reform of preschool class provision was to bridge the transition from informal systems (family/preschool) to more formal systems (school). The preschool and preschool class setting in Sweden is inclusive; all children with or without disabilities attend together and children attend their local preschool or preschool class (Lillvist 2010). Preschool classes are usually located within mainstream primary schools and leaving preschool to start preschool class is the major educational transition to school for the majority of children. The transition from preschool class into the first grade in primary school is often not such a big step for children without disabilities or their peers as teachers and learning environment do not change as much as in

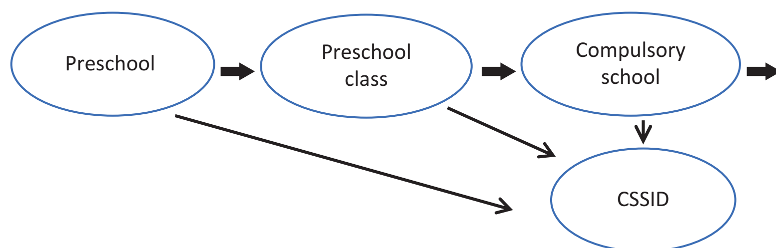

Fig. 4.1 The different pathways in transition from preschool for children with ID in Sweden

their previous transitions. For children with ID the transition from preschool can be more disruptive, see Fig. 4.1.

The thick arrows in Fig. 4.1 signify the usual route in transition from preschool to preschool class to primary school. The thin arrows signify the different possible pathways for transition from preschool for children with ID. As illustrated a child with ID may have several transitions in just a few years.

The data for this chapter come from a longitudinal project investigating children's learning journeys from preschool into CSSID. Alongside a study of teachers within CSSID, the project also includes a multiple case study. In this chapter we present data from the first of three data collection time points in the transition process of eight children with ID. The in-depth interviews were conducted with parents whose 5–7 year old children were about to make the transition to CSSID. The families were contacted by either the municipality's coordinator for placement in CSSID, or the CSSID principals, with information about the research project, and interested families were encouraged to contact the authors. It was made clear both in the written and oral information about the project, that the parents' decision whether to participate in the study or not would not have any negative consequences for the services they would be accessing.

The interviews were semi-structured, thematically based on factors identified in previous research as important for facilitating a smooth educational transition in general, and for children with ID in particular. Specific questions were asked about stakeholder collaboration, knowledge transfer, information about the transition process and the parents' expectations linked to all these areas. In six of the cases, the parent interviewed was the mother, in one case the father and another, both the mother and father. The time point for the interviews was late spring or early summer 2014 or 2015. This period was chosen because by then all of paperwork regarding the children's eligibility for CSSID for the fall semester would be finalised and most parents had also had some contact with the schools. Most interviews were conducted at the university where the authors worked, but we also met parents at their work or in public places at their request. Interviews ranged from 50 to 90 min. In data analysis the eight interview transcripts were read several times and analysed thematically with the parental expectation as the main perspective (Kvale and Brinkman 2009; Miles and Huberman 1994). Themes are exemplified with quotations in the results.

4.5 Results

In the results we will first give a description of the different pathways in transition from preschool for the eight children. We will then present three main themes about the transition to school that emanated from the interviews: the decision to start school, smooth transition and dualism in expectations.

The educational transition to start CSSID looked different for the eight children. Two of the children were to be in inclusive education within a regular primary school and study according to the CSSID curriculum or training school subjects. Six of the children were going to attend a CSSID school. Furthermore, the eight families had decided that their child should start CSSID at different ages, see Table 4.1.

As can be seen in Table 4.1 some of the children were 6 years old and still in preschool or 7 years old and were in preschool class. This means that they lagged behind their age-peers in starting formal schooling. Alex, Brian, David, Eric, Frank and Gareth's parents had decided to let their children stay an extra year in preschool. Connor and Amanda did not stay in preschool for an extra year, but had different pathways from preschool: Connor was to start at a CSSID school at the age of 6 and Amanda at 6 years old was already in a preschool class and was due to start inclusive education in a regular primary school class.

The decision to start school was a prolonged process for these parents. The decision was always whether their child should either start inclusive education in a regular primary school or if their child should attend a separate CSSID facility. All of the parents indicated that they took advice from professionals such as special educators, preschool staff, doctors and the municipality's coordinator for placement in CSSID. By seeking advice from several sources the parents tried to come to the correct decision for their child. The parents had no previous experience of CSSID for themselves or from the educational transitions of their other children. As Connor's mother stated: *Neither I nor my husband is in that part of the world of schools so we had like no idea what school for intellectual disabilities meant, what level it is about.*

Table 4.1 The educational transition to start CSSID for the eight children

Child	Age	Transition from	Transition to
Alex	6	Preschool	CSSID school
Brian	5	Preschool	Training class in CSSID school
Connor	6	Preschool	CSSID school
David	6	Preschool	Training class in CSSID school
Eric	7	Preschool class	CSSID, inclusive education in regular primary school
Frank	6	Preschool	Training class in CSSID school
Amanda	6	Preschool class	Training class, inclusive education in regular primary school
Gareth	6	Preschool	Training class in CSSID school

4.5.1 The Decision to Start School

Two processes of decision making took place during the period in which it took parents to make their final decision. The parents tried to handle their worries about receiving the correct support for their child and at the same time the parents' struggled with wanting their child to belong to the mainstream of society.

4.5.1.1 Receiving the Correct Support

Parents were worried about the gap between the regular primary school and the CSSID schools when it came to support resources. The low number of children in classes in CSSID schools meant they had many more staff resources and the adapted learning environments and materials stood in stark contrast to the minimal support they had been told would be provided with in regular primary schools.

> We have considered and discussed if we should have him in a regular class, but that would be based on him having an assistant full time and there is no guarantee that there will be one when you move up to school. (David's mother)

> In the separate CSSID facility there is fantastic support, such small groups and so many staff and there is so much knowledge there, so that we, we had doubts: can we say no to this? (Eric's mother)

Parents had experiences of rather large groups of children in preschool and were worried about the maybe even larger classes in regular primary school. Some parents felt that their children did not have the skills to cope with large groups and some parents felt that their children's communication skills were an obstacle to participation in a regular class. In that sense the child's impairments were also a basis for the decisions taken.

> He has so many difficulties in these large groups in preschool so that we do not think that he would cope. He would be totally stressed-out in a regular school … We do not dare take the chance and then some day there is no support for him. (Alex's mother)

> I think it will be too rowdy in a regular class with twenty-five children, where he would be. I don't think it would work. Because he takes in everything, he takes in all impressions. (David's mother)

4.5.1.2 Belonging Within the Mainstream of Society

Another thought process which was part of the decision making was whether the children would become part of the mainstream society or not. For some parents this was expressed as more of an issue than by others and it seemed to be entwined with the realisation about their child's disabilities and thoughts about the future. It also seemed to be an expression about the opinion of equality and the rights of all people to participate in society.

> We want to think the same for Frank as for his sister who does not have a diagnosis, so in some way, if it works fine at the nearest school and they can, well he has the right to be accepted there. If they can meet his needs then it is the first choice for us. (Frank's mother)

> We feel that as long as she likes it here, and it works, then we want her to stay here at this regular school together with her sibling. And it is partly because we want her to be in a speaking environment and because she should be one in the town, which is a very small town. And the longer she can attend the school the better for both Amanda and everyone else, that she is part of the town. (Amanda's mother)

4.5.2 Smooth Transition

The parents were keen for their children to have as smooth a transition and as good a learning environment as possible. They discussed how to bridge knowledge in transition and what knowledge should be bridged between settings.

4.5.2.1 How to Bridge Knowledge

Collaboration between the different educational settings was discussed as being very important. All parents stressed that it was important that teachers from both settings should meet and talk.

> I think it is important that they [teachers at CSSID] at least take time to meet his preschool teacher and have a thorough talk and really listen to what she has to say. She knows Alex inside out. (Alex's mother)

> I have high hopes for these meetings between CSSID and preschool, that both have time and take time to sit down and to really go through situations and experiences, well, for Gareth's sake. (Gareth's mother)

Parents suggested that it would be easier if the child knew the teachers, the other children and the environment of the new setting.

> I think it would be good if they would consider what peers around him that he works well with. … if the children who have shown an interest in him, if they could put them in the same class, so he could have the best conditions possible to, well, have friends during breaks, have friends in the same class. (Eric's mother)

> One would like it if he had someone that he likes from preschool who can be with him at the new school in the beginning, until he gets to know the other teachers. One would prefer it, but it won't happen. It doesn't work that way. (Gareth's father)

Most parents talked about the need to prepare their children for the transition, for example, by the child visiting the new school in advance both together with the preschool staff, but also with the parents on weekends. For some parents this was more important than for others and this appeared to be dependent on the child's impairments.

> We saw the risk that he would think it was boring with school, there are some premises and places that he absolutely refuses to go to … at my sister's house it can take up to an hour before he wants to enter … if it would become the same situation with school then the whole autumn would be totally destroyed. (Frank's father)

> ..this summer; cycle pass and stay a little and play on the school's playground now and then. (Alex's mother)

One set of parents said that it was not possible to prepare their child for the new school, but that it was more important that it worked well the first time they went with him to the new school. Trying to prepare him would probably only confuse him more than help him.

4.5.2.2 Knowledge to Be Bridged

All parents brought up knowledge and information which they thought was important to pass on for a smooth transition; knowledge which they, the preschool staff and preschool class staff held. This was knowledge about personal traits, communication, everyday care needs, how to handle the child in specific situations, how to motivate the child and how to encourage the child to participate.

> … his behaviour, how he is as a person. Also what kinds of manual signs he uses and what they mean because it is not always logical. (Frank's father)

> You need to stay ahead of him. He has many fears. So you must be able to read him before certain things happen. (Alex's mother)

> … how to help her into play with others, or that you are beside her and so she can participate on equal terms and be accepted as the others. (Amanda's mother)

> They need to know that he has a self-injurious behavior. (Gareth's mother)

Some parents thought that preschool staff and preschool class staff had knowledge that they themselves may not have and that it was important for them to convey this information to the teachers in the new educational setting. They also thought that if both parents and staff would say the same things it may have better bearing.

> they see a lot how he functions in a group with other children, you cannot see that at home in the same way with siblings or friends, it is not the same thing, it is not the same kind of group of children. (Connors's mother)

> maybe they [teachers in CSSID] need to hear it from the preschool as well, so they do not think 'this is only the parents' point of view', but rather 'okay this comes from both so it must be true'. (Gareth's father)

4.5.3 Dualism in Expectations

There was a dualism in the expectations of the parents. The parents had hopes and concerns about the transition to school: they expected the teachers to be professional and to take good care of their children; but at the same time they worried about how the children would cope. They also worried about how they themselves would become involved.

4.5.3.1 Expectations of Professionalism

The parents had high expectations of the teachers in the CSSID schools. They anticipated that their professionalism and experience would help their child to learn and develop to their full potential. They also thought that the adapted environment in the CSSID schools would benefit their children.

> Those who work there, they want to work with these kinds of children, and these kinds of diagnoses. They have experiences and resources, so it feels really good if you compare to preschool; they do not have any experience or education for it. (Gareth's mother)

> From what I hear from others whose children go to CSSID, school children learn plenty when they start, and that, I guess, is our expectations too, that he will get more opportunities to develop, on the basis of his capacities of course. (Brian's mother)

> The everyday situation will be totally different. It will be more structured because it is more scheduled exactly what will happen during the day, so it will probably be calmer and more stable for him. (Frank's father)

At the same time the parents whose children were going to start regular primary school anticipated that the teachers would take the challenge and do their job.

> So now it is up to them. The teacher has the responsibility for the whole class and will have the main responsibility for the teaching materials that Amanda shall work with. (Amanda's mother)

> Maybe I have high hopes but I am thinking that the regular teacher should know this, but maybe it is not to be taken for granted. (Eric's mother)

4.5.3.2 Worries About Increased Demands

There were worries about how the children would cope with the new demands of going to school. All parents thought that to sit at a school desk and to concentrate for longer periods of time would be challenging for their children and for the teachers.

> So far there has been rather too much play. Now there will be more school, more teaching. … I think that having to sit still and to keep concentration on something that might not be that interesting, or it is difficult. Yes well to meet resistance. … I think it will be more challenging. (Eric's mother)

> On top of it all you experience him as very small. You can feel that. Oh, how is he going to be able to sit still, they had school desks. (Gareth's father)

4.5.3.3 Worries About Transportation and Information

The transition to school meant that for most of the families the transportation to school was going to be provided by the municipalities in the form of school taxis. The parents were very worried about how this would impact their children and, as a consequence of this, the parents were also concerned about how they would get information about their child's day at school.

> It is a little bit scary with school transportation, you read horror stories about children being dropped off and things like that and it probably never happens, but it does happen and how if he can't communicate… he is in a vulnerable position. (David's mother)

> What will happen with a child who bangs his head hard to the glass window if you take the wrong turn? … As a parent I know it is okay and that you can press him back, but I mean… how will the poor taxi driver know. (Gareth's father)

> The contact will disappear a little now when he will have school transportation to and from school. So the natural contact with the staff will not really be there. (David's mother)

> I expect that you get some kind of report, what has happened during the day, how the child has been, in one of those contact books or in some way to be able to follow up. (Connor's mother)

4.6 Discussion

'We can be challenged to consider transitions as times of opportunity, where children, families, educators and other stakeholders can build relationships and where transition experiences and expectations can be shaped by those involved' (Dockett 2014, p. 196). This statement illustrates the actual situation for Swedish families of children with ID very well. Our findings about parental expectations show that as each transition is unique the road lies open for individual collaborations by stakeholders and individual adjustments for the child's needs. The Swedish context of educational transition from preschool for children with ID and their families seems to be an open process because the system allows for individual choices by parents and for specific adjustments to the individual needs. The challenge that comes with this situation is that stakeholders during the transition must take on distinct and outspoken responsibilities. Dilemmas can develop because the responsibilities are tied to people and relationships instead of regulations and routines. In Sweden the guidelines for transition to school are not commonly documented and the results from our survey study indicated that only 50% of 250 teachers in CSSID schools reported that their school has a transition plan in which the routines for family collaboration were described. The other 50% either did not have a school transition plan or did not know if their school had one (Lillvist and Wilder 2015). Furthermore,

in the process of making the school choice for their children, the parents indicated that they took advice from the professionals. The main reason being given was that they had no previous experience or knowledge in this area and their decision was preceded by a long process. During the years prior to the decision about school placement being made, various professionals influenced the parents with information about school choices. Parents were also influenced by decisions by made by doctors, including the medical categorisation given when the child received a diagnosis. For parents of children with ID the parent and professional partnerships are about trust. In a review of parent and professional partnerships, Keen (2007) described the "relationship power" that can prevail in these partnerships. Relationship power concerns the ability to influence others and the official nature of professional work can sometimes discourage the parents' participation in the decision making.

However, reinforcing other research (Dockett et al. 2011; Janus et al. 2007), these eight Swedish parents were advocates for their children and, depending on the individual characteristics of the parents, they may or may not have been very comfortable or skilled in that role. Some parents were more assertive than others in their reflections and choices and, as can be seen in the results of this study, there were differences in what coloured the decisions about whether their child would start CSSID schools or inclusive education within a regular primary school. The variance is illustrated by the parents' thoughts about their child's needs and capabilities, but also by statements about thoughts of equality and rights. The parents in our sample were Swedish mother tongue speakers and had a comparatively high social and economic status and they had voluntarily chosen to participate in the study. These parents are more capable to advocate for their children in comparison to families of different backgrounds; this has been shown in other research (Pickl 2011).

Families will always strive to make the best decision in relation to the family members' beliefs, resources, capacities and wellbeing. In times of change, families will adjust their daily routines to fit the family's resources in an attempt to harmonize everyday life so that it will become sustainable. Our study gave examples of this: parents worrying about how information will be transferred between home and school; how their child will cope with the new situation; and how they can prepare their child for these major changes in their life. The goals of achieving a smooth transition should not only be child focused, but should also be outspokenly family focused. It is important that professionals take a family centred approach and make sure parents are not worried for the child's or the family's wellbeing in the transition processes.

For families of children with disabilities, educational transition carries many challenges. In educational transition, changes will occur at the individual, relationship and context levels and this chapter has shed light on the parental expectations for the educational transition of young children with ID. We have illustrated how parents have high expectations for the professionalism of teachers and hopes about resources which will support their child's learning. We have also shown that parents worry about the same problems. During transition the parents have ambitions for achieving a good outcome in their family's future wellbeing and this can be achieved by the stakeholders understanding each other's expertise and consciously working together with the parents during a child's transition to school.

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Chapter 5
'Everybody Has Got Their Own Story': Urban Aboriginal Families and the Transition to School

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5.1 Introduction

Music blares over the loudspeaker. The school playground becomes a hive of activity as children rush to grab their schoolbags, gulp down the last of breakfast, stow handballs or dash to the toilets before heading to class lines. Final goodbyes are exchanged with parents, some taking this opportunity to leave, already thinking of what needs to be done before it is time for the afternoon pick up. A few

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S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_5

'parent-helpers' have already started on the lunch orders at the canteen. Several parents, scattered in groups around the playground, are chatting about the weekend or upcoming sports carnival. One parent is trying unsuccessfully to pacify a school-aged child who is reluctant to line up. Near the staff room door two parents wait expectantly, hoping to intercept 'the teacher' for a quick word, or to determine when they are needed for reading groups today. The screech of feedback echoes as a disembodied voice offers a cheery 'good morning', and summons everyone to silence… the school day officially begins!

Throughout Australia this scenario plays out regularly on school days. Parent involvement in schools is not something new (Henderson and Berla 1994). Parents[1] continue to play a significant role in children's school learning (LaRocque et al. 2011). Developing family-school partnerships has been part of school policies and community development for some time, and remains a major challenge and an area for targeted growth despite considerable investment of time and resources (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2008). In this chapter, we define parent involvement and its role in children's learning and in family-school partnerships. A model of parent involvement is described and the reader is introduced to the rhetoric-reality gap. Three case studies, developed from parent and teacher interviews, are used to show the range of experiences of parent involvement and relationships that exist between families and schools for participants of the Gudaga Goes to School Study, a study of urban Aboriginal children's and families' transition to school (Kaplun et al. 2016).

5.2 What Is Parent Involvement in Schools?

Parent involvement is participation by parents in activities that promote children's educational processes and their academic and social well-being (Fishel and Ramirez 2005). Factors influencing parent involvement include ethnicity, family composition, income, education level, and parental work status (LaRocque et al. 2011). Parent involvement is a shared responsibility of families, schools and communities to support children's learning 'from birth to young adulthood' (Weiss et al. 2010, p. 6).

A plethora of literature exists on the effectiveness and value of parent involvement (Hornby and Lafaele 2011; LaRocque et al. 2011), with reported benefits varying depending on the way parent involvement is defined (Chenhall et al. 2011). Parent involvement can facilitate partnerships between parents and schools, even before children start school (Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) 2008), and provide a major source of support once children attend school (Henderson and Mapp 2002). A growing body of multidisciplinary research upholds the assertion that 'parents' attitudes, behaviours, and actions in relation to their children's education have a substantial impact on student learning and educational attainment'

[1] The term 'parent' is used to signify the person most responsible for the primary care of the child which may be the biological parent, grandparent, foster carer or guardian.

(Emerson et al. 2012, p. 9). Utilizing strength-based views of families helps to promote positive, ongoing parent involvement and formulates strong relationships between home, school, and community (Armstrong et al. 2012). These relationships can help to reduce families' vulnerabilities (Dockett et al. 2011) and develop resilience in young people (Smart et al. 2008).

5.3 A Framework of Parent Involvement in Schools

Several theoretical models and guides, developed to understand parent involvement (Hornby and Lafaele 2011), support the notion that a range of parent involvement exists (Higgins and Morley 2014), with considerable variations in the ways parents are involved, types of activities, and changes that occur in parent involvement over the child's school life. Epstein's (1992, 2006) framework of parent involvement draws on Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) bioecological theory and was influenced by works regarding families as educators (Koonce and Harper 2005), social connections between families-schools-communities (Jackson and Remillard 2005) and shared responsibilities in education (Ryan et al. 2006). It continues to provide a useful understanding of parent involvement and the connections that underlie family-school partnerships. In Epstein's (2006) model, six categories define parent involvement in schools:

1. *Parenting*: establishing home contexts that support children's school learning;
2. *Communicating*: between home and school about children's progress/school programs;
3. *Volunteering*: parent help and support;
4. *Learning at home*: provide material/concepts about how to support students at home with school work and other curricular decisions;
5. *Decision-making*: involved in school decision-making; parent leaders/representatives; and
6. *Collaborating with the community*: identify/incorporate resources and services from community to grow school programs, family practices, student learning and development.

Overlapping spheres of family-school-community form collaborative partnerships that develop "social capital" – 'the informational, attitudinal, and behavioural norms and skills that individuals can spend or invest to improve their chances for success in societal institutions, such as schools' (Sanders and Epstein 1998, p. 3). The School-Family-Partnership Framework, based on Epstein's model, is used in Australian schools to support parent involvement (DEEWR 2008). It encourages schools and parents to contextualize the framework 'to fit particular conditions of family demographics, student developmental needs, school structures, and community resources' (Moore and Lasky 1999, p. 18).

Epstein's model has been criticized for its individualistic, school-centric view of parent involvement, emphasising school priorities, goals and views of the parent role that fail to acknowledge and support the diverse ways parents, particularly

those from cultural minority groups, are involved in their child's learning and education (Baquedano-López et al. 2013). This criticism is particularly pertinent in multicultural Australia where socio-economic inequality is a well-recognized problem in Australian school education, particularly regarding Aboriginal students in low-income families (Kenway 2013). Globally, educational inequity raises concern with a need to combine 'quality with equity' (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2012, p. 170). Building inclusive contexts for all children and parents may help to reduce inequities and inequalities in education and may provide benefits to both individuals and society.

5.4 Parent Involvement in Schools for Families of Aboriginal Children

Parents are significant role models for their children, with children more likely to adopt positive attitudes about school when parents have high expectations of achievement and school commitment (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005). Children's early experiences in the home and community influence their transition to school. For example, attending high quality early childhood services can develop the skills and attributes children need to assist a positive transition to school (Magnuson and Shager 2010). In contrast, experiences of disadvantage can restrict children's access to resources and experiences, impacting interactions that foster learning and development, and leading to problematic and challenging school transitions (Smart et al. 2008). Families from disadvantaged or minority cultural backgrounds also report lower rates of parent involvement (Hornby and Lafaele 2011).

Not all Australian Aboriginal families experience disadvantage, but they are over-represented amongst the most disadvantaged and marginalised families in Australia (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service (SCRGSP 2014). Historically, educational policy and practices have not supported the school engagement or educational attainment of Aboriginal Australians. A persistent, well-documented gap exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students' school performance (SCRGSP 2014). The achievement of positive educational pathways for Aboriginal children remains a key strategy and a pathway to empower their communities (Mason-White 2013). Instilling confidence and empowering parents to negotiate the school context by developing parent's knowledge, skills and familiarity with the school system are important undertakings for supporting all children's learning (DEEWR 2011). 'Interactions between families and schools set the scene for ongoing engagement in education' (Dockett et al. 2011, p. 1).

Schools present different environments from home and prior-to-school services; environments that may lack understanding and provisioning for Aboriginal ways of learning and culturally specific knowledge (Hutchins et al. 2007). Parents of Australian Aboriginal children were reported to expect these differences to exist between home and school environments and realised the need to negotiate this space (Chenhall et al. 2011). Perceived power imbalances between teachers and parents were reported to inhibit parents of Aboriginal children from participating and com-

municating regularly with schools (Dockett et al. 2006). These parents see teachers as professionals and expect them to make contact if and when problems arise with their child (Lea et al. 2011). Similar to other cultural minority groups, parents may support Aboriginal children's learning at home in ways that are not "visible" at school (Jackson and Remillard 2005). When parents' "hidden" support is not recognised, important insights about their children's learning are dismissed and they may withdraw further from their advocacy role (Koonce and Harper 2005). Other factors that may hamper levels of parent involvement include teachers' beliefs, and the opportunities they provide for parent involvement (Berthelsen and Walker 2008), parental employment or care of younger children (LaRocque et al. 2011).

Programs developed and targeted to remediate inequities that exist for Aboriginal families, and to improve parent involvement in children's education, have shown some effectiveness in building parent involvement (Higgins and Morley 2014). Programs such as: FAST™, an eight-week, early intervention and prevention program designed to strengthen family functioning and build resilience in school aged children (Sanders and Epstein 1998) and the Indigenous Parent Factor (IPF), designed to empower parents to understand how their children learn and improve parents' self-confidence, also created a flow-on effect to parent involvement and self-learning (Muller 2009). Research in different political and cultural contexts, such as with Canadian Indigenous communities, has determined barriers to developing effective family-school partnerships, which may be pertinent in the Australian context. These factors include negative associations with school, communication issues and unintentional 'segregation' through support offered to Aboriginal students (Dockett et al. 2006; Mason-White 2013).

5.5 The Rhetoric-Reality Gap

Despite growing understandings and information about parent involvement, a gap remains between what is understood from the literature (rhetoric) and what is implemented in schools (reality) – 'the rhetoric-reality gap' (Hornby and Lafaele 2011, p. 50). Barriers contributing to this gap include: 'parents' beliefs' and perceptions about parent involvement; 'current life contexts'; differences in goals, agendas, attitudes and language; economic, political, historical and demographic factors; and children's age, behaviour, learning and development (Hornby and Lafaele 2011, p. 39). Schools can lead the development of effective and successful parent involvement when partnerships incorporate the values of 'democratic collaboration; student, family and community empowerment; social justice; and strengths focus' (Bryan and Henry 2012, p. 409). However, schools must reach out to parents whose voices are seemingly 'invisible' in the school context (Chenhall et al. 2011; Lea et al. 2011). Many schools establish partnerships with parents that are 'well-intentioned', but fall short in effectively assisting students to build the strengths and resilience that can enhance their personal and educational outcomes (Bryan and Henry 2012, p 409). School leaders must re-envision 'the involvement of parents, families, and communities from the current dominant deficit narrative to one of collaboration, promise and

hope' (Boutte and Johnson 2014, p. 167). Gaining an understanding of beliefs and perceptions about parent involvement held by all parents (Hornby and Lafaele 2011) may provide a gateway to making schools more inclusive environments to support every child's learning (Block et al. 2014; McDonald et al. 2015).

5.6 The Gudaga Study

The Gudaga Goes to School Study (Gudaga-GtS) (Kaplun et al. 2016) explored the early educational experiences and transition to school for 117 urban Aboriginal children and their families attending schools in southwest Sydney, Australia; the Gudaga-GtS study was part of the Gudaga Study, a continuing longitudinal study of the health, development and service use of a birth cohort of Aboriginal children and their families (Comino et al. 2010). Three case studies are presented, summarised from semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers of Gudaga-GtS children. Parent interviews occurred on five occasions: prior to school start; in the first year of school which is named Kindergarten (beginning and end), Year 1 (beginning) and Year 2 (end). Teacher interviews occurred on three occasions: Kindergarten (beginning), Year 1 (end) and Year 2 (end). Interview questions focused on: children's social, behavioural and academic progress at school; views of expectations of the roles of parents, teachers, and schools in children's learning; parent-teacher interactions; parental involvement with children's learning; and aspirations for children. The case studies describe a range of parent involvement. The development of parent involvement and partnerships between home and school is discussed, focusing on supports and challenges to involvement. In each of the following case studies, the names of respondents are replaced by pseudonyms.

5.6.1 Case Study 1

Danni is the single mother of three children, including Jameira who is presently in Year Two at a local public school. Jamiera's Aboriginality comes from her father. Danni left school when she was 15 years old to have Jameira, and has since felt uncomfortable interacting with teachers or being in the school setting, avoiding visits to school whenever she can. Jamiera's aunty takes Jamiera to school and picks her up afterwards. Danni works full time, arriving home at 3:30pm. Danni has not formally met Jameira's teachers and never attends parent-teacher nights. However, she does attend special events such as the Easter Hat parade or Christmas concerts where she can observe without having to engage in one-to-one interactions with the teacher. Danni offered the following view of volunteering at the school:

> So there are parents that, like, get up there – … and do it, and I am not really…a very sociable person, so I am not going to really get involved because that is not me. So I am not going to go up there and get involved and feel uncomfortable… I'd be too embarrassed.

Danni is not fully aware of what happens during Jamiera's school day. For example, she remembered that Jameira was going on an excursion but couldn't remember where or when, and she was not sure whether Jameira participated in the Aboriginal program at school. Danni was confident that the school would contact her if there was anything she needed to know about Jameira's learning or behaviour.

Jameira's teachers were happy with her progress and praised her. She was described as an *animated*, *bubbly little thing* and a *kind girl* with particularly strong reading skills. Only one teacher, in Year 2, has attempted to contact Danni using a letter sent home to inform her that Jamiera was reading well and asking her to continue to encourage Jamiera's home reading. Danni returned a short note saying that the readers being sent home were too hard. The teacher was confused as she had heard Jameira read these same books confidently in class, and made no further contact with Danni to follow-up. The teacher felt that Jameira was doing well –*she does her home reading at home, she does her homework at home; it reflects in her class work…you can tell she's had some sort of help at home* and there was no need to continue to engage Danni if she felt reluctant. Despite her reluctance to engage with the school, Danni described wanting Jameira to have a good education so she could *have a good life, not the life I have had*. Danni is thinking about returning to college to complete her own schooling to Year 10. While she sees education as a stepping stone for her daughter towards securing a job and financial security, Danni points out how pretty Jameira is and says that Jameira's best chance in life is to be a hip hop dancer *or something like that, that can get her famous*.

Supports to Danni's Involvement

- Established a home context that supported Jamiera's school learning including homework routines.
- Recognised school would make contact if required about Jamiera's learning and behaviour. Willingness to respond when contact made.
- Attended some school-based activities not requiring face-to-face meetings such as concerts.
- Aspirational – saw education as a stepping stone to employment and financial security however juxtaposed with goals of fame for the child as a hip hop dancer.

Barriers to Danni's Involvement

- Own schooling and 'embarrassment' at the thought of engaging with teachers.
- Missed opportunities for open communication between teacher and parent as:
  - No follow up about home reading.
  - No alternatives to provide information or communicate about Jamiera's day.
  - Little understanding of parent situation or effort to involve parent in day-to-day schooling.

5.6.2 Case Study 2

Erica is, according to her mum (Cassandra), *a really happy, cheeky little girl who just loves everything…and … always has a go at anything*. She is the second of three children in her family. Erica's Aboriginality comes from her father. Cassandra readily identified a number of factors that helped Erica make a smooth transition to school. Erica's older sister was in Year 2 at the same school so Erica knew the school grounds as she had been with her mum and sister during school drop off and pick up. The year before starting school Erica had attended a preschool that was just around the corner from the school. Many of her preschool friends started school with her. Erica attended a transition program in the year prior to starting at the school; she got to know her teacher, her classroom and others in the class.

Cassandra was not surprised when, on her first day at Kindergarten, Erica simply said *Bye Mum. S*he recalled how Erica just *walked in the door* [laugh] . . . *she was fine* and at the end of that day *she came out [of the classroom] with a big smile on her face*. Cassandra feels it is important to be involved in the school as much as possible. She does this in a number of ways. The whole family attends barbecues hosted by the school. Cassandra sees this as a good way to raise any concerns she has about the school in a relaxed and informal manner. She volunteers in her daughters' classrooms, which she finds challenging; she can only go when her youngest daughter is in day care, and even then divides her available time between two classrooms. Cassandra is comfortable meeting with the teacher after school, attending parent-teacher interviews and asking for additional work to do with Erica at home. During the first term of Kindergarten she was, for example, concerned that Erica wasn't learning enough and asked the teacher for a copy of the sight word flashcards to practice at home with Erica. She monitors Erica's homework and at-home reader. Throughout her Kindergarten year, Erica has become increasingly independent with her homework. She is now confident and happy to do it without Cassandra's help.

Cassandra reports that, when asked, Erica has long said she'd like to be a teacher. More recently though Cassandra has noted she says she'd like to be a vet (her older sister would like to be a doctor). Cassandra is very proud of the high aspirations held by her daughters and contrasts their future plans with her childhood:

> When I was at school I didn't have a really set goal of anything. I was just going with the flow. And I don't know what I want to do and now I'm a full time mum [laugh]… I'm glad that as soon as you ask 'What do you want to do?' [They reply] 'I want to be a doctor'; 'I want to be a vet'. When I was asked that when I was young [I'd say], 'I don't know' [laugh].

Cassandra is actively engaged with her girls' school, keeps a close eye on Erica's academic progress and social development, and regularly questions her daughters on their aspirations. She hopes her daughters will have a different life to the one she had. She is determined her story will not be the life experience of her daughters. Now her daughters are settled at school Cassandra is considering what she wants to do with her life and wistfully admits she is still unsure. Leaving school at Year 10 with no goals or aspirations of her own, and happy to go with the flow, she now finds herself with no skills or training.

Supports to Cassandra's Involvement

- Recognised importance of parent role to support child learning, including attending parent-teacher nights.
- Participated as a family in activities organised by school such as barbeques.
- Assisted with homework (although child is becoming more independent in managing homework tasks).
- Good relationship with class teacher.
- Advocated so Erica was learning and doing well at school.
- Aspirational for children to do well and complete further study.

Barriers to Cassandra's Involvement

- Care of younger children.
- Time (especially to assist in both children's classes/activities).

5.6.3 Case Study 3

Don is the middle child of a large family. His mother is unable to care for him and his three siblings, so they now live permanently with relatives, Chris and his wife. Don's Aboriginality comes from both his mother and father.

Don was described as having a *nervous* start to school. The time immediately prior to school start was difficult for Don and his family. Don did not attend pre-school because he moved to live with his relatives. He had little opportunity to develop local friends and *was very quiet; he was pulled to himself 'cause he never been away from his siblings.* Chris was particularly concerned as Don had some behavioural and learning challenges, and expected that Don would do poorly at school: *I didn't have much – much expectation of him to learn as a normal child.* Don started school in a small multi-stage class to support identified learning needs and despite Chris' low expectations and the challenging life circumstances prior to starting school his teacher reported, *He came really settled. He came with reports that said he wouldn't be, but he was very settled from the very beginning…Yeah, so he just transitioned really well which was surprising, considering the turmoil he had come from.* Despite being settled at school Chris was having difficulties with Don's behaviour at home. Chris's wife would not attend the school due to negative personal school experiences. Chris felt similarly but believed he had to support the children and walked them to and from school every day, informally meeting Don's teacher: *I see the teachers every day. Yeah, I've got to take him to the school in the morning and pick him up in the afternoon.* The teacher would tell Chris what Don was doing and enjoying at school, particularly in cooking classes, and Chris began to try to incorporate these enjoyable things at home; *Oh, he wants to cook it down there, but I can't let him do that with me because the, er, the bench is too high. And I don't want him to stand on a chair. But sometimes I put him [up] to sit with me.*

In Year 1 Don continued with the same teacher in the small multi-stage support class. Don had a somewhat unsettling start attributed to *the change in the environment in class, or ….[perhaps] in response to being away from school and that routine from a big five-week break* but this quickly resolved. Don was also integrated into a single-stage Year 1 class with a different teacher and although Don was reported to be working and learning well in the classroom, his teacher was concerned that he was not making friends and was isolated on the playground. Both his teachers worked together to better connect Don with his Year 1 peers.

Chris continued to experience difficulties with Don's behaviour at home, and remained somewhat unconvinced by the teachers' reports that these behaviours did not occur at school: *Oh, she comes to say hello, 'Don was good,' if he – yeah. I mean I take their word for it. What else can I say?* Chris maintained his frequent informal meetings with both teachers: *I see every teacher twice a day, every one of them, and every time they've got something to say to me, they will come down and talk to me*. Despite scepticism about Don's classroom behaviour, and behaviour problems at home, Chris admits that Don was not *backwards, not this one. He's – he's cluey. And he did learn a lot.* Chris knew Don was doing well: *he's sitting there, he's communicating, he listens, he cooperates with the teachers.*

Don's transition into Year 2 was a continuation of his spending time with his peers as they moved into the single-stage Year 2 class with a new teacher, and spending some time in the smaller supported class with the same teacher. Don was happy: *He's happy. He had – he had his teacher* [support class] *there with him and that's it. As long as she's there he's sweet as.* Chris did not attend formal parent-teacher interviews because of his regular informal engagement with the teachers: *They got about four times a year, their parent teacher interview, they tell – tell you, ah, but with our – with Don, yeah, I go down there, they – they tell me all that before even – I don't have to go to parent, the teachers' meeting.* Don's interests expanded in Year 2 and included both his ongoing interests in cooking, and in planes and helicopters. Both the school and his parents supported this interest through excursions to airports; *He's fascinated with that thing, doesn't matter, it flies, he's in it. That's his favourite.* Don continued to do well at school, however, problems at home also continued: *He is very, very polite at school, that's Don. He does whatever teacher asks him, that's Don. When he comes home, he's a quack. He doesn't want to do nothing.* Despite these problems, however, Chris now has aspirations for Don: *I hope he – he just be a Don, a nice person*, and *be good in the school, learn everything, get your pilot license and then you be – you could fly helicopters.*

In addition to class activities, Don was supported by the Aboriginal teacher throughout these early years of school. Augmenting the integration of Aboriginal cultural learning within the classroom, Don attended a weekly activity for Aboriginal children. Chris is happy the school supports Don's Aboriginal identity: w*hatever helps them to learn their own ways, their own culture…go for it,* but he has concerns the weekly activities take time away from class learning and could be divisive: *but I feel if you keep going like that and we separate them from the others it will create racism.* Chris ultimately expressed the utmost confidence in the school despite his own poor experiences as a child: *I think he's in very, very capable – capable hands*

with his – with his teachers in school; and the value of education: *Education, which is a must. Learning, it’s essential. It doesn’t matter if you’ve got a – difficulty to learning; you’ve still got to learn. Without education, you’re nothing.*

Supports to Chris’ Involvement

- Constant and informal engagement and positive feedback about the child’s learning and activities at school.
- Awareness of child’s interests and strengths at school supported at home.
- Supported to develop a positive view of the child’s learning abilities.
- Respect for each other’s role in child’s learning and growth.
- Openness, understanding and acceptance of contextual life factors that impacted on parent and child.
- No pigeon-holing or stereotyping of child and family but a genuine willingness to build on resources and strengths over time.
- Additional teacher improved monitoring and support for child and family.
- Valued education and confidence in school.
- Consistency of same support teacher over time.
- Aspirational – both personal and educational aspirations for the child.

Barriers to Chris’ Involvement

- Initially, expectations of child’s learning potential.
- Family commitments and life challenges.
- Stresses of instant family – change in roles.
- Poor personal experiences as a child with education system.

5.7 Discussion

The case studies show a range of experiences of involvement at school and the nature and type of relationships, or the lack of, which existed between the school and home contexts. The different opportunities and challenges that families and teachers faced in developing partnerships are shown. Core areas of overlap in the case studies existed with similarities in parent involvement that fit the categories of Epstein’s framework (1992, 2006) – whereby families: established support for children to complete homework (parenting; learning at home); recognized the importance of their role in the child’s learning (communicating; learning at home); trusted the school would make contact if something were needed and were prepared to respond (communicating); formed a connection with the school and/or the child’s teacher (communicating); and had aspirations for the child’s future, to do well at school and to achieve more than the parents had achieved in school and in life (parenting). Clearly there are areas for growth in the relationships, where the framework does not capture the types and nature of ‘hidden’ supports according to the strengths and resources of each family.

There were clear areas where families' circumstances differed. Parent factors prevented Danni from being involved at school due to her current life context, history of school interactions and feelings of embarrassment (Hornby and Lafaele 2011). Chris also spoke of personal (and his wife's) negative school experiences. Aboriginal families' may have negative associations with schools, such as feelings of alienation and fear, due to their histories (Herbert 2006). However these barriers can be overcome, as shown in Chris' case. Through their informal interactions and persistence Don's teachers developed a rapport with Chris (and Chris with the teachers) that helped develop trust. This was not easy initially. The teachers helped Chris to become involved without pressuring him to attend formalised meetings and slowly developed his appreciation for Don's learning style, abilities and interests. An advantage in Chris' situation was having the same teacher in the multistage class over Don's initial school years.

Cassandra's experiences of parent involvement were positive from the beginning. Cassandra had a good relationship with the teacher and was able to advocate early in the school term for Erica's learning. Cassandra was involved in a more "visible" way in the school context. She recognised the importance of her parenting role in supporting Erica's learning and participated in activities in the school context by attending barbeques and parent teacher nights. Cassandra volunteered in the classroom. She supported Erica's school learning at home, requesting resources from the teacher, helping Erica to become independent in completing her homework activities. Cassandra also experienced some barriers to her involvement in the form of care of her younger children and time.

In the case studies, informal interactions to exchange information between parents and teachers were important in establishing trust and gaining feedback from parents; they helped to build parent confidence and understanding of the school system. Parents are usually receptive to and trusting of their child's teachers (Pianta et al. 2001). Teachers provided positive feedback to parents in interactions, opening communication pathways that welcomed parents' concerns and ideas to support their children's learning. These exchanges occurred without parents feeling uncomfortable in formalized face-to-face meetings. Teachers often initiated these exchanges and persisted to engage parents. Don's teacher tried to understand Chris' perspective and worked through Chris' preconceptions about Don's abilities to learn, and finally encouraged Chris to be aspirational for Don's future. Jamiera's teacher attempted to encourage Danni to continue to support Jamiera's reading at home through a letter, realising that she was getting reading support from someone at home. The contrasting approaches however showed very different trajectories for parent involvement. Parent-teacher exchanges in Chris' case strengthened the parent-child relationship and parental involvement, ensuring a more positive outcome for Don's learning. For Danni, the parent-teacher relationship stalled.

Overall, the case studies presented a range of parent involvement behaviours, highlighting supports and barriers. There is a common theme that links the individual experiences of parent involvement: effective communication between parents and teachers supported the family-school partnership. Development of effective partnerships relies on mutual understandings and respect between collaborators;

this must be initiated by gaining an understanding of parents' beliefs and perceptions about education. The case studies showed these parents were involved in supporting their children's learning although they were not visibly active in the school. Lack of "visible" involvement at school does not mean parents are not interested in their children's education (Crozier and Davies 2007). The teacher plays a critical role in initiating and maintaining effective communication with the parent and in initiating and sustaining parent involvement (Anderson and Minke 2007; Green et al. 2007). The key to building effective communication and strong family-school partnerships lies in focusing on common goals for children's learning. By establishing common ground with parents, particularly those whose voices are seemingly "invisible" in the school context, schools can create more inclusive environments for learning that provide support for all children and families.

Schools must provide safe and comfortable contexts for parents to share their beliefs and concerns, and have them acknowledged, respected and addressed. The shift presented in these case studies saw teachers utilising informal ways to engage and involve parents without pressuring them to attend formalised school activities such as parent teacher interviews. Focusing on parent involvement only at school misses the diversity of parents' responses to support their child's learning in other contexts such as home.

Epstein's categories of decision making (5) and collaborating with the community (6) were not mentioned by parents in these case studies. Cassandra, the most "visibly" involved parent of the three was not involved at the decision making level at the school or in drawing community resources and services into the school. Involving parents in ways to informally express their ideas may be an easier way to gain the perspectives of "invisible" parents in decision making and collaborating rather than through formal groups and meetings. As evidenced in these case studies, some of the parents of Aboriginal children did not feel comfortable or feel the need to be involved at the school but were still very involved in their child's learning and education. Parents do not have to be "visibly" involved in the school context to want the best for their children, but they must be actively involved in decisions about their children's learning to achieve the best outcomes.

5.8 Concluding Thoughts

We began this chapter defining parent involvement and explored the idea of family-school partnerships and the mutual understandings and reciprocity that underlies these relationships. Parent involvement is important and beneficial to children's learning and impacts on their educational trajectories. The notion of parent involvement must acknowledge support for children's learning outside the school context and not rely on parents being "visible" in school as a sign of their commitment to children's learning. The reality-rhetoric gap sustains imbalances in schools; imbalances that exist when schools are not places that are inclusive to all families and children, and where school goals and dominant voices persist. Three cases studies

of Australian Aboriginal children and their families in the transition to school were presented noting the supporting factors and barriers to parent involvement. Australian Aboriginal families have complex histories that may impact on their interactions with schools. We responded with ways to transform thinking about the practices that drive parent involvement using strength based perspectives of families and highlighted the critical role of the teacher. The case studies reinforced the need for schools and teachers to consider informal ways to involve parents in their child's education. It is hoped that the case studies will assist understanding and respect for the different ways families are involved in, and support their children's learning and development, even though they may not be "visible" at school. More importantly, this chapter has highlighted the importance of persistence and the commitment of parents, schools, and communities to work together in partnership to provide safe and inclusive contexts to support every child's learning and development.

We can walk together to change the status quo. Ken Wyatt (Australian Inspirations 2016).

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Part II
Resources Families Bring to Transition to School

Chapter 6
Primary School Choice and the 'Good' Mother: Balancing Complex Support Needs and Responsibility

Sue Dockett and Bob Perry

6.1 Introduction

The principle of school choice has been a key element in Australian educational policy since the 1970s, when government funding was extended to non-government schools (Campbell et al. 2009). The notion of school choice is supported by both major political parties, and often by the general public, as a 'good thing *per se*' (Angus 2013, p. 1). One recent example of the focus on school choice has been the establishment of the *MySchool* website, which promotes national comparison of standardised test results across schools described as having similar student cohorts, at least according to socio-economic status (Exley 2013; Mockler 2013). In launching *MySchool*, the then Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, argued that the transparency afforded by the public reporting of standardised test scores and other comparative information on the website empowered parents to make informed choices about schools (Robinson 2010).

6.2 School Choice

School choice is a central plank of neoliberal approaches to education, fitting in with the 'agenda of economic and social transformation under the sign of the free market' (Connell 2013, p. 100). The underlying premise of neoliberal approaches is that responding to market forces will improve educational quality by encouraging competition among students and schools. Pressure from parents – positioned as consumers of educational services – is regarded as the main driver for educational

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© Springer International Publishing AG 2017

S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_6

innovation and change, in theory pushing up educational standards. As a result, schools are expected to demonstrate increased levels of efficiency (Hoxby 2000); "underperforming" schools are expected to become innovative (Woessmann et al. 2007); and students and parents are expected to experience increased levels of satisfaction (Smrekar and Goldring 1998). Critics of neoliberal approaches to education argue that the positioning of parents as consumers benefits those with greater economic and cultural capital, exacerbating divisions and inequities in educational access (Angus 2013), increasing social stratification along lines of race and class (Bifulco and Ladd 2006), and contributing to residualisation as talented students leave local schools, particularly in disadvantaged areas (Lamb 2007).

Reference to cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) emphasises ways in which education works in favour of those who are already advantaged, as schools value and reward those who reflect widely shared, high status cultural signals (Lamont and Lareau 1988), and parents use education to perpetuate class divisions and privilege. Cultural capital influences the strategies employed by parents to promote their children's access to, and engagement in, education and the value accorded to these. For example, valued modes of parental participation in education include providing an enriched educational environment at home, volunteering at school, supporting the work of the school, advocacy on behalf of children, and generating support for the school (Kimelberg 2014). These modes are most often associated with middle-class parents able to draw on substantial economic and cultural capital (Lareau 2003).

Cultural capital is intertwined with family habitus (Bourdieu 1997). Drawing on family stories, traditions and expectations, habitus generates a set of dispositions that support particular practices within families (Dumais 2002). These dispositions frame both limits and possibilities which guide decision-making. Habitus often includes intergenerational elements, where the experiences of older family members influence decisions made for, and by, young family members (see Chap. 8). While habitus may establish the viability of some practices within families, individuals have the potential to enact alternative ways of being and doing. Both of these options are reported in the school choice literature, as some parents make decisions based on replicating their own school experiences, while others choose schools that will provide experiences unlike their own (Fuller et al. 2011).

Australian, as well as international research, identifies middle-class parents as those who feel that they, and their children, have the most to gain (or lose) through school choice. For example, Campbell et al. (2009) report the anxieties of middle-class parents as they jockey for access to the "best" private or public schools, and English (2009) describes the ways in which "good" parents optimise the advantages available to their children through school choice. Similar trends are reported in the UK (Ball 2006; Exley 2013) and North America (Kimelberg 2014; Posey 2012).

Middle-class parents tend to be well-placed to make informed school choices because of 'their financial and cultural resources, because their children are regarded as good risks, and because they are sufficiently education literate to compose applications that will gain their children places' (Angus 2013, p. 10). In contrast, less advantaged parents are reported to choose schools that are 'outside middle-class norms of desirability' (Exley 2013, p. 78), possibly due to disengagement in the

educational market place, the perception that such schools do not cater for families “like them” (Reay and Ball 1997), and/or lack of success in accessing more desirable schools (Angus 2013; Windle 2009).

While the advent of resources such as the *MySchool* website suggests that choice is open to all, Clarke (2012) describes this as an illusion. Middle class parents not only engage actively in school choice, they also have a wide range of educational options from which to choose as they mobilise economic, social, and cultural capital (Kimelberg 2014). In contrast, less advantaged parents, who typically have fewer resources, are assumed to exercise limited choice, often opting for the local public school (Raveaud and van Zanten 2007). In some instances this is described as a “non-choice” (Fuller and Elmore 1996), or “default’ choice” (Vincent et al. 2010a). However, such labels may well mask a complex evaluation of available options for these families.

6.3 Good Mothers and School Choice

The focus on competition, and the push for parents to secure their own children’s futures through the “right” school choice, means that such success may only be achievable at the expense of others (Mockler 2013). Associated with the focus on school choice is the promotion of individualism over inclusiveness, as parents use their resources to generate a competitive edge for their children (Oria et al. 2007; Wilkins 2010), under the rhetoric of wanting to “do the best” for their child. Indeed, not to do so casts parents as irresponsible: ‘The neoliberal position is that all responsible parents must choose carefully and vote with their feet in the consumer market…it would be irresponsible parenting not to be an economically rational chooser of schools’ (Angus 2013, p. 8). Following this rhetoric, “good” or “responsible” parents, are those who shop around for schools, weighing up the costs and benefits of different educational options, with the aim of enrolling their child in a school that best fits their needs, interests and aspirations.

The work of school choice falls primarily to mothers (Kimelberg 2014). This extends to the physical effort required to seek out information, visit schools and complete the necessary enrolment procedures for their children, and to the emotional work of managing the process (Aitchison 2010). While this can be an onerous task for all, it is particularly burdensome for parents whose children have special education needs or whose families have other complex support needs (Janus et al. 2008).

“Good” mothers engage in “responsible” parenting. Current notions of good mothering (Griffith and Smith 2005), have reified middle-class values, normalising activities such as active school choice (Exley 2013) and concerted cultivation (Lareau 2003), where parents provide a wide range of learning and enrichment activities for their children. The finding that less advantaged mothers tend not to engage in these behaviours can quickly lead to a deficit model of parenting (Exley 2013). Compared with their middle-class counterparts, working class mothers are

more likely to be labelled as failing, or irresponsible parents. This is despite consistent efforts from these mothers, towards "betterment"; seeking positive experiences and outcomes for their children (Vincent et al. 2010a).

Moves towards competition, individualism and responsibility in education come together in narratives about school choice. Positive educational outcomes can be attributed to "good" choices; poor educational outcomes to "poor" parental choices (Wilkins 2010). Neoliberal approaches assume that the availability of metrics to report school performance promotes informed school choices. Yet, academic measures are only one of the factors reported to influence school choices. Others include school reputation, often conveyed through social networks (Kimelberg 2014); the nature of the student population (Ho 2011); social factors and the likelihood that children will "fit in" at the school (Reay and Ball 1997); physical factors, including class size, supervision and support; and the location and accessibility of the school (Raveaud and van Zanten 2007).

The contexts in which families live contribute to educational decision making. The resources and connections within communities generate and reflect cultural, economic and social capital (Bourdieu 1986), influencing the opportunities available within that community and contributing to a collective sense of what is accessible, valued and important in choosing a school (Raveaud and van Zanten 2007). Much of the recent focus on school choice attends to the practices and discourses of middle class families choosing secondary schools for their children. Relatively few studies address the choices of families considered disadvantaged, or families choosing primary school for their children. Even fewer studies investigate the primary school choices of families living with disadvantage. This chapter explores intersections in the narratives of school choice and responsibility for a small group of mothers described as having complex support needs.

6.4 Background to the Research

Two issues provide background to this study: explanation of the term families with complex support needs and an overview of the context of public school choice in New South Wales (NSW), Australia.

Families with complex support needs experience 'multiple problems, which may be problems for the parents, for the children, or for the whole family' (Katz et al. 2007, p. 33). They are less likely than other families to have positive relationships and engagement with schools (Smart et al. 2008). It is not uncommon for such families to be characterised as both vulnerable and disadvantaged. In this paper, the term "complex support needs" is preferred to other labels, as it lends itself to consideration of the strengths (Saleebey 1997), not only the problems, faced by these families. Choosing a primary school, and having children start school, represent both opportunities and challenges for these families.

Public school choice in NSW is based largely on place of residence. While the government school enrolment policy notes that 'parents may seek to enrol their

child in the school of their choice' (New South Wales Department of Education and Training 1997, p. 6), enrolment priority may be directed towards children living within a designated residential area (zone). Enrolment of out-of-zone children is only considered when resources are available and specific criteria are met. In practice, this means that schools have some control over the number, and nature, of out-of-zone students who are accepted for enrolment. Within the government school system in NSW, there is provision for children with special education needs to be enrolled in regular classes at their local school; support classes within some regular schools; or special schools that cater for children with more severe disabilities (New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2010). Some independent (non-government) schools also provide programs for children with special needs. Enrolment in these programs is dependent on assessment of individual children and the availability of places.

In NSW, parents also sometimes have choice about when to start their child at school. While children must have started school by the time they are 6 years old, they may start in the year that they turn 5, provided they do this before July 31 in that year. Given that all children in NSW start school at the end of January, this means that children aged between 4 years and 6 months and 6 years could commence the first year of school (Kindergarten) together, and some parents have the choice of starting their children when they are aged between 4½ and 5 or between 5½ and 6 years.

6.5 Research Focus and Approach

As part of a broader project exploring the experiences of families with complex support needs as their children started school (Dockett et al. 2011), parents were asked to describe their educational decisions. The study was undertaken during 2006–2009, in partnership with two organisations responsible for the delivery of early childhood intervention and support programs for families. Invitations were extended to families involved in existing programs with these organisations, recognised as having complex support needs and having a child eligible to start school. Forty-four families from a range of geographic regions of NSW (with 46 children starting school) participated in the research. Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008) data for these areas indicated high levels of disadvantage.

While details of individual families were not shared by the nominating organisations, family members themselves disclosed a range of complex circumstances including chronic poverty, unemployment, isolation (geographic, social and/or cultural), violence/trauma, alcohol and/or drug misuse and mental health and dependency issues. The majority (n = 41) of participants were mothers. Other participants were one grandfather, one aunt and one father.

Data for the study were generated through in-depth, face-to-face, conversational interviews with family members over the year before children started school and

into the first year of school. With the permission of participants, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Interviews were undertaken at times and locations nominated by participants; most often this involved interviews in participants' homes. The average length of interviews was one hour. For each participant, the same team of two researchers was involved in interviews, to promote the sense of continued conversations.

Interview data were analysed using the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz 2008) and through the construction of case studies (Stake 2008). Each transcript was read multiple times by members of the research team. Discussion and re-reading started the process of coding, drawing on the broad research questions as well as issues that arose from the data. Memos were written and shared, followed by independent coding of transcripts. This process continued through the period of data generation, leading to a point of theoretical sampling where additional data were sought to elaborate and refine emerging ideas. At this point, several case studies were developed to provide rich data about the experiences of families as they considered and planned for the child's start to school. Each case study was constructed around an individual family.

This paper reports excerpts from three cases – chosen because they illustrate the tensions between narratives of choice and responsibility. These data are not reported as representative; rather they have been chosen to highlight the ways in which school choice may be influenced by the contexts in which families live as well as their economic, social and cultural capital. We introduce the cases before examining several themes highlighted by them.

6.5.1 Lydia

Lydia was a single mother of ten children who were aged from 2.6 years to 21 years at the time of the first interview. Six of the children lived at home; some of the older children lived nearby in the same regional city. After a family life characterised by domestic violence, Lydia had separated from her partner. However, he lived in the same city and had irregular contact with Lydia and the children, sometimes with violent consequences. Lydia had no car. Dale (aged 8) attended the local public school and the 5-year-old twins (Earl and Gerard) were due to start school. Lydia participated in three interviews over 12 months.

Dale and his older sister were well-known in the educational community as truants. Lydia had been threatened with substantial fines if the truancy continued. Dale also had the reputation of being a bully at the primary school. Lydia was very distressed at sending her twin boys to the same school, where she was convinced that Dale's reputation would precede them. Lydia had been trying for some time to have the twins accepted by a different school. However, public schools within the city preferenced local zone enrolments, and very few out-of-zone enrolments were available. Lydia indicated in interviews that she did not feel she had any choice about which school the twins would attend.

> I've tried to get help in the last 12 months but…it's up to me…I don't have any family or friends for support…I suppose that's one of the downers of domestic violence…[the twins] need to go to a different school. That's the only light in the tunnel that I can see…with the education department...I said we'd been through an awful lot at home…I went to the school and sort of tried to explain the home life…but it didn't work…I don't even want to send the twins [to that school]. I don't want to send them there because of the deep fear…I'm scared that the twins are going to see Dale acting up, running out of class and think 'if he can do it why can't we'...I said, 'I can't do it. I'm not sending those kids,' I even told them. 'I don't care if you take all my money from me, class me as an unfit mother, I don't want to send them to that school'...
>
> All I wanted was for my children to have an education…I don't see that there's any hope if they have to go to this school. … [I want them to go to a different school] but you're not allowed to because it's the zones. So for me to do it I either have to move, or my daughter lives in [next suburb], we were just going to use her address and put them in another school...[but] the last six months I haven't had a car, so it's made it a lot harder. … I've been given really no choice. Like, I want the boys educated and otherwise I'm just a totally failed mother…

Despite Lydia's efforts, Earl and Gerard were enrolled in the same school as Dale. They were enrolled in different classes and each of their teachers commented that they did not attend the first week of school and often missed days. The teachers did not see Lydia much and Lydia did not respond to our invitations to a further interview once the boys had started school.

6.5.2 June

June was a single mother who lived with her son Bradley in the western suburbs of Sydney. Apart from her mother who lived nearby, June described herself as having no friends or support. Bradley's father had regular contact. At the time of the first of three interviews over a 12 month period, June indicated that while Bradley was age-eligible for school, she had decided to wait another year before enrolling him. She was also waiting for Bradley's language delay to be assessed in order to provide some guidance about whether or not he would be eligible for a place in a special education class at a local school. However, she was also aware that Bradley may not be offered such a place, and so had considered other options.

> Trying to decide whether public or going into the private sector…Thinking of what's around...I wanted to keep him back another year until I was ready as well. Until I had my licence and a car and all those different things that will make it a lot easier to pick a school. So that it wouldn't matter and it wouldn't have to be right close or on the bus route or anything like that.
>
> [Bradley's Dad] doesn't want me to send him to a private school. He'd prefer public because of the way he used to treat the private school kids when he was in school...it's not so much the cost or anything else, it's just that he thinks he'll get bullied at private school if he went to one.
>
> I liked [school] up until high school. I went to a kind of bad high school and I didn't really have a good experience...So I really want to make sure he goes to the right school, in

> the right environment with good people and makes good friends instead of the wrong crowd.

Prior to the final interview, June had been advised that Bradley would be unlikely to be offered a place in a special class and decided *that I'm going with public... because of the pricing. And then maybe about Year 5 send him to a private school, when I'm more set up and everything.* To help with the choice of school, June planned to ask the preschool for a list of the schools the children would attend, so that she could go and visit them. She was hoping that her case worker would go with her and help her sort through the information. As well, she was working with Bradley and his language, again in collaboration with her case worker and the preschool: *We're going to teach him how to read before he goes [to school]... to prepare him more, rather than just throwing him in.*

6.5.3 Andrea

Andrea, her husband and two children had recently moved to an outer metropolitan area. Partly, their decision was based on the lower cost of living, compared with inner-city areas. In addition to financial strain, Andrea had experienced post-natal depression. Andrea participated in four interviews over 18 months. In the second of these, she outlined her reasons for Jake attending the local school.

> ...I've enrolled him at the school down the road. [I want him to] meet the other kids that are going to be in his class...and see if he kind of has any sort of special connection to any one of them...I'm pretty much just really keen on making any connections that we can because everybody who goes to that little school pretty much lives in this little corner of the world. So they've got to be around the corner, they can't be too far...everybody in that school knows each other...everybody pretty much just lives in this corner…and all the kids seem to just walk together to school and back and stuff like that...at least going to a really local school is advantageous in that way. If you get invited to parties or anything they're just around the corner. It's not like going to some ritzy private school...and then not knowing anyone here.
>
> ...I'll be there to pick him up...I will be standing at the gate and if you stand at the gate you meet all the other parents...for a chin wag.

In her third and final interviews, Andrea reported being happy with her choice of the local school. She felt that Jake had settled in to school. She had become involved in the school's parent organisation and was active in her support for the school.

6.6 Discussion

The narratives of school choice shared by these mothers intersected with narratives of responsibility. Each of the mothers regarded it as their responsibility to make decisions about the "right" school for their child. However, making such a choice

was often not simple. The context for these families involved high levels of complexity; there was already much happening and the families responded in various ways to the many demands and challenges they encountered. Deciding which school children would attend sometimes afforded opportunities for change; at other times it was perceived as a time of increased vulnerability. While each of the cases is unique, some themes were evident across the cases. These are reflected in the following discussion.

6.6.1 Possible Choices

The first choice made by June and Lydia was not to enrol their children at school as soon as they were age-eligible. All three boys, Bradley, Earl and Gerard, were eligible to start school in the year in which they turned 5, as their birthdays fell before the mid-year cut-off date. However, there was also the option for them to start school the following year, when they would be 6. The mothers exercised the latter option, with June indicating that she *wanted to keep him back another year until I was ready*. These mothers acknowledged that starting school involved their own preparation, as well as that of their children.

June set herself the goal of attaining her driver's licence and a car, to increase the school options for Bradley. Bradley had a range of special needs that led to June seeking enrolment in special education services. She commented on the difficulties she experienced finding information about special education options, as well as the processes for seeking enrolment, assessment and notification. June also weighed up the options of private and public schooling. June's public school decision was driven mainly by cost, but also influenced by her ex-partner's experiences and perceptions that Bradley would not 'fit in' at a private school and may be bullied.

Lydia indicated that she had no choice about which school her children would attend. She had resisted advice to enrol them in school when they were age eligible, and continued to resist sending them to school, even in the face of legal sanctions. She mentioned the strategy of using her daughter's address in order to gain enrolment at a different school, but her lack of transport made this impossible. In later interviews, Lydia indicated that this may not have been a successful strategy anyway, as she expected that school principals shared information – including reputational information. Lydia positioned herself as an 'unfit' mother, unable to secure what she considered to be an appropriate school placement for her twin boys.

6.6.2 Looking to the Future

The inability to choose a different school for the boys left Lydia without much hope for the future: *All I wanted was for my children to have an education…I don't see that there's any hope if they have to go to this school*. This was in contrast to the other mothers, who regarded the choice of school as one step towards future choices. For example, June noted that she had not abandoned the idea of Bradley attending a private school, possibly from Year 5, with the idea that both she and Bradley would be better "set up" by then. While there are reports that middle-class parents, rather than their less advantaged counterparts, use education as a means to guide their children's futures (Reay and Ball 1998), the actions of these mothers suggest a more nuanced interpretation may be needed. The mothers did not necessarily refer to their children's future careers, but they did consider the ways in which their choice of primary school influenced future educational decisions and the way they imagined their children's futures (Wilkins 2010).

6.6.3 Belonging

Andrea's school choice was based on a strong desire for her family to become members of the local community. She had considered other schools in the area, but opted for the local school. Andrea's choice reflected both the responsibility she felt towards her own child's educational success, as well as a sense of community responsibility (Wilkins 2010). Having decided that she wanted to be a member of the community, she actively sought to build connections and to support the central role of the school within that community. Membership of the parent organisation afforded her engagement in the local community, access to the school on a regular basis, and opened up a network of other parents. One of the advantages was that members of this network could verify her view that Jake had settled in to school. For example, the canteen lady confirmed that he ate lunch and then played with friends during lunchtime.

June and Lydia both referred to the challenges of "not belonging". Bradley's father was not at all keen for him to attend a private school, where he might be bullied because he did not "fit in" (Reay and Ball 1997); and Lydia felt alienated from the school and expected her young sons to feel the same.

6.6.4 Networks

The process of choosing a school was undertaken individually by Lydia and Andrea. June's limited network centred on her case worker, who supported her in visiting schools and considering the information provided. Both June and Lydia indicated

that they had a limited social network, with Lydia commenting that having no friends was *one of the downers of domestic violence*.

The social isolation experienced by Lydia and June had a range of implications, including limiting access to information and the ability to tap into local knowledge about schools and how they worked. Social networks of friends, family and other parents have been identified as key sources of information about school choice (Ball and Vincent 1998; Vincent et al. 2010b). However, families who are socially isolated have limited access to social networks and hence to information about ways of decoding information about schools, the choices of others in similar situations and strategies that lead to desired educational outcomes.

6.6.5 Family History

Lydia and June referred to family history in discussing their school choices. For example, Bradley's father did not want him to attend a non-government school, based on his own experiences of teasing children at private schools, and June noted her own negative experiences of school.

Lydia also recalled her school experiences in a negative light, highlighting both academic problems and bullying. Lydia and June connected narratives of family history with narratives of betterment – they wanted their children to have better educational experiences than they, or older children in the family, had experienced. Lydia clearly wanted Earl and Gerard to have more positive experiences of education than her older children; she was concerned that teachers would look at the boys and think *Oh my God, I hope they're not like Dale*.

The betterment narrative can result in tensions, as family ways of being – habitus – are challenged when there are attempts to change, rather than reproduce, expectations (Lüscher 2002). It also contrasts with the efforts of middle-class parents to reproduce educational advantage (James and Beedell 2010). Some of these tensions were evident for Lydia, who was trying to advocate for change for her sons starting school, despite one her older daughters feeling that *she got away with not going to school* and her perception that the teachers having a sense of inevitability about the way the boys would engage with school.

6.6.6 Responsibility

Three levels of responsibility were identified for these mothers. The first level, responsibility to "do the best" for their individual children, appeared to be the overriding concern. Each mother assumed the responsibility of school choice as well as the responsibility of preparing children for school: Andrea described her partner as not really involved in decisions about school choices; June indicated that she

discussed the matter with her ex-partner; and Lydia called upon her older daughter for advice, but regarded the responsibility as hers.

June and Andrea described their responsibilities to prepare their children for school. Andrea described strategies she used before school started to help Jake learn the alphabet by *playing games …we started playing Hangman and I'd write down the letters and he'd pick them* and June planned to use the time before Bradley started school to teach him to read. Lydia was focused much more on acceptance for her sons than academic preparation for school.

The second level of responsibility related to family. Lydia had a large family of ten children. While not all of her children resided at home, they constituted her social circle and she was concerned for their wellbeing as well as that of the twins. Her greatest concern was for Dale, who she described as dogged by his reputation, and how he would react to his brothers at school *What is it going to be like with two other little ones that are following after him, sort of egging him on?*

The final level of responsibility was noted by Andrea: responsibility to the community. Andrea had come to regard the community as a resource; her acceptance into the community was contingent upon her children attending the local school. In return, Andrea and her children expected to experience a sense of acceptance and belonging to that community (Wilkins 2010).

6.6.7 Emotional Work

For each of these mothers, choosing the "right" school was regarded as an important step towards setting children on the path to educational success. Conversely, making the "wrong" decision, having children attend the "wrong" school, was regarded as seriously curtailing children's chances of educational success. Lydia's distress at her twin boys having to attend what was clearly, for her, the wrong school, was palpable. Each of the mothers made a considerable emotional investment as they engaged in the process of choosing the right school. This is particularly evident for Lydia, who adopted a heavy emotional burden when she was unable to engage in the process of school choice: *I'm just a totally failed mother*.

6.6.8 Missing from the Data

Two themes are noticeable in their absence from the data presented here. The first is data related to academic factors in school choice. Of these three mothers, only June referred to the perceived academic quality of the school as one of the elements she was looking for in a school for Bradley.

> ...he's got to be happy...[and it's important] the programs, I guess, that they have. That they can manage behaviours, different things and that they are really encouraging to kids. And

> that they give them homework, because I know some schools don't really give them work or anything.

Even with this reference, factors other than the programs and homework were emphasised as important.

The project was conducted prior to the launch of the *MySchool* website, but during the time when there was considerable press coverage of the plans for the website. Despite this, the data contributed by these mothers make no reference to it. Among many possible explanations is the possibility that such a website may illustrate limitations, rather than choices (Clarke 2012).

6.7 Conclusion

Each of these families operated in contexts characterised by complexity that derived from different family circumstances and a range of challenges for children and/or parents: school choice decisions were always interconnected with other things happening in their lives. This is reflected in Andrea's desire to be a part of the local community; Lydia's efforts to manage the school experiences of several children; and June's focus on preparing herself in order for Bradley to make a positive start to school.

These cases contribute to understandings of school choice, affirming that 'school choice is not merely a matter of parents and children calmly thinking about schools on offer and rationally deciding on which seems best' (Angus 2013, p. 14). Nor is enrolment at the local school a matter of "non-choice". The mothers did seek to engage in the educational market, but they did not necessarily rely on the neoliberal logic underpinning it.

Rather, the data reported here suggest that the mothers felt the responsibility of engaging in the educational market, but were often constrained in their efforts to do so. Their constraints varied, but included their family context, as well as available resources – their cultural, economic and social capital. The data confirm that the presence of an education market does not mean that choice is open to all. They also suggest that policies of school choice are not sufficient to increase the agency of all parents, because they fail to take into account the contexts in which families live and operate (Exley 2013).

The school choices made by these mothers were shaped by their resources and their histories. The economic capital available influenced choices, as did the ways in which social and cultural capital was activated. Andrea's commitment to becoming a part of the community contrasted with the social isolation experienced by June and Lydia.

While these mothers engaged with school choice with varying degrees of effect, they all felt that it was their responsibility to do so. Lydia, in particular, felt the weight of disapproval and, when unable to exercise choice, positioned herself as a failed mother. Her positioning reflects the struggle of mothers in similar positions to

be considered “respectable” and “responsible” (Vincent et al. 2010a). Despite being promoted as a choice available to all, for these mothers, school choice and responsible mothering was highly context dependent.

Acknowledgement This work was supported by the Australian Research Council Linkages Grant [LP0669546]. Partners in the grant were Mission Australia and the then NSW Department of Communities.

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Chapter 7
Connected Dynamics: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives on Family Life and the Transition to School

Dominik Krinninger and Marc Schulz

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we address key concepts that define the German-language educational policy discourse on the transition to school. One of our core arguments is that consideration of the family within the research on transition is not only an empirical undertaking. It is also essential to put empirical research into the context of the public, institutional and private interests that are articulated and addressed within the discourse. In this respect, the key concepts outlined are ambivalent with regard to the family, which is seen as one of the main resources for academic achievement. However, the key concepts do not take into consideration the shifting between family and public education that accompanies the increase in the family's responsibility. This forms an important background, and research on families and the transition to school needs to address it.

7.1.1 Family as an Original Sphere of Education

The professional and political consensus is that the family can be seen as an educational environment of its own. Families are, from both a sociological and a pedagogical perspective, a discrete educational entity with different inner-familial practices and decision-making patterns, so they also develop individual educational strategies and convey their own educational content (Büchner 2011). They should

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S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_7

not be seen exclusively as providers of formal educational processes. Nonetheless, the role played by the family in school pupils' academic success is always vehemently debated when, for example, international comparative studies of school performance are published. In Germany, the transformation in welfare state structures has led to individual provision and care – and their corresponding competencies – replacing state provision. In this context, public and political attention is turning to families and the contribution they make to their children's academic success and therefore future employability (Richter and Andresen 2012). Parents are supposed to feel co-responsible for giving children the best possible support in their educational attainment. At the same time, families in a socio-economically precarious position come under particular critical scrutiny. Many believe that the contribution these families make to their children's "learning outcome" needs to be supported and supplemented further.

Two concepts in particular are emphasised in the bid to prevent educational inequality: first, a spatio-temporal measure that aims to interlink and overlap educational entities ("networking landscape"), and second, an interpersonal measure that deepens and consolidates communication structures between families and the institutions of the education system ("partnership"). Thus, public institutions address families as being involved in these institutional transitions, and they should therefore receive support both in the transition into, and cooperation with, the public institution. This apparently "normal" context, however, produces a specific ratio. It sets up a reciprocal relationship between the actors and institutions under the premise of "learning", as we discuss further.

7.1.2 Good Education in a Networking Landscape

Spatial models have found their way into discourses on education. Concepts such as "education landscape" (Kruse 2003) locate educational institutions in a network of reciprocal relations.[1] Terms such as "all-day education" in turn emphasise the temporality of this concept of the network, for instead of classifying time zones – such as school lessons – as educational time, they classify the whole day – including free time or family time – as such. These spatially broad-scoped models are based on the idea that different places of education and different learners are positioned within a cooperative network in the sense of participative 'learning communities' (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (BMFSFJ) 2006, p. 194). In these discussions, the models of a networked education landscape are almost always seen as positive, and the administrative organisation of this education landscape is combined with individual flexibility in terms of managing and optimising educational processes.

[1] In the American context we find comparable terms such as "overlapping spheres of influence" (Epstein et al. 2009).

Learning within an education landscape on an all-day basis means the children move around within a flat and permeable landscape – for example, between family and school. This embedding of institutional transitions in such landscapes goes hand in hand with the view that they should be organised on an institutional and administrative basis. In this connection, "education" functions as a gravitational cipher, bringing these actors into reciprocal relation within a homogenous education landscape, and facilitating territorial transitions. However, such concepts of spatial integration, which emphasise the connection between territorially separate locations, also produce and manifest social boundaries (Reutlinger 2008). Making conceptual connections between different social locations without locating them within a social topography masks possible social distances between the different actors and institutions.

7.1.3 Optimising Education in Close Relationships

There has been a programmatic demand for a stronger reciprocal relationship between public (nursery, pre-school, school) and private (family) institutions and actors. This is called a "partnership". The term "Erziehungs- und Bildungspartnerschaft"[2] is widespread (Betz 2015) and inflected towards the maxims of cooperation, transparency and equality, where the latter is often described as "being on a par" (Haase 2012).

Typically, this key concept lacks definition and is rarely used systematically. Inherently, though, it not only aims to facilitate cooperation at the organisational or administrative level, but calls directly upon children, parents, and professionals as actors within the process of children's education. The concept describes the nature of parental participation in (public) education and raising of children as 'overlapping responsibility for student learning. This marks a fundamental change from traditional separate-sphere conceptions of parents and teacher roles' (Nawrotzki 2012, p. 73). The necessity of partnership and parental engagement, as well as the continual work to improve this partnership, are therefore not offered to parents without obligation. It is standard to call upon parents to engage more with their children's learning. Experts generally agree that public institutions may, and indeed should, demand this increased engagement from parents, too, for the sake of children's future educational success.

Families are therefore expected to conform to this standardising logic of mutual facilitation of children's learning outcomes, regardless of their inner-familial practices and decision-making patterns. On the other hand, the public actors, such as nurseries or schools, appear to define the "product" of this cooperation. Accordingly, this requirement for increased cooperation, focused on education as a transfer of pedagogical norms to the family, can also be seen as ambivalent. The normalisation

[2] The term refers to the two poles of education typical in the German context: "Erziehung" for upbringing or training and "Bildung" for education. In English-speaking contexts we find comparable terms such as "parent participation" or "family involvement" (Grant and Ray 2015).

of the parents' educational responsibility plays a crucial role in the relation between the family and the educational system. Families develop, perform and display specific forms of "responsible parenthood" in response to the respective policies and practices of the educational system they live in.

7.2 Case Study: Shaping the Transition to Primary School Within the Family

Within the international debate there is a consensus that the institutional transition from nursery to primary school is an important event for all involved (Dockett and Perry 2007; Margetts and Kienig 2013). This discussion is focused on successfully shaping the transition as a cooperation between child, day-care institution and school, with the participation of families and communities. At the same time, empirical perspectives on parents dealing with the transition to school are relatively new, even though from a discourse analysis perspective there have for a long time been references to the intention within family policy to switch the family "from function to competence" (Gillies 2012). The German empirical research studies on this relation between parents and educational institutions can be divided into two categories: First, there are studies which address parents' ideas and perspectives in the form of interviews (Andresen et al. 2015; Graßhoff et al. 2013; Griebel et al. 2013). Their common key finding is that the transition radically changes families' daily lives, and that parents of other schoolchildren are perceived as an important source of support. At the same time, parental participation in the transition process differs significantly across families because of socio-cultural differences in practices of raising children, educational orientation and paradigms of childhood. These studies, however, offer little information about the practice of reciprocal address and the mechanisms of institutional integrations and exclusions. Observation-based studies address this gap. Using recordings of natural interactions and conversation situations in institutional contexts, these studies analyse how parents are addressed (Urban et al. 2015). In so doing, they demonstrate that parents participate in the institutional transition process only in a fragmentary way.

There is still, however, a lack of empirical knowledge about what happens within families in the face of the expectations placed upon them, how the families deal with the new requirements practically, and how they integrate the transitional phase into their daily lives. The research project *Shaping the transition to primary school within the family*[3] focuses on these questions.

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[3] The project is based at the University of Osnabrück. It is running from 2014 to 2017 and is financed by the DFG, the German Research Foundation. The project is led by Dominik Krinninger, and the project staff are Kaja Kesselhut and Richard Sandig. Marc Schulz is a cooperating partner in the project.

7.2.1 Theoretical Framework

The project examines the family from a pedagogical perspective. What is significant in this is the focus on the family's original potential for educating children, as well as on specific forms of executing familial education. To this end, the family is considered in its social contexts, which include the institutions of the educational system. We do not, however, ask whether the family does justice to the demands placed upon it, for example, in terms of school requirements. We are interested in how the handling of the transition is embedded in the everyday practices of the family, in what ways family life is organised around this, and which specific experiences it enables its children to access. It is also essential to this focus on the family's perspective that we describe the families under study using horizontal differentiation and do not carry out vertical hierarchisation.

The project's research interest is framed by a model of the family as an "educational configuration" (Krinninger 2015; Krinninger and Müller 2012). This concept, which builds on Norbert Elias' figuration theory approach (Morrow 2009), comprehends the family as a constellation of actors with relative autonomy. The family is a social figuration connected to other social figurations, for example, within the education system, and can therefore also be described as a configuration. On the one hand, the educational world of the family is conditioned by its external world. On the other, the dynamic integration of multifaceted relations, as well as of the given social, economic and cultural conditions, into a specific shape and an inner order can only be carried out by family actors. This means the respective "family style" becomes relevant as a fundamental mode in the production of this order. This category combines practices typical to the family that have developed through communal living as well as through dealing with the differences inherent in this. Thus, the theoretical framework of the project also draws upon concepts that highlight how the family is shaped by everyday practices (Jurczyk 2014; Morgan 2011). Finally, from a pedagogical perspective, the family-specific "educational gestus" is of particular interest as a subdimension of the family style. This category targets the particular forms in which cultural content and personal dispositions become an issue between children and parents. Here, we are not only concerned with the explicit, rationally discursive forms of such intergenerational issues, such as verbal regulations. We also cover a broad spectrum of forms of familial education, including the use and configuration of multifaceted physical, material and practical arrangements in the familial environment. Implicitly, this also brings practical forms into focus.

7.2.2 Methodological Aspects

The participating families who agreed to be accompanied through their child's transition to primary school were recruited via flyers in nursery schools, so they approached the project on their own initiative. Our sample consists of twelve cases:

the families are situated differently in terms of social structure; the number of children varies from one to four; single mothers, patchwork constellations and married couples are included. In total, five research visits take place within the families, from around 3 months before the start of school up to around 6 months afterwards. These visits involved carrying out participatory observations, making notes, and conducting interviews with parents and children. In addition, the families produced photographic and videographic self-documentation in which particular scenes from everyday life were recorded – such as departing for school in the mornings or doing homework. Of course, this is not direct access to the families' "authentic" daily lives. The thematic focus and the presence of field research, also represented by the camera, imply that families portray themselves for the camera. In this respect, we have here a specific case of displaying family (Finch 2007). This should not, however, be seen as a distortive feedback effect. The fact that the families portray themselves to the project as they wish, and the way in which they do this, allows us to infer their representational paradigms and their respective self-perception. Moreover, it gives us the opportunity to reconstruct in detail any correlations between the different types of empirical material, in order to explore significant structures in family life. This reconstructive orientation of the analysis also aims to comprehend structural contexts by comparing cases, and compensate for the restricted possibilities of participatory observation through the extensive analysis of select focus files. We combine this process with ethnographic elements. This includes not least the fact that we address the familial actors as experts in their way of life, according their self-descriptions an integral significance within our case descriptions.

Below, we will show how the transition to school is shaped by the family in a specific way by presenting two contrasting cases. Whereas we can see an almost complete match between familial practices and resources and the requirements accompanying the transition in one case, in the second case we see an increasing distance between family and school. To avoid misunderstandings, we would like to emphasise that the two cases have been chosen to provide a strong contrast in order to generate cross-case hypotheses. The intention is not to show how the transition should be dealt with "properly" within the family.

7.2.3 The Feltz Family

7.2.3.1 Portrait

The Feltz family consists of parents Fritz (28) and Frauke (32) and their son Finn (6); the second son Fridolin will be born shortly before Finn starts school. Fritz is a pharmacist and works full-time in a pharmacy. After her Masters degree in primary school teaching, Frauke studied for a diploma in pedagogy. She holds a temporary part-time position at a family education centre. The family lives in a rented house for a single family on the outskirts of town. The property, which is located in rural surroundings and is well maintained, suggests the family are in a secure

socio-economic position. They are well connected to the town centre via a nearby country road and a bus route into town. Various strands are interwoven within the family milieu: we find elements that are rooted in the family biography, such as weekly meal planning or the family's religiousness. These give the pedagogical conditions a certain traditional slant. Furthermore, we also find elements that can be classified within the context of the newer middle-class milieu. This includes a parental responsibility for upbringing that is emphatically based on parity and a clear educational orientation. The latter is not only apparent in the way the parents intensively support Finn as he starts school. In the child's bedroom, for example, there are two book shelves; one with books which are currently being read, and one with books which will be read next, as Finn explains when showing us his bedroom. Finn could have started school last year, but at that time the parents felt he was not yet ready for it. Meanwhile, they think he has actually outgrown the nursery school. This is also why he has been going to flute lessons for half a year; *so he can get used to learning* says his mother in conversation. In addition, he takes part in children's gymnastics, an extra-curricular activity. Overall, the Feltz family is characterised by a high level of cultural confidence, which on the one hand is fuelled by their secure social situation. On the other hand, the family's values – apparent in its educational affinity and religiousness – also contribute to its positive, stable self-perception.

7.2.3.2 Familial Practices as Practices of Transition

The family's daily life reveals a pragmatic-functional orientation as a primary element of the family style. The pragmatic organisation of family life is supported, for example, by different kinds of lists. As well as the family calendar, this includes shopping and meal planning and, for example, the "wish lists" Finn writes for his birthday. The division of care duties between the parents according to practical considerations (primarily the different working hours) likewise contributes to the pragmatic structuring of daily family life. However, we also see a functional moment in the father's and son's shared liking for a technical construction toy, which they play with together very meticulously. The way the family deals with the transition to primary school combines this pragmatic-functional orientation with the educational orientation of the family, resulting in a significant adaptation of school precepts within the family. Both the parents and Finn make these adaptations. This is illustrated in the arrangement of Finn's bedroom, which in part appears to be an exact reproduction of a classroom. The photo is a still from one of the family's home-recorded videos (Fig. 7.1).

The following artefacts reflect the equipment of a classroom: the desk is placed, without a desk lamp, in front of the window, simulating the arrangement of working conditions that exist at school, and the table takes up a prominent place in the child's bedroom. After completing his homework, Finn closes his school bag and hangs it – as he would do at school – on a hook on the side of the table. In the background there is a blackboard, which is another carrier of school practices and representations of "content". On it, we see a magnetic strip with the letters of the alphabet and

Fig. 7.1 Finn doing homework (Reproduced with permission of the copyright holder)

the numbers from 1 to 10. On the blackboard, the words “Spring”, “School Holidays”, “Summer”, “Autumn” and “Winter” are handwritten in capital letters, indicating the rhythm of the “school year”. These material furnishings lend school a permanent presence in Finn’s bedroom.

To what extent Finn has already internalised the school requirements can also be seen in how he does his homework. After lunch, he practises reading with both parents at the table, then he works through the second part of the homework (addition within the number range 1 to 10) alone in his room. The video sequence which shows Finn doing this, and from which the above still is taken, is 22 min long. In the course of this, Finn demonstrates some prominent physical gestures that appropriate the material equipment, as he is taking social cues from it: he moves his body several times back into position after having sunk down, bringing himself into an upright working position on his desk chair. He scratches his head and presses his lips together, which can be read as an expression of cognitive exertion, or he props up his head with his hand in a contemplative gesture. He sighs and blows out through his mouth, making his exertion clear, and he also regulates himself via brief self-commentaries (*stupid axe*). Not least significant is the self-discipline Finn shows when doing his homework. It is only after 8 min that he loses concentration for a moment: Finn looks briefly out of the window and independently finds his way back into the work process. Even the jar of sweets – to which Finn may help himself – remains untouched during the recording. When Finn completes the work and shouts *Ready!*, his father comes and checks through the completed tasks together with his son. The parental supervision of the homework is therefore not orientated towards doing the homework. Relevant organisational issues or aspects of concentration and discipline are not directly addressed; these aspects are a habitual part of the familial milieu. The explicit parental interest is focused instead on the results and therefore on a function that is also integral to the monitoring of homework by the school. In this respect we can see Fritz referencing school practices. At the same time, though,

he flags up (for his son and for the research project symbolically present via the camera) his superiority over the school requirements by criticising one of the tasks as *not very clear*. The family's secure educational affinity, reflected here, is already expressed by the father in a parental conversation during the first research visit when he comments, *It's only primary school, after all*.

In summary, it is clear that the Feltz family's adaptation of school requirements builds on a series of prerequisites. These include socio-structural factors, such as the family's income and the parents' educational status, but also factors related to the family's inner milieu which emerges in a specific combination of social pre-structuring and familial practices. When the research contact is concluded, the parents believe Finn's experience of starting school has gone well, and they have no anxieties about the future. This is, from the family's perspective, just as much down to familial resources and practices developed within the family as to Finn's contentedness at school. In this, the Feltz family shows it is not only on a secure path through the education landscape, but is already on this path even before school actually makes an entrance. The education landscape appears to be the quasi natural habitat of the family.

7.2.4 The Carter Family

The circumstances are different for the Carter family. In their case, breaches and distances between family and school, as well as the accompanying strains on the family, played a prominent role.

7.2.4.1 Portrait

Carolin Carter (42) is a single mother with three children: Chloe (18), Calvin (15) and Chris (6), who now attends primary school. Chris was diagnosed as having multiple special needs (physical-motor, social and learning). He attended an inclusive nursery school and now goes to a special school for children with physical and motor development needs. The family has no contact with the father of Chloe and Calvin, and loose contact with Chris's father. Carolin lives with her sons and a dog in a four-room flat in a house containing two flats in a rural community. Chloe lives in a youth residential community for supportive housing approximately ten kilometres from the flat. She often spends time with the family and appears to be well integrated in the family community. The rooms in the flat are relatively small and equipped with low-cost furniture. When there is a build-up of mould in Chris's bedroom, a bed is made up for him in his mother's room and three boxes of toys are moved into the living room.

Upon taking up contact with the project, Carolin emphasises that her motivation is to draw public attention to her situation and the stress it causes her family. On the first visit, we notice the mother demonstrates a particular attitude. The three children

are supported by the youth welfare service. Carolin sees this support as a resource and not, in fact, as a stigma, and she derives from this, in terms of her self-perception, a fundamentally positive view of her family and her role as a mother. In other areas of life, however, she is disillusioned: as regards going back to work or looking for accommodation, she has resigned herself to a permanent dependence on state support systems. Overall, it is clear that the Carter family are under certain pressures. The family reacts to this with strong inner solidarity; its relations with the outside world, with neighbours as well as school, prove, however, to be fragile.

7.2.4.2 Familial Practices and the Transition to School

It is not surprising that this constellation creates problems for the family. However, we do not intend to infer the orientation of familial practices or the course of events during this family phase from specific frame conditions. Instead, we are interested in the typical profile of familial practices that ensues from the family's situation but is also shaped by these practices. Furthermore, we ask to what extent these practices can be employed in dealing with the transition.

A specific defensiveness can be identified as a key motif of the family style. Faced with excessive pressures, Carolin tries to avoid further pressures and, along with these, also new challenges, for she cannot find the resources she needs to deal with these. The caution resulting from this fragile family statics is evident, on the one hand, in recurring situations involving Chris, for example, in Chris's dinnertime routine, which is fastidiously observed. The mother's interactions with Chris are rarely stimulating. She mostly reacts to disruptions and then tries to re-stabilise the situation. Overall, Carolin gives the impression of being intent upon avoiding conflicts and agitation in daily life, too.

This family style becomes relevant when Chris starts school. The fact that his transition to primary school was perceived by the family as beset with crisis must also be seen in the context of Carolin's mistrust of school. In an interview conducted a few weeks after the start of school she says: *It's a shame; he is just starting; I am very very sad about it. I'm also very disappointed with the school. There is no trust left on my side*. In this interview she also refers to a therapeutic measure the school is providing for Chris (he has to wear a vest filled with sand for a short time to promote his sensorimotor attention). When she asked a professional from the youth welfare service and he judged the measure to be outdated, Carolin wrote to the school, forbidding it to continue the therapy. This anecdote points to Carolin's social vulnerability, which must be understood in the context of her experience of social marginalisation. In her dealings with the school she has a low level of social recognition, and she vehemently demands this recognition where she believes herself to be in the right, thereby setting up a pedagogical opposition to the school.

The mother's increasing lack of trust leads to the family's alienation from the school. In the course of the research contact, Chris, too, takes on his mother's defensive attitude. This process is clearly apparent in the conversation with mother and

son. When asked about her experience when the school asked her to change the snack Chris brings from home, a conversation develops between Carolin and Chris:

Carolin: At nursery they were allowed to, and now I'm supposed to make him change; it doesn't happen that quickly. We take it slowly step by step… And it was the same with drinking. He wasn't allowed to take drinks in cartons with him anymore because it was a lot of work for the teachers at school to cut them open and just pour them into a cup. (…)
Chris: What they are doing with the drinks in cartons, that I'm not allowed to, it's just daft.
I1: And how do you do it now with drinks at school; what do you have to drink there?
Chris: At the moment just…apple juice with fizzy water. But not in a carton anymore, and I'd actually like to drink from a carton, but they don't like that. But, but if they don't do that they are just daft. (…)
Carolin: Everything, they want to change the way he does everything, so I said: it's gone far enough now.
Chris: Yes, and change from two hands to doing one hand, it's just daft. But I'd like to do both hands.
Carolin: You can keep doing it with two hands.

Chris subsequently takes up again this question of which hand to use for writing:

I1: Have you ever felt angry at school when they said you had to do something you didn't want to do?
Chris: Yes, from two hands to…
Carolin: And what on earth are they doing? Because otherwise I'll take him straight out of there and get a doctor's note; then it's an issue for me; then I'll go to the head and then I'll go to the public, because it's not right. They can't just go over my head.
Chris: But they said I have to change from two hands to one.
Carolin: They said that?
Chris: You have to practise it every day, but it's just stupid and daft.
Carolin: And how did you do it today? How did you write at school today?
Chris: Well, with both hands…
Carolin: Because mummy has said something about it now, too; you're allowed to write with both hands; you're allowed to write whichever way you can do it. And when you are writing with your left hand, for instance, they can show you how you can place your book, and, when you write with your right hand, how to place your book so you can write with both hands in the way you can do it best. Okay?

Carolin insists on her maternal competence and responsibility in her dialogue with both the school and her son, and she shows a tendency for escalation. She tends to generalise the way the school deals with general organisational aspects, such as rules around eating, turning this into a fundamental criticism of the way Chris is treated. Emotionally, she also goes far beyond not approving of school work

processes, contemplating instead the possibility of an official complaint to the school and even a public scandal to highlight her interactions with the school.

This development ensues, significantly, in an interview sequence that is structured less by the researcher's questions and more by an interaction between mother and child. Carolin lays claim to the primacy of pedagogical care for her son by belittling the institutional measures. This battle for recognition as a mother is verbally supported by Chris. He calls his teachers or their measures *daft* a number of times. This gives rise to the problematic constellation of a reciprocal solidarity within the mother-child-relationship, which is bought at the price of a familial "othering" vis-à-vis the school.

By the end of the research contact Carolin appears to be resigned, but she also shows the will to persevere. She says she is searching for a new school that will handle her son "properly" and "care" for him. *This ordeal will soon be over. Mummy will take care of it.* This is by no means easy for her, but she *went down this route with all three children, and there are ways, and you can do it*. To the question of whether she is getting enough help this way, she replies in the negative, expressing her desire for *a bit of relief (…) just a bit more time for myself*. At the same time, she derives a high degree of self-esteem from the situation:

> Raising the children on my own with these health issues, and so on and so on. The problems that come with this… I would like to see anyone else do that! (…) It's an ordeal, yes, but on the other hand, I know who I am. I know what I can do. (…) I won't let anyone mess me about.

From the Carter family's point of view, the relationship between family and school has become one of opposition. The process of changing pedagogical institutions reveals a gap in the family's support within this constellation. This gap arises out of the subdivided support structures observable within the Carter family. Overall, this is not atypical. Attendance at an institution is supported by the institutions themselves (nursery, school), and the educational support provided by the youth welfare service is child-centred. This means no structurally comprehensive perspective is applied to the family as an actor community in its social context. The Carter family is meanwhile not in a position to bridge or close this gap through its own resources or with recourse to familial practices it has developed. The defensiveness the family has developed from within its socially marginal position cannot, it seems, be transformed into an adaptation to the new requirements – at least, not by the family alone.

7.2.5 Cross-Case Theses and Findings

Different constellations emerge in the cases presented above. In the Feltz family, the child appears as the pupil, and the family moves within the education landscape surrounding it as a matter of course. In the Carter family, the confrontation experience leads to a continued distancing of the family from the school. At this point it should be noted that the two case studies end with the end of the research contact.

We therefore cannot say how the processes continued. In any case, the reconstructed circumstances do not simply ensue from a causal relationship whereby the sociocultural position anticipates the familial order which, for its part, would then just have to be "executed" in familial practices. The family forms an educational configuration in the first place only via the familial actors linking the different levels together practically. This gives the families room for manoeuvre.

This basic approach shows that the families adapt to the new requirements within the framework of practices already functioning within the family. The familial practices therefore emerge as relatively stable. Over the course of the research contact we noticed that at least the parents started to think early on about issues related to the imminent transition that will affect the family (such as by asking questions regarding homework supervision or communication with the school).[4] Compared with this rather rapid convergence on the discursive level, the dynamic level clearly takes longer to develop on the practical. If closer relationships with fellow pupils, contact with other parents, or practical confidence in dealing with the new requirements do materialise within the families under study, then this occurs only towards the end of the research contact.

This asynchronous adaptation suggests two aspects. Firstly, the transition appears to be a complex phenomenon in an inner-familial sense, too, for differentiations must be made around *who* in the family does *what* to contribute to the transition. In this, we see both substantial participation by parents and children and mutual responsiveness between parents and children. For example, through his competent utilisation of the familial learning arrangement Finn supports, to a significant extent, the Feltz family's educational gestus, which forgoes direct and explicit regulations. In turn, Chris is an important interlocutor for Carolin; she articulates her self-esteem as a mother vis-à-vis him, and he plays a part in producing the defensive position towards the school connected with this. The familial handling of the transition is fuelled by a broad spectrum of forms of knowledge: how the familial environment is equipped, the familial practices, the attitudes and mindset of the family members, but also their explicit reflections. Only against a correspondingly complex background does it become clear that the crisis-laden process experienced by the Carter family does not derive from, for instance, a lack of intelligence or an absent sense of responsibility. Instead, we see a double bind situation in which the family's fortress mentality is a stabilising force in the preservation of the family's – in this case – very important, positive self-perception, and simultaneously poses massive obstacles to the support for Chris's education.

Secondly, the asynchronous adaptation sheds new light on the crucial importance of the families' resources and practical knowledge. The families fall back on the means they have at their disposal. This temporary self-sufficiency is strengthened as the transition is experienced as a distinctive change in pedagogical cultures; new communication channels and new responsibilities mean that clarity around expectations and processes emerges only gradually (Andresen et al. 2015; Graßhoff et al. 2013). The Feltz family bridges this phase competently. The Carter family, however, falls through a gap.[5]

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[4] This is, at the same time, also an artefact of our specific sample.

[5] See also Dockett et al. (2012) on this gap in support for families in need of assistance.

7.3 Conclusion

In the context of our findings, we propose a differentiated consideration of the transition process on the levels of empirical research and theoretical modelling. The following aspects can, however, also contribute to raising awareness of inherent involvements and paradoxes in relation to pedagogical support for the transition.

Firstly, it is important to consider the transition as a complex and dynamic process. We believe the merging of two rivers is a helpful metaphor for describing the transition. Both have their own flow forces which, upon converging, overlap each other and form new flow conditions. Similarly, families are not just a place where children and parents deal with the transition. Instead, families themselves as social figurations are exposed to new dynamics in the transition by virtue of being interwoven with the school order. They integrate new requirements into their existing structures, which keep on working but are also given new directional impetus.

Secondly, the analysis of the transition needs to acknowledge multiple perspectives. Nursery, school and family all do have a duty, or intention, to ensure that the transition to school is "successful". However, in terms of what this means for each of them, we see different perspectives and, to a certain extent, also latent or explicit contradictions emerging. On the one hand, this is significant with regard to questions of social recognition. When, for example, it is argued that a congruence of rules and orientations between family and primary school supports a positive process of transition (Walper and Ross 2001), this casts a problematic perspective on forms of familial life in which this kind of congruence either does not exist or exists to a lesser extent. The normatively uncritical operationalisation of a successful transition from a pedagogical-institutional perspective is in danger of contributing to the reification of pedagogical normative notions and reinforcing structural discrimination within the education system. In terms of the two cases presented above, this means that the families' relation to school can be seen as ambivalent. While this is quite obvious in the case of the Carter family, it also applies to the Feltz family. The congruence between family and school is not only a resource but could also make it difficult to deal with problems Finn might have in school someday. Furthermore, different perspectives also interfere in the family itself, which absorbs different requirements from different contexts. The family should therefore not be seen as a homogenous unit but as a constellation of actors addressing differences.

Thirdly, the analysis of transition processes requires reflexivity. This means familial practices or institutional structures must not only be described but also analysed in their discursive context and with respect to their normative framing. This includes identifying the power relations between the actors, determining practices of addressing, and identifying discursive attributions. All actors involved in the transition not only carry out the tasks it entails; they are also involved, each in their own way, in producing the transition as a social construct. In addition to our figuration theory perspective, the pedagogical approaches within actor-network theory (Fenwick and Edwards 2010), for example, would be suited to the analytical work necessary for this.

In summary, this means – from both a scientific and a pedagogical-practical perspective – we should not only be asking *how* the transition is executed, but also *what* it is that defines how it is executed.

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Chapter 8
'I Had a Grandfather Who Taught Me Everything': Grandparents as Family Capital in Transition to School

Tuija A. Turunen and Bob Perry

8.1 Introduction

> Grandparents have always played an important role in family life, but over the last twenty years, many have had increased responsibility for their grandchildren due to changes and issues in families and society. The first major change is the provision of child care. Grandparents, mostly grandmothers, are the major providers of child care for preschool children, particularly for babies and toddlers, when both their parents are in the workforce. Grandparents also help parents with school-age children by picking them up from school, and by caring for them during school vacations. (Ochiltree 2006)

In many families, the contribution of grandparents is part of the overall family capital, an integral part of the ways in which families function (Horsfall and Dempsey 2011). Grandparents, tend to engage in "less formal" interactions with their grandchildren than do parents. Such interactions can provide ways of building up the family's social capital, particularly around attachment and socialisation (Dunifon 2013). Such family capital can also help people bridge the numerous transitions within their lives and, in particular, within the lives of children and families during the process of starting school (Turunen and Dockett 2013). During this transition process, grandparents can support both the parents and their grandchildren by providing much-needed wisdom, guidance and support, and highlighting the importance of starting school. This has been emphasised by Statham (2011) who states that '[g]randparents continue to have a significant role in child care arrangements when children start school, particularly during holiday periods' (p. 2).

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S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_8

Previous studies have discussed grandparent-grandchild relationships from the grandparents' point of view (Breheny et al. 2013; Lou et al. 2013; Smorti et al. 2012). This chapter considers the role of grandparents as their grandchildren make the transition to school. We do this by first seeking the recalled memories of grandparents about their own starting school experiences, with particular emphasis on their memories of the role of their grandparents in these experiences. The possible impact of these experiences and/or memories on the roles they have played or will play when their grandchildren start school is then considered.

Even though this chapter examines the memories of past experiences, it will also contribute to the present through illuminating how family transition to school can be strengthened by grandparents. Hence, it will enhance understanding of how grandparents can both support and be supported through programs promoting effective transition to school for children and families.

Previous research has indicated that the educational experiences, such as transition to school, of past generations contribute to those of following generations (Barnett and Taylor 2009; Räty 2003, 2011; Turunen and Dockett 2013). These studies have mostly concentrated on the impact of parents' experiences on their actions within their children's transition to school. This chapter contributes to this literature by highlighting the significance of grandparents and thus widening the understanding of the family context as children start school.

8.2 Grandparents as an Asset in Transition to School

Citing Horsfall and Dempsey (2011), Deblaquiere et al. (2012, p. 69) reported that 'around one-half of Australian grandparents spend time with their grandchildren at least once a week, and just under three-quarters spend time with them at least once a month'. Hence, many grandparents are a major part of a child's family microsystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). If grandparents are available for much of the time, the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren will probably have some effect on the grandchildren's development. The heart of the Bronfenbrenner bioecological model are "proximal processes" or interactions which 'occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006, p. 797). The relationships present in this kind of interaction require reciprocity. This requirement puts both grandparents and grandchildren into active roles through which each impacts the other.

Grandparents can play an important role in their grandchildren's transition to school. They can provide important developmental assets for the children who could benefit from diverse and intergenerational interactions with grandparents. These interactions may differ in nature and frequency from those with parents. The children's development may well be assisted by the extensive and complex relationships between the children and their grandparents (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006).

These relationships generate some of the proximal processes present when grandparents contribute to their grandchildren's transitions to school and the grandchildren contribute to the joy and trust felt by the grandparents as they are in touch with lives in younger generations. The contributions from the grandparents can be understood as family capital developed with their grandchildren and their families. In this case, family capital is a form of social capital that provides a social environment characterised by trustworthiness and joy, and where the children have access to intergenerational knowledge (Coleman 1988). Family capital is a resource embedded within family networks which affects the functioning of all family members (Belcher et al. 2011).

The role of grandparents in their grandchildren's transition to school, can also be understood through the concept of life course in which the interdependent lives of family members can regulate and shape the transition experiences of the children and other members of the family (Elder and Shanahan 2006). Practices and values, informed by the experiences of previous generations and family stories, can be transferred across generations (Turunen and Dockett 2013). The relationships between generations form important mediators in linking the lives of all the participants (Elder and Shanahan 2006).

8.3 Research Design

People tend to remember things that are important to them (Abrams 2010; Yow 2005). Memories of these important things are significant in constructing an autobiographical narrative (Blagov and Singer 2004; Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000). As part of a larger study, data were gathered during autobiographical interviews where interviewees were asked to recall their memories about starting school. Altogether, 89 autobiographical interviews were recorded in Australia. The interviewees ranged in age from 20 to 89 years. The interviews started with an open-ended, generative statement which aimed to encourage the participants to share their personal experiences in the form of a narrative presentation (Riemann 2006). After participants had finished their narratives, defining questions were asked as needed. The interview protocol did not contain any questions specifically related to grandparents but in 45 of the interviews, grandparents were mentioned. That is, in the interviews grandparents were mentioned unprompted, signifying the importance of these recollections. These interviews provided the starting point for the analysis discussed in this chapter.

The data analysis was assisted by NVivo software (QSR International 2015). Firstly, the software was used to identify the interviews where grandparents were mentioned. Of the 45 interviewees who talked about grandparents, many recalled that they did not play a significant role in the interviewee's transition to school. Rather, grandparents were briefly mentioned as part of everyday life in quotes like: 'My grandparents lived upstairs and my parents lived downstairs. That's what

houses in [] were like.' These kind of vague references to grandparents were omitted from closer analysis in the study reported in this chapter.

After this first sorting, the quotes containing recollections of grandparents were analysed within the frame of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) to identify those with significance for transition to school. Next, the quotes referring to proximal processes and close relationships between grandparents and children were identified. Finally, a thematic analysis was executed. The following results section is organised using the three major themes identified during the analysis:

1. close relationships;
2. support provided by grandparents; and
3. inherited intergenerational assets.

It is notable that, in this study, recollections related to grandparents are more present in older participants' stories. In the interviews with younger participants, grandparents are mentioned occasionally, but stories of close relationships are missing. This might partly be a consequence of changes in society. Previously, it was more common to have many generations living either in the same household or very close to each other. Many present-day families tend to live far away from relatives, and grandparents in particular, and this might impact on relationships between grandparents and grandchildren. This may vary from family to family with some evidence that societal crisis such as economic uncertainty brings grandparents closer to their grandchildren (Dunifon 2013). As well, the development of early childhood services for families might have reduced the support needed from grandparents. Besides these societal changes, the bias in the results may be explained by the phenomenon of life review, highlighting elderly people's tendency to look back and make sense of their past experiences through the present (Abrams 2010; Scott and Alwin 1998). By the time of the interviews, many participants were grandparents themselves and spoke about their grandchildren. Perhaps, this is an indication of the research evidence that older people are better in telling stories than younger ones (Yow 2005).

8.4 Results

8.4.1 Close Relationships

Some interviewees had very special and extensive recollections of their grandparents. Certain experiences shared with their grandparents were remembered vividly and told with warmth. Stories described ongoing relationships illustrating many of the features of proximal processes. For example:

> My first memories are associated with coming home from school, funnily enough. That was in the house where my mother's father and mother were living with us. My Opa [grandfather]

> was a keen gardener … So he had lots of chooks and a big veggie garden and it was always good to come home and fossick in the garden with him. (Started school 1957)

This recollection of gardening with his grandfather came early in the interview with this participant. It was clearly a significant recollection and was the first memory he had, during the conversation, of starting school. The positioning of ideas in collections of memories can often indicate the relative level of significance of these ideas (Yow 2005). The interviewee continued:

> I can remember coming home from school and my Oma [grandmother] would have something basically on the stove for us and what we liked the most and what I have the strongest memory of is in the winter time is she used to have the small potatoes, the Australians call them chats. Opa used to grow his own potatoes … So Oma used to boil the chats up and they would always be nearly cooked when we got home and then it was a matter of sitting down and eating chats with a little dab of butter on them. (Started school 1957)

This interviewee was from an immigrant background and it would appear that his grandparents represented the family homeland and culture to him. He kept mentioning his cultural heritage throughout the interview, underlining its importance to him. Indeed, he also offered German biscuits with coffee during the interview.

Another interviewee had spent her childhood with her aunt and grandparents, although the particular circumstances resulting in this arrangement were not disclosed in her conversation. Fond memories of a playful childhood were related to starting school.

> We were really outdoor kids. I always came home with one plait hanging out. I could never, ever manage to sort of keep them all together. I always looked a wreck. But I was brought up by my aunt and grandparents and they never growled at me for things like that. They weren't important which was a really nice way to have a childhood. (Started school 1946)

When asked about the most significant memory related to starting school, this interviewee referred to the fact that she was a skillful child and knew the alphabet and numbers by the time she started school. Her grandfather taught her these things and many others.

> So yes, my grandfather was just always the support. He taught me how to ride my pushbike and taught me how to stand on my head in the backyard, all that sort of thing … and I can remember the teacher holding letter cards and saying 'You know them all. I don't know why I'm holding these up'. I had a grandfather who taught me everything and that helped. (Started school 1946)

Some of the participants were quite proud of the "secrets" that their grandparents shared with them. Sometimes, these were almost "open" secrets but, on other occasions, they were even a little subversive. Even 70 years ago, grandparents had an advantage over parents in terms of the overall responsibility they felt for the child's upbringing. For example:

> But I read everything I could get my hands on, particularly my grandfather's dreadful western stories. You know those awful westerns? Oh they were terrible. And he'd hide them from me. And my grandmother would wait till he was asleep, having a nap or something and she would say 'Here's another one', and she would give it to me 'But don't tell grandfather'. So that was rather nice. (Started school 1943)

Close relationships with their grandparents provided nurture, care and company for many of the interviewees when they were young and when their parents were not available. One of the younger participants in the project recalled the importance of his Nan (grandmother).

> Because Mum obviously had to work to provide everything we needed as kids or what we wanted, Nan was always there. Nan was the cook; Nan always made sure there was food and everything, and that dinner was ready. And Nan was always there, if Mum wasn't there. (Started school 1988)

Grandparents' relationships with their grandchildren tend to be somewhat different from parents' relationships with their children. As well, the roles and ongoing responsibilities of parents are quite different from those of grandparents. As Ochiltree (2006, p. 2) suggests

> Contact with grandparents can be mutually satisfying for both generations. Grandparents are usually not so caught up with the daily routines and issues of living with the grandchildren and have more time to listen, observe and attend to small things than busy parents. Grandparents can reflect and pass on to their grandchildren cultural knowledge as well as family and community traditions.

According to one interviewee, this difference was an important aspect of his relationship with his grandparents:

> It was very nice having my grandparents there because they didn't actually "teach me" that much, but I think they teach you lots of things. I remember my grandparents very fondly. (Started school 1943)

For the participants in this study, grandparents had a great influence on their transitions to school. Grandparents provided intergenerational and multicultural experiences, reinforced skills that were useful at school and beyond, and provided social and cultural resources to their grandchildren. The relationships between grandchildren and grandparents were balanced between the personal needs of grandchildren and the resources to meet these needs that were held by grandparents. Following Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), this personal and contextual match strengthened the relationships and supported transitions to school.

8.4.2 Support Provided by Grandparents

In the memories of many of the study participants, grandparents played numerous roles throughout their schooling and, in particular, when they started school. Not all of these involved the close personal relationships described in the previous section, but all fit within the realm of proximal processes – both with their grandchildren, but also through the provision of support to parents. As previously discussed, food was an important conduit for many of these roles.

> I can remember the first time I opened my lunch box it was … I had a white damask serviette with wax paper around my sandwich and around my cakes. My grandmother was a pretty crack cook so I had lots of cake and fruit. (Started school 1946)

Material support was often remembered in terms of the supply of school uniforms, often in times of shortage:

> I think I can remember my first days at school was it a skirt and a jumper my grandmother made me I would imagine, I think from memory that I would have worn, yes. (Started school 1938)

This kind of material support was recognized and appreciated by many of the interviewees. For example, school uniforms were very important to young children starting school in Australia, and still are (Simos 2013). Uniforms are seen within individual schools to be opportunities for “levelling the playing field” for many children as competition around wearing the latest designer clothes is removed. As well, they are seen to assist children “belong” to their school and, consequently, feel that they are an important part of the overall enterprise. The input of grandmothers was much appreciated by some of the interviewees.

In Australia, it is not the norm for school lunches to be supplied by the school. Children tend to bring their own lunches or, if they can afford to do so, buy them at school canteens. School lunch time is a very important social occasion, especially for young children, and is also a good time for children to show the quality of support they have from home. Grandmothers and mothers who are good cooks can be very important attributes to have, as has been illustrated by a number of memories for the study participants. Memories of “the wonderful food” supplied by grandmother may be about the food itself but are also likely to be about how the young child felt when he/she could show-off, and even share, the marvelous school lunches that helped them “shine” at lunch time.

Transition to school involves a change of role for the child (Dockett and Perry 2007) and new school-related things such clothes, school bag and school accessories are external signs of this new role as a school student (Peters 2014). By participating in these preparations for their grandchild’s transition to school, the grandparents supported the transition process and strengthened their grandchild’s new role in the new environment.

Some interviewees recalled their grandparents’ participation in school activities, often substituting for parents, sometimes in their own right. Many schools have a practice where young children take turns to present important items from their lives to their class. This practice is often called “show and tell”. One interviewee recalled that he brought his grandparents to school for “show and tell”.

> I remember I brought my grandparents as show and tell. My grandad … was Irish so everyone was fairly intrigued by him… I just remember being very proud of my grandad, probably simply because he was Irish and it was fairly different to most other people. (Started school 1990).

The interviewee suggested that this memory as one of his strongest related to starting school, although we cannot be sure about how far the experience was from the first day of school. His grandparents did not live near to the family, but were ready to be part of their grandchild’s school life by visiting the school.

One interviewee used an artifact – a photograph – to recall her grandmother participating in a school fete.

> I know that we had a fete because I've got a photo here of myself riding a Shetland pony. My grandmother must have brought her three Shetland ponies along for people to ride around a track at the fete. (Started school 1954)

The involvement of grandparents in the interviewees' schooling was not always seen as positive. Sometimes, tensions between parents and grandparents were recalled.

> Now, my mother was going through a hard time with my granny because she [mother] was a Catholic. And so if Granny could get me and hide me when Mum was going to mass on Sunday morning she would hide me. Anything to cause disruption. (Started school 1934)

Recognition of grandparents' diverse roles resonates with previous studies reviewed by Dunifon (2013) which show that grandparental involvement can have negative influence if they interfere with or subvert the practices of the parents. In most cases though, grandparents' emotional and material help supported parents, decreased their stress and promoted overall well-being (Dunifon 2013).

8.4.3 Inherited Intergenerational Assets

In their stories, interviewees highlighted what impact they saw the characteristics and habits of their older relatives, including their grandparents, had on their own development. Many of them noted their apparent inheritance of these intergenerational assets.

> The only other thing I remember there was I was so pleased with myself because I think in second class I learnt to spell 'disappeared, disappointed' and I can't remember the other one, but three very big words. That made my day. I loved reading. I don't know at what age I learnt to read but it was quite an early age. Mum was a reader and my aunt and grandmother were readers so there were always books around. We read. (Started school 1958)

> Used to love woodwork, metal work, all that sort of thing. As I said, my father was a chippie [carpenter]. My grandfather was a chippie, my great grandfather was an engineer. Pretty good with their hands. (Started school 1947)

In the first of these two quotes, the interviewee recalls her success at school work and links this with the family habit of reading. In the second quote the handicraft aptitude is connected with the skills of previous generations. However, the intergenerational assets were not only related to skills and aptitudes. In the following extract, the interviewee interprets her personal characteristics through an intergenerational lens.

> You know really probably they were a big influence on our lives because of my grandmother was a very cultured woman and so we had lovely music and poetry and singing. She sewed beautifully also but she was quite a lady and she discussed politics with men when it really wasn't quite the done thing to do. So we came from a line of very strong women and very much quieter men. (Started school 1937)

The interviewees had reproduced family practices (Lüscher 2002). The extracts above illustrate how personal skills, aptitudes and characteristics are reviewed within the life course and through linked lives as heritage has passed across generations. This demonstrates how stories of transition to school are not only part of personal narratives, but also represent shared family narratives. While what has been presented here are individual autobiographical narratives they have been constructed, sometimes over many years, in interaction with families and other influences within an intergenerational framework. Such ongoing stories in families represent continuity in transition experiences across generations. Family stories are interpreted in the context of the tellers' lives and as illustrated in the previous extract, they can impact upon identity-building processes and the constitution of the tellers (McKeough and Malcolm 2011).

8.5 Conclusion

Grandparents have great potential to support their grandchildren when they start school and the grandchildren have great potential to remember this support. This potential is enabled if grandparents can participate actively in their grandchildren's everyday life and create a positive reciprocal relationship with them. These proximal processes support the children and parents and can help promote successful transitions (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). By their support and presence, grandparents can also provide assistance to families and highlight the importance of new phase of life, schooldays. They promote children's positive identities within school contexts and support children's and their parents' agency (Dockett 2014). Our previous research (Turunen and Perry 2013) has illuminated how even young children starting school are able to act as active and proactive individuals and thus cope well in the new situation and unfamiliar environment. For their part, grandparents can be a critical component of this support for successful transitions to school.

Grandparents can also strengthen family capital at the time of their grandchildren's transition to school. The family's role in building up social capital can be understood via financial capital, human capital and social capital (Coleman 1988). The interviewees recalled all these aspects. Financial capital was provided by food, clothes and school accessories and human capital in the form of inherited aptitudes and skills. Social capital was especially evident in close relationships between grandparents and grandchildren. Family capital was used by interviewees to manage transition, review it and construct it as part of their life course (Belcher et al. 2011).

The recollections of transition to school provide evidence that grandparents can be an important part of a successful transition to school. In the study reported here, grandparents were not part of every recollection. Quite the contrary, the majority of participants did not talk about their grandparents. Many did not have grandparents available when they were starting school. Those who were able to build up a

supportive relationship with their grandparents remembered them as an important and supportive part of their transition to school experiences.

Stories reviewed in this chapter covered several decades from the 1930s to the 1980s and the majority of them referred to experiences from some 50 years ago. On one hand, they represent oral history, narrative accounts of the past (Abrams 2010), and reveal historical incidents and ways of life in Australia. On the other hand, they tell powerful stories about relationships that were so meaningful that they could be recalled decades later, often in a detailed manner. This suggests that also today grandparents can be significant for their grandchildren. Societies have changed and families often live far from their extended family members and three-generational households are not as common as they used to be (Pilkauskas and Martinson 2014). But, as Dunifon (2013) has reported, grandparents' involvement has increased, at least in the United States and this maybe the case in other countries as well. In Australia, nearly all children under school-age are in touch with their grandparents (Gray et al. 2005). The care and support provided by grandparents during their grandchildren's transition to school deserves to be recognised by parents, school principals and teachers. As well, the transition capital built throughout the lives of children as they recall the role of their grandparents in starting school can be of some importance in the way they interact with their own grandchildren. There is much further research to be completed regarding the role of grandparents in their grandchildren's transition to school.

8.6 Epilogue

We conclude this chapter with an extended example of the impact of grandparents on children's transition to school. The story teller recalls her own transition to school and the role her grandmother played in her early years of school. By the time of the interview, the story teller was herself a grandmother and one of her grandchildren had just started school. The interactions with her grandchild and their relationship to her own experiences of starting school reinforce the key points of the chapter:

- the importance of intergenerational interactions as children start school;
- the potential for grandparents and grandchildren to contribute to each others' lives;
- ways in which family capital can be developed through access to intergenerational knowledge;
- the potential to regulate and shape transitions to school through life course experiences contributing to the independent lives of members of extended families; and
- the continuing role of grandparents in the transition to school experiences of their grandchildren.

Lucy started school in rural South Australia in 1956. She was the eldest child in a farming family. Her two siblings were a lot younger than she, so Lucy had a childhood that did not involve many other children. As a result 'I was a very shy child when it came time to start school'. Even though she was eligible to start school when she was 5 years old, in 1955, her parents decided that she would not start until the following year. Lucy has very fond memories of her grandmother, whom she called "Nana". In fact, during the year before Lucy started school, she stayed during the week with Nana in town, about 15 km from home. This enabled Lucy to access preschool as there was no public transport for her to use from the farm. Her memories of Nana are filled with 'love, security and no tension. Nana was very important to me'.

When it came time for Lucy to start school, there was still no bus from the farm, so she again stayed on weekdays at Nana's house. This lasted for just one term, after which the required bus route was instigated and Lucy could stay at home and access the "local" school. So, Lucy started school in town and, after one term, moved to the rural school nearer her home. Her memories of her first day at school are that both Mum and Nana, and her younger siblings, accompanied her to the school gate, where they all said 'goodbye' and left her. She remembers that she went into her classroom, knowing no-one, and it was dark and very big and 'I was very small'. Her other memories of this school are that there was a large group of children and the teacher was very kind, although the children were made 'to sit on the floor and undertake endless repetitions of the alphabet'. Lucy does not have particular memories of Nana's role in her transition to school, except the enduring image of being driven to and from school in 'Nana's shiny, black Austin A40'.

In 2015, Lucy is a highly educated, successful, retired early childhood educator living in a state capital in Australia. She is also a grandmother of two girls, the elder of whom started school in 2015. Lucy describes herself as 'a loving, supportive Nana who is both professionally and personally interested in transition to school'. She has much interaction with her granddaughters and has talked with both about starting school. Rosie, the elder granddaughter, has had a somewhat difficult start to school, partly because, in Lucy's words 'she is shy and finds making friends difficult'.

While Lucy's informal support for Rosie continues through her first year of school, Lucy provides two more structured supports. One day per week Nana and Pop collect Rosie from school and take her to their home. This provides the opportunity for Rosie and Lucy to talk about school. As well,

> I go as a volunteer one morning per week to support the school and teacher by hearing children read but also to be a support to Rosie. … A downside of this is that I have some concerns about the program at the school but, because of my past employment, I have to be very, very, very cautious and controlled about my reactions to the things that Rosie has been exposed to. … I feel that I am returning to transition to school. I loved school but parts like the alphabet cards were tedious. I can see myself in the current *Jolly Phonics* program through Rosie who does not seem to be looking or concentrating much of the time.

Lucy's memories of her Nana and her current involvement with Rosie's transition to school provide a salient link between memories of important people in children's

transition to school and, generations on, the impact on their grandchildren as they start school. We would do well to remember that all family members, including grandparents, can play a role children's starting school and that their involvement will often grow from their own experiences with their grandparents. Lucy is but one example of the growing number of grandparents – especially grandmothers – who impact on their grandchildren's transition to school by bringing their experiences and expertise to bear on this important process.

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Chapter 9
School Choice and Parent Involvement Among Australian Children Starting School

Graham Daniel, Cen Wang, Elizabeth Murray, and Linda J. Harrison

9.1 Introduction

Children's first experience of starting school often begins with the decisions parents make about the school their child will attend. Opportunities for school choice have increased during the past 25 years in over two-thirds of the 48 countries surveyed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2009 (Musset 2012); and a growing number of parents are exercising explicit school choice (Goldring and Phillips 2008). School choice has gained international attention in recent decades as part of school reform and quality improvement initiatives (Brasington and Hite 2014). Choice is also promoted as an expression of individual democratic rights enabling individual families to select the schooling environment they believe is best suited to their child and their family. School choice is also advocated as a way of addressing disadvantage by providing access to potentially better outcomes beyond those that may be available in the immediate locality (Lubienski et al. 2009; Musset 2012).

Some studies conducted in the United States have suggested that school choice is linked with a range of improved schooling outcomes (Cullen et al. 2006), with particular benefit for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. A Stanford University analysis found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds benefited from enrolment in Charter schools (Center for Research on Education Outcomes [CREDO] 2013), and a meta-analysis of studies encompassing 24,599 students from faith-based schools (mostly Christian) across 1052 schools showed that these schools closed socio-economic and race-based educational gaps by 25%, and were effective across all subject areas (Jeynes 2014). Furthermore, the lower the SES of the student's background, the greater the effectiveness of these schools. To date, Australian

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S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_9

studies have not confirmed the association between school choice and student outcomes noted in the US (Mahuteau and Mavromaras 2014; Nghiem et al. 2015).

Early advocates of school choice asserted that choice promoted improved schooling outcomes in part by increasing parent involvement in their children's education, through the parent's increased ownership and personal investment in the process of selecting a school that best meets the needs and interests of their children (Bauch and Goldring 1995). Reflecting Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory which proposes that children's development is supported by strong relationships within and between the different spheres that form the child's ecological environment (Bronfenbrenner 1979), Epstein (1987) proposed a model of overlapping spheres between home, school and community, and promoted the critical role of schools in facilitating these overlaps through the facilitation of parent involvement in children's education in the school and community environments (Epstein 1995).

Positive parent engagement between home and school is key to enabling continuity between home and early care environments and experiences within the formal school context (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000), and is a recognised characteristic of high quality school transition programs and pedagogy (Pianta and Kraft-Sayre 2003). Like school choice, parental involvement is a central element of school reform movements and forms an important support for children, promoting adjustment to schooling (Galindo and Sheldon 2012) and a range of improved academic and socio-emotional outcomes (Avvisati et al. 2014; Borgonovi and Montt 2012; Daniel et al. 2016; Wilder 2014).

As experiences such as transition to school, school choice and parent involvement become embedded within policy and cultural contexts that may promote different actions on the part of schools and outcomes for students, it is important to understand these experiences within different countries and contexts. This chapter focuses on relationships between school choice, parent involvement and transition to school in the first year of primary (elementary) education in Australia. We draw on current research and data from children and families who are participating in the nationally representative Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) (Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS] 2012; Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) 2012). In particular, we draw on data indicating parents' initial reasons for their choice of primary school, and their practices of parent involvement as reported during the second year of their child's enrolment. These data provide a picture of the relationships between school choice and parent involvement in the early school years, and illustrate emerging patterns of involvement in relation to the type of school chosen and reasons for these choices.

9.2 School Choice Policy and Practice

School choice is enabled through a variety of policy and funding arrangements that vary across different countries and regions within countries. Access to private schooling for example may be supported through funding schemes such as direct

subsidies, tax discounts or full or partial voucher systems. In public schooling, de-zoning of enrolment restrictions allows students to enroll in schools in areas beyond their immediate residential location. Schools with specialist curriculum focus areas and academically selective public schools may also be available. Privately managed public schools with specific government mandated requirements have also been established in some countries as a way of linking the benefits of private management with the delivery of public education (for example Charter One schools in the United States and Academy Schools in the United Kingdom). The Australian Federal Government has recently funded the establishment of Independent Public Schools, based on a Western Australian model that gives increased powers to local school principals to make management and educational decisions in areas such as financial management, student support, staff recruitment, curriculum and in some areas of policy and governance (Department of Education and Training 2014a, b). These schools work with their local school communities and in clusters of schools to provide support through the sharing of resources.

Finally, parents have the choice to withdraw from formal school settings through home-schooling where it is available.

Statistics from the 2009 OECD review suggest that choice between public schools was available in 23 of 33 OECD countries (Musset 2012). Government dependent private schools (those receiving at least 50% of their income through Government funding) were available in 27 out of 36 OECD countries at the primary level, with this type of school forming the majority of schools in The Netherlands, Chile, Belgium and Ireland (Musset 2012).

Australia is recognized as having a high participation rate in school choice, due to relatively generous public financial support for private schools, which receive support from both Federal and State Government funding (Dearden et al. 2010; Musset 2012). Catholic schools receive approximately 80% of the costs of educating a student, while Independent schools receive between 15 and 85% of these costs, based on a formula relating to the relative wealth of the area in which the school is established (Dearden et al. 2010; Watson and Ryan 2009). Australia has the highest level of local competition between schools in the OECD, with 94.5% of Australian principals reporting that they compete with at least one other school in their locality for enrolments, and 86% reporting the presence of two or more competitors (OECD 2014).

In the early years of primary schooling, many Australian parents are able to choose between their local public school and public schools in other localities (through de-zoning policies), Independent (private) schools including those in the Catholic and Anglican school systems, and individual schools based around other religious faiths or philosophical approaches to education. However, these choices may be limited by availability of places in government schools for students from other school zones, and in private schools by the availability of places as well as through eligibility in relation to particular expectations such as in faith-based schools. OECD comparisons show that Australia has the fifth highest enrolment in the non-government schooling sector, after the Netherlands, Chile, Belgium and Ireland, at almost two-and-a-half times the OECD average (Musset 2012).

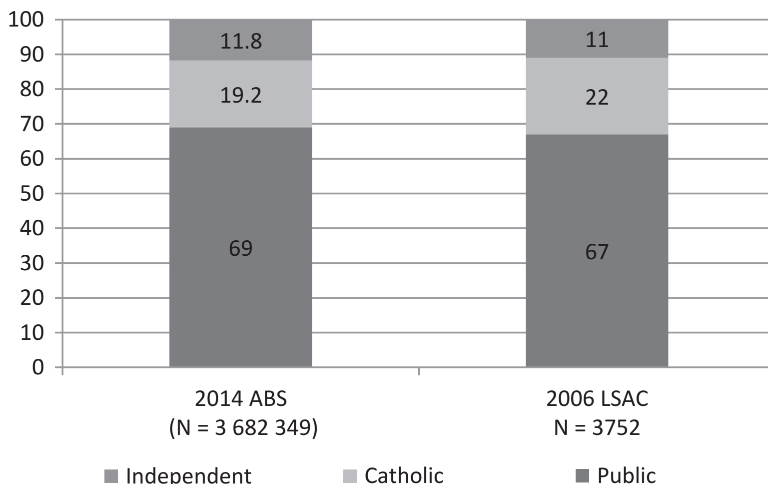


Fig. 9.1 Participation rates in public, Catholic and Independent private schools according to 2014 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2015) data and 2006 LSAC data

In 2014, approximately 69.0% of Australia's primary school students attended public schools, with 19.2% attending Catholic and 11.8% attending Independent schools. In secondary schooling, enrolments in non-government schools increased, with 59.2%, 22.7%, 18.1% and attending public, Catholic, and Independent secondary schools, respectively. The figures for the LSAC study sample (2006 data for children in Year 1) are very similar: 67% attended a government (public) school; 22% attended a Catholic school; and 11% attended an Independent (private) school. As shown in Fig. 9.1, the LSAC study sample used in this chapter largely mirrors the current pattern of enrolment in the overall population.

9.3 Reasons for Choice of School

Families choose schools for a variety of reasons including the school's academic performance or reputation, religious or philosophical approach, particular curriculum strengths, school environment, convenience, safety and discipline (Goldring and Hausman 1999; Musset 2012). Other factors include travel distance, cost, or connections through families or friends (Musset 2012). Families may also choose not to enroll in particular schools due to quality and safety concerns, or on the basis of the particular demography of the school community (Jacobs 2013). A 2012 survey of school choice in 11 OECD countries reported that the reasons for school selection were very similar across the participating countries: Chile, Portugal, Mexico, Korea, Macao-China, Hong Kong-China, Croatia, Germany, Belgium, Italy and Hungary (OECD 2015). Academic achievement was ranked as the highest priority in all countries, with school reputation, environment and safety the second

most important category in all. Where school choice was available, parents were more likely to nominate a safe school environment and school reputation as being more important than the academic achievement of the school (OECD 2015). Safety and discipline are more likely to be a high parent priority in areas of high crime and violence, which are often disadvantaged urban communities (Lee et al. 1996; Schneider et al. 1998, 2002).

Australia did not participate in the 2012 OECD survey, and there are few published studies of school choice in Australia, despite the relatively widespread availability of different schooling options (Windle 2009). Campbell et al. (2009) summarised the main drivers of school choice in Australia as being associated with parents' aspirational and religious values. In an analysis of school choice using data from the Australian Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, Dearden et al. (2010) found children with at least one parent identifying as Catholic were 16% more likely to be enrolled in a Catholic school. Families with at least one parent identifying as Christian were 5% more likely to be enrolled in an Independent school. A strong intergenerational influence was also evident with the type of school chosen being related to the type of school attended by parents, with 75% percent of parents who both attended public schools enrolling their children in public schools. Just over half (51%) of parents where both attended Catholic schools enrolled their children in Catholic schools, and just under half (46.1%) of families where both parents attended Independent schools enrolled their children in Independent schools (Dearden et al. 2010). There may also be differences in enrolment patterns and reasons in different localities, where the availability of accessible choices may be restricted. In a case study of 80 families living in rural Australia where choice is more restricted than in metropolitan areas, Goh and Dolnicar (2006) found that proximity, academic reputation and religious affiliation were the main reasons for parents' choice of school.

To our knowledge, the data presented in this chapter is the first time that the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) dataset has been analysed in relation to school choice. We focused on the LSAC-Kindergarten Cohort, which recruited a sample of 4983 4–5 year old children in 2014. From this original sample, we selected the children who stayed in the same school across two waves of data collection. The study sample was the 3752 children whose families provided information on their choice of school. Parents were asked to select from a list of possible reasons influencing their choice of school. There were four options provided in the LSAC interview: "an aspect of the school", "familiarity", "convenience", and other.

Results showed that 32% of families chose "an aspect of the school" such as school academic reputation, religious values, and availability of specific programs as most important. A slightly lower proportion (28%) selected "convenience" as the main reason (school is close to home or work). A further 28% selected "familiarity of the school" (family member or child's friends attended the school). The remaining 12% of families chose "other" reasons (defined as financial reasons, unspecified other reason, or did not have a choice) (Fig. 9.2).

We then examined the relationships between parents' reasons for their choice of school by the type of school children were attending. The results (presented in

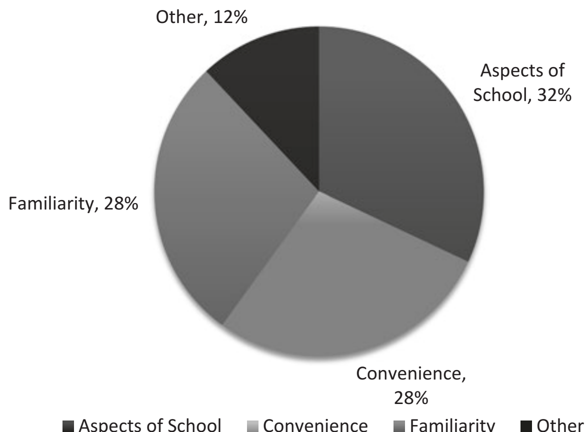


Fig. 9.2 Reasons for school choice in LSAC study sample ($n = 3752$)

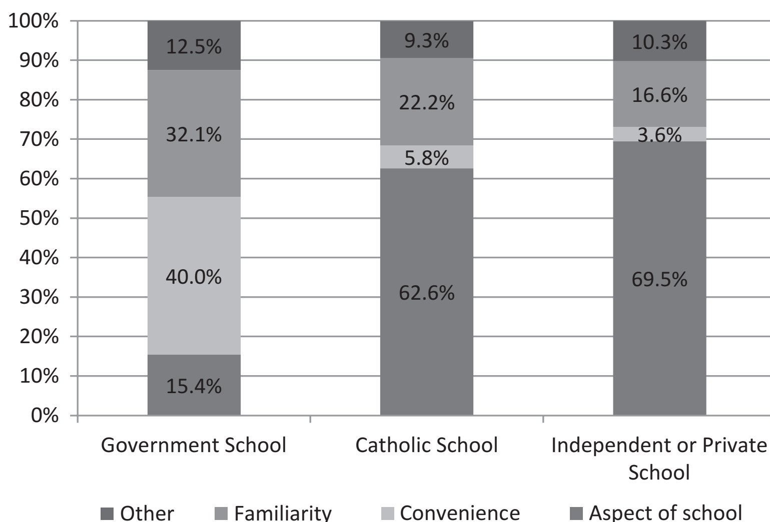


Fig. 9.3 Reasons for school choice by school type

Fig. 9.3) indicated that there were significant differences across the three school types. Characteristics of the school, such as the educational/religious program, was selected by over 60% of parents who had chosen a Catholic or an Independent school for their child, but by only 15% of parents who had chosen a government (public) school. Convenience was the reason cited by 40% of parents who had chosen a government school, but by only 6% of those who used Catholic or Independent schools. Familiarity was selected by a slightly higher proportion of parents whose child was attending a government school (32%) compared to parents using Catholic (22%) or Independent schools (17%).

9.4 School Choice and Parent Involvement

International research has shown that in countries where choice of school is available, parents who exercise this choice report higher scores on measures of parent involvement in home, school and community-based activities (Goldring and Phillips 2008; Hoxby 1999). Parents also report higher levels of teacher outreach in facilitating parent involvement and that schools are more responsive in meeting the individual needs and interests of families (May 2006). Not surprisingly, research also shows that parents who choose their children's school report higher levels of satisfaction with their school (Bosetti 2004; Hausman and Goldring 2000; Kim and Hwang 2014).

In our analyses of the LSAC-Kindergarten sample, we examined this issue by comparing levels of parent involvement by reasons for school choice, and by school type. Parent involvement was measured by four items (parent had visited their child's classroom, contacted the teacher, attended a school event, volunteered in the classroom or on an excursion). These were reported as yes/no, with a value of 1 assigned to each yes response. The items were summed to generate a parent involvement score, with a minimum value of 0 and a maximum of 4. The overall average score for parents was 2.84 activities. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) statistics were applied to the comparison tests.

Results showed that parent involvement was significantly related to parents' reasons for school choice. Specifically, parents who chose schools based on characteristics of the school (academic standing, religious values) reported higher levels of school involvement (mean score = 3.00) compared to parents who chose a school because of convenience (mean score = 2.69) and familiarity (mean score = 2.76). Parents who chose schools for "other" reasons also had higher levels of school involvement (mean score = 2.97) than those whose choice was based on convenience and familiarity of the school. There were no significant differences in parent involvement for parents who chose the school because of convenience versus familiarity, and no difference in involvement for parents whose choice of school was based on characteristics of the school versus "other" reasons (Fig. 9.4).

Parent involvement also differed by type of school, being higher in Independent schools (mean score = 3.06) and Catholic schools (mean score = 2.96) compared to government schools (mean score = 2.76). There were no significant differences between Independent and Catholic schools (Fig. 9.5).

In a further test, we included both school type and reasons for school choice using two-way between-group ANOVA in order to understand the relative importance of these factors as influences on parents' level of involvement in their children's schooling. The results showed that when both school type and reasons for school choice were included in the analysis, school type was no longer a significant predictor of parent school-based involvement. Rather, the level of school-based parent involvement was largely determined by parents' reasons for school choice. No significant interaction was found between school type and reasons for school choice, suggesting that the relationship between reasons for school choice and parent

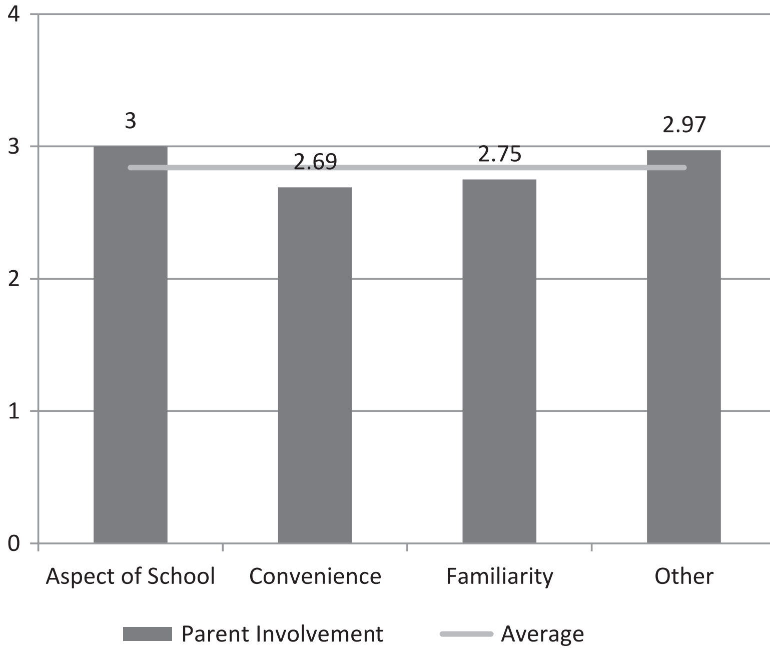
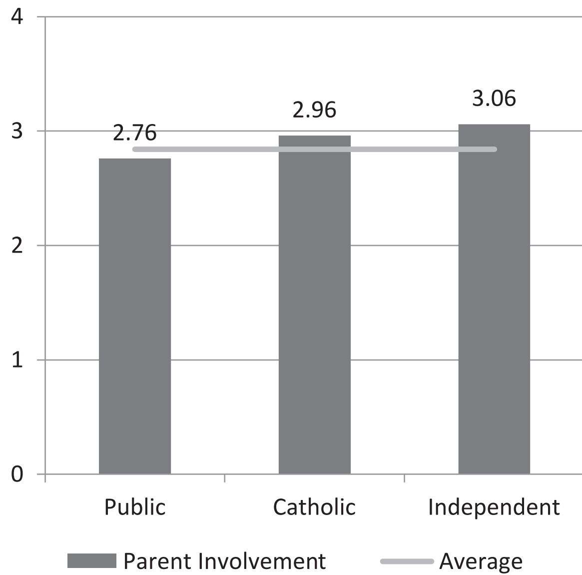


Fig. 9.4 Parent involvement by reason for school choice

Fig. 9.5 Parent involvement by school type



involvement was not affected by the type of school that the child attended. The results aligned with findings reported above: parents whose choice of school was based on the characteristics of the school reported higher levels of school involvement than those whose choice was based on convenience and familiarity. Parents who reported "other reasons" for their school choice had higher levels of involvement than those whose choice was based on convenience.

9.5 Conclusion and Future Directions

Supporting and enabling parents to be active participants in their child's schooling is an important part of ensuring education is equitable, and focused on engaging families. Parent involvement is particularly important to promote and sustain during the period of transition into formal schooling, in part because parent involvement has been found to drop over the transition from preschool to school (Murray et al. 2015) and because involvement levels decline over the school years (Daniel 2015).

Results from our analyses of the LSAC dataset, presented in this chapter, suggest that parent involvement is influenced by the decisions parents make about the school their child will attend when they start school, and that the decision making process is guided by a focus on a particular aspect of school. In line with international evidence, Australian parents tended to identify academic reputation, religious values or specific programs as the most influential reason behind their choice of school. Familiarity with the school and convenience were the next most common reasons for school choice. Influencing these decisions, although not directly affecting parent involvement, was the finding that parents' reasons for choosing their child's school differed by type of school. Parents whose choice was to send their child to a Catholic or an Independent (private) school were more likely to report that an aspect of the school was the reason for their choice, whilst parents who chose a government school favored familiarity with the school or a convenient location. These differences have important implications for future practice around the transition to school. Schools for example could facilitate parent involvement by developing and promoting inclusive and empowering methods to inform prospective parents about the educational program and other aspects of the school and encourage communication between teachers and parents.

Our primary aim in this research was to gain a clearer understanding of parents' involvement in their children's schooling. Parent involvement represents a critical component of children's experiences in their transition to school and it is encouraging to note that most of the LSAC parents reported some level of involvement in the early years of schooling (visited the child's classroom, contacted the teacher, attended a school event, or volunteered at the school). The average involvement score for the sample was just under 3 on the 0–4 scale. Different levels of parent involvement were largely determined by the reasons that had influenced their choice of school, rather than the type of school chosen. Parents who chose schools based on academic, religious or other specific aspects had higher scores for school-based

involvement. In contrast, parents who chose schools based on convenience or familiarity had lower scores.

This is an important finding, given that Australia has policies and funding arrangements that promote choice and a relatively high level of participation in school choice compared to other OECD countries (Mussett 2012; OECD 2014). Whilst is likely that within Australia, families do not all enjoy the same degree of accessibility to different school options and therefore do not have the same degree of school choice, the national picture is one of a context in which parents could be encouraged to consider the type of schooling environment that best suits the needs and interests of their child and family. The association between active choice and higher parent involvement indicated in this research suggests a way in which schools might facilitate parent involvement in their children's education and in the school community. First, schools should seek to inform prospective parents about the educational program and other aspects of the school, particularly for those parents who are likely to use the school for reasons of convenience and familiarity. Second, schools and teachers should ensure that parents are aware of the opportunities for involvement, and the benefits their involvement has for their children.

A number of authors have criticised policies of school choice and parent involvement, because of their potential to promote inequity due to socio-cultural, economic and personal barriers that may limit parents access to choice and their ability to engage in parent involvement activities (Avvisati et al. 2014; Ben-Porath 2012; Borgonovi and Montt 2012; Emerson et al. 2012; Musset 2012). Further research is needed to examine these issues of accessibility in the Australian context, as policies of school choice and parent involvement become embedded within the educational landscape.

This chapter has drawn on a representative sample of Australian parents to present a description of the choices families make in selecting their child's first school and the association between these choices and parent involvement in the early years of school. One of the limitations of the analyses in this chapter is that we are not able to identify the degree to which particular types of schools influence this involvement through policies of interaction, opportunities and expectations of parental involvement. Similarly, due to the format of the LSAC interview, it was not possible to separate which particular aspects of a school were of most important for school choice, such as distinguishing between religious affiliation, curriculum and extra-curricular opportunities and academic or social aspects of the school. It will be important for future research to examine these distinctions, in order for schools and policy makers to better understand the reasons behind school choice in Australia. With this understanding, programs to support parent and community involvement in school activities are likely to be better informed and more successful.

While school choice is one of the initial decisions parents make about their child's education, the subsequent ways parents are involved in schools can have a significant impact on children's academic and social-emotional outcomes (Avvisati et al. 2014). This is not to be underestimated. With a focus on the importance of positive literacy and numeracy outcomes early in school, and many programs targeting the wellness and wellbeing of young children, taking steps toward increasing

parent involvement in early schooling, and encouraging strong partnerships between families and schools, should be high on the agenda. Building awareness of the strengths of schools during the enrolment process may offer an early way to engage parents in the process of active school selection, and encourage increased parent involvement in transition to schooling and beyond.

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Part III
Parent and System Perspectives on Transition to School

Chapter 10
Parents' Emotional and Academic Attitudes Towards Children's Transition to Preschool Class – Dimensions of School Readiness and Continuity

Helena Ackesjö

10.1 Introduction

Starting school is an important milestone for both children and parents. The issue of children's transition from preschool to school has been a recurring issue on international political agendas (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2006). These political discussions are often based on perceptions that children's transitions are problematic, and therefore must be handled carefully. For this reason, focus has been directed towards building bridges and easing the transitions between different school settings, with the overall aim being to simplify transitions for children (Ecclestone 2009). International research shows that the way children make transitions between different school settings not only affects their start to school, but also has potential to influence their future academic outcomes (Bulkeley and Fabian 2006; Fabian 2002; White and Sharp 2007). However, few studies problematize the risks or opportunities with various transition experiences. Above all, there is a lack of research that takes parents' experiences of their children's transitions as its empirical basis.

Therefore, this study examines Swedish parents' expectations and concerns about their children's upcoming transition from preschool to the preschool class. Comparisons are also made between statements of parents who already have older children in school and statements of parents whose oldest child is now making the transition to preschool class, to detect whether or not parents' previous experiences with their older children influence their expectations and concerns.

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S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_10

10.2 Children's Transition from Preschool to School in Sweden

The following section presents the educational context in which the transition from preschool to school takes place. In Sweden, children attend preschool between ages of 1–5 years. The year they turn six, they make the transition to the preschool class. At age seven, they enter first grade in the compulsory school (Fig. 10.1).

Even if the Swedish preschool class still is a voluntary school year,[1] it is most often located on school premises. This means that the transition to the preschool class involves a physical movement from a preschool environment to a school environment. The preschool class is designed to act as a bridge between preschool and school traditions and educational approaches: the purpose of the preschool class is to relate to both preschool and school and the pedagogies of these institutions, in order to "smooth" children's transition between them.

While parents' voices about their children's transition to school are almost absent in national research, a few Swedish studies (Ackesjö 2014; Fast 2007; Lago 2014; Sandberg 2012; Skoog 2012) focus on children's perspectives as they make the transition to and/or from preschool class. These studies provide consistent evidence of discontinuity between the preschool class and grade 1, as teachers in these different settings share little common understanding of the different settings and expectations. As a result, children's prior knowledge is often not recognized and it is difficult to create continuity between the school settings. This makes the transitions from preschool to preschool class and further on to school a big step for children to take.

International research has shown other dilemmas for children that deal with understanding the complexity of the school environment, for example, greater numbers of children and fewer adults, and managing different interactions. Fabian (2002) also argues that the children's changing status can create confusion. When children start school, they soon realize that they are among the smallest and youngest in school, which is a big change from being the oldest in preschool.

The time before and after starting school can be seen as an important and, for some children, critical period of life. The start of school implies changes, which can have an impact not only on the initial period in school, but also a future perspective. The transition from preschool to school involves children being required to adjust to

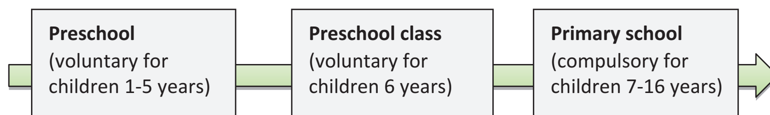

Fig. 10.1 The Swedish school system

[1] However, a majority of the political representatives are now working towards making the Swedish preschool class mandatory for all 6-year-olds.

the school's culture (Fabian 2002). In addition, Ackesjö (2013, 2014) states that the transition is not only about adaptations to the new. It is also about separation from earlier practices and important relationships. At the same time as children are finalizing their time in, and separating from preschool, they must adapt to the preschool class. This period can therefore be an unstable time where synchronous exit and entry processes in different school forms are drifting into each other. Children can be excited over "starting school" but also worried about the actual transition to the school environment. Ackesjö's (2013) study also implies that even if children are well prepared, they can "get lost in transition". This suggests that teachers in preschool have a certain responsibility to facilitate the transition process for the children, by helping them separate, disengage and finalize their time in preschool. In this process, the support from the children's parents could be considered as crucial.

10.3 Parents in Transition

Becoming a parent of a school child is a part of a transition process. A study by Ackesjö (2010) has shown that while children often are prepared and ready for the transition, their parents may have a harder time to adjust to all new aspects of the school context. According to teachers in the 2010 study, parents of children in transition to school often express concerns about their children's safety at school.

The objective of the Swedish preschool class is to act as a bridge between preschool and school. One preschool class teacher describes this objective as: 'Bridges shall be built for children, parents and other teachers. Building bridges in children's learning is also important. Creating positive transitions is an important part of our work' (Ackesjö 2010, p. 71). Consequently, bridges must also be built for the parents in transition.

Children's transition to school affects all family members – it is not only a transition for the children (Westcott et al. 2003). Family support plays an important role in preparing children for the transition to school, and in providing continuity. However, parents draw on their own experiences and perceptions as they participate in their children's transition to school, and research (Dockett and Perry 2007) has shown that children and parents report different perspectives and worries about the transition to school. Becoming a parent of a school child for the first time can be a shock. Griebel and Niesel (2013) argue that parents in transition face discontinuities and challenges at the individual level (changes in their own identity, coping with strong emotions), the interactional level (building new relationships with teachers and parents) and the contextual level (meetings with new educational environments including the before and after-school programmes) (see Chap. 2).

To sum up, research has shown that the transition to school is a time of both vulnerability and opportunity for children and families as new relationships and new contexts are explored (Dockett and Perry 2013). Well-being for both children and parents seems to be an important criterion for a successful transition. Indeed, families play an important role in children's transition to school. This implies that both children and parents need to be informed and prepared for the transition.

10.4 Transitions and School Readiness

Research has shown that parents' and teachers' discussions about children's transition to school soon turn toward children's readiness for school. There is also often a connection found between age and gender and a perceived state of readiness (Dockett and Perry 2007). Historically, early childhood educators have been reluctant to define the concept of school readiness (Saluja et al. 2000). This attitude could be explained by former approaches to the concept that stressed the maturity of the child as the primary indicator for school readiness, with maturity meaning that the child would be able to do quiet, focused work in primary school. The trend has now changed considerably, and the definition of children's readiness for school has undergone a major shift during the past decades towards a more socially-constructed concept. Recent approaches stress the relationships between the child and the surrounding environment (Murphy and Burns 2002). From this perspective, school readiness is to be seen as a result of interactions between the child, the environment and cultural experiences (UNICEF 2012). However, some educational systems (like in the USA, France and the UK) use a narrow pre-academic educational approach that stresses children's literacy and numeracy skills as indicators of school readiness, while others (like in the Nordic countries) use a social pedagogic approach that stresses a broader preparation for life beyond the years in school (OECD 2006).

In their school readiness conceptual framework, UNICEF (2012) draws parallels between school readiness, improved academic outcomes in primary and secondary school, and positive behavioural and social competences in adulthood. The UNICEF report (2012) also links school readiness to building human capital and economic development. The definition of readiness published by UNICEF (2012) identifies three interlinked dimensions: (a) children's readiness for school, (b) schools' readiness for children, and (c) families' and communities' readiness for school. These dimensions can be directly linked to the new trend in defining the concept of school readiness, which is now seen as a result of interactions between the child, the environment and cultural experiences. However, all three dimensions are equally important and must work together. In addition, transitions also require connections between individuals, families and school systems (see Chaps. 2 and 15).

10.5 Theoretical Framework

This study explores parents' expectations and concerns about their children's upcoming transition from preschool to the preschool class. This focus also includes how parents describe their children in transition. This study assumes a socio-cultural perspective on transitions, which emphasizes changes in participation in different contexts (Rogoff 2003). Surroundings, relationships and contexts therefore become key aspects of the transition process. The socio-cultural environment is an important factor that shapes the experiences of transition. From this perspective, the

transition is considered as both a process and a result of socio-cultural interactions (Chick and Meleis 1986).

The focus on the parents' understandings of the children's transition to school assumes that the child and the family are embedded within social, cultural and historic contexts and influences (Rogoff 2003) as they are part of different educational contexts. This definition of the transition takes a more cultural perspective in which transitions are understood in a broader socio-cultural context. This influences the empirical data: parents' descriptions of their children's transitions are sensitive to culture, context and diversity (Pence and Nsamenang 2008).

Moving into a new context (as from preschool to the preschool class) theoretically implies crossing a border. The border concept can have negative connotations because it may suggest difficulties in gaining access. Indeed, borders can create divisions and lead to separations and fragmentation. But borders can also be places for meetings between perspectives and opening up new opportunities (Wenger 2000). Newman (2006) contends that it is often when the borders are breached that they are seen and noticed; borders can reflect differences experienced between those who belong to the community and those who do not. Tuomi-Gröhn et al. (2007) argue that border-crossings, such as transitions, involve an encounter with something new: going into a new territory and facing something unfamiliar.

This theoretical perspective implies that when parents give meaning to a context, they also establish a border to something outside this border. When marking borders between different school forms, one also contributes to the maintenance and reproduction of both cultures and contexts. From such a theoretical perspective, borders become symbolic markers or manifestations of a cultural, social or political practice. By marking borders, parents may more easily understand and define both the transition and the different contexts, but also more easily understand their children in transition.

Children's transitions between school forms are socio-culturally based in a society with an educational system where the cultural framework provides the conditions under which the transitions can occur. Children are engaged in transitions from one school form to another in a given space and time within the educational system. From a socio-cultural perspective on transitions, children are regarded as active individuals who develop expectations about what will happen through negotiations. These expectations can be reciprocal between, for example, the children, parents and teachers, and are developed in daily interactions and routines. In accordance with the theories of Vygotsky (1978), parents' experiences of their children's transitions could be considered individual reconstructions and variations within the collective, historical and cultural framework provided. Such an approach makes it possible to study the parents' experiences, perceptions and understandings of their children's transitions and to make visible the variations and nuances that emerge.

10.6 Method

The empirical data for this study consist of 176 questionnaires answered by parents of children who were about to make the transition from preschool to the preschool class by the end of the preschool year of 2012. One hundred and five of the parents were becoming parents of a school child for the first time. Seventy-one of the parents already had older children in school.

A questionnaire is a suitable instrument for a structured approach in order to construct data from a larger number of respondents, and the responses are often possible to compare (Wilson and McLean 1994). The questionnaires were answered a few months prior to the actual transition from preschool to the preschool class, when the headmasters of six different schools invited parents to visit the school to gain information about the preschool class and the school environment.

The questionnaire consisted of one section with nine multiple-choice questions. Inspired by Dockett et al. (2002), the second section in the questionnaire consisted of one open question asking for qualitative answers: *Write what comes into your mind when you think about your child starting the preschool class.* This open-ended question encouraged parents to consider things that were important for them as well as what worried them in relation to their children's transition. This chapter focuses on this open-ended question.

The first step in the analysis process involved several readings of all questionnaires. In the second step the parental descriptions of the children's transition were read closely. However, there were dilemmas in analysing these descriptions. Some answers were written at length and directly possible to analyse. Other descriptions consisted of brief comments and were accessible only after some interpretation and consideration.

Finally, a thematic content analysis (Kvale 1997) was made. The aim was to find the most central themes and the most important information the parents provided on the questionnaires. When the key themes emerged, one layer of analysis sought to determine any group differences between parents who were becoming parents of a school child for the first time and parents who already had older children in school). The themes were then analysed theoretically using border theories and sociocultural theories.

10.7 Results

The parents' descriptions of what came to mind when they thought about their children's transition to the preschool class varied from longer arguments to a few words. Descriptions of strong emotions, pride, worry and curiosity, but also grief about loss, were identified. Three themes were found: *The transition as a big change and a critical event, The big and competent preschool child ready for transition* and *The small school child in need of care.*

10.7.1 The Transition as a Big Change and a Critical Event

Common for almost all parents in both groups (parents experiencing the transition for the first time and those who already had experienced a child making the transition to the preschool class) was the notion of the transition as *a big change and a critical event* both for themselves as parents as well as for the children – an important step on a new journey:

> It is development for my child. Preparation for the school start. The entrance to future adult life.
> It is an important step in life. It is important to get a good start.
> The toddler age is over. Now a new journey begins.
> We expect that the preschool class will be more like school.

The notion of the transition as a big step for children to take was common for most parents, and could be perceived as both negative and positive. The statements above illustrate how family and school are embedded within social, cultural and historic contexts and influences (Rogoff 2003) – leaving preschool seems to be embedded in a notion of "stepping into the adult life" (school) and "leaving childhood (preschool) behind."

In their statements, these parents theoretically marked a border between preschool and the preschool class. Crossing this border implies that children are going into a new territory and facing something new, important and rather unfamiliar (Tuomi-Gröhn et al. 2007) after the transition.

The analysis shows that the parents' comments contain an understanding of preschool, preschool class and school as different social and cultural practices. All children make transitions in educational systems which are predetermined historically and framed by educational policy. Preschool, preschool class and grade 1 in Sweden are different school forms which are most often separated at different locations. Even when preschool classes are integrated on school premises, the preschool class and first grade can be located in different spaces. This means that the distance and differences between school forms are created (Ackesjö 2015), which causes discontinuities that children have to manage in transition.

Parents' comments, and the way they marked borders, suggest differences between the cultural and social practices. Such statements also maintain and reproduce the dichotomy between preschool and the preschool class as separated sociocultural and tradition-bound contexts.

10.7.2 A Big, Competent Preschool Child Ready for Transition

Within this theme, parents pointed out that their children had been longing to start school. The children were described as "ready" for school as they had developed an interest in learning more:

> It is time for our child to move on.
> She is ready to start school. She has longed for this for a long time.
> We awaited this. It fits well now when the interest for reading and writing has begun.

As the parents commented on their children's move to the preschool class, they also marked a border (Wenger 2000) between preschool and preschool class. The children were described as ready for higher standards and more school-like learning, ready to move on and to cross the border. When crossing the border, *new opportunities for learning* and formal schooling seem to be expected by parents:

> I have great expectations that he will get to learn a lot.
> She is excited to start school and learn to read and get better at counting.

Overall, the focus in these descriptions is predominantly on learning – children's readiness for school is described in terms of skills and knowledge that children demonstrate, already possess or want to learn. These parents also expect that their children will meet another form of education after the transition to the preschool class. There seems to be an expectation that children should be *educated and disciplined to be responsible pupils* after the transition. The parents describe thoughts about the preschool class as an arena for traditional instruction. The transition to a more discipline-driven school form is described as positive:

> It feels exciting, and I hope that teachers take a hold and give children more stimulus. I also hope that teachers have clearer rules for the children.
> It is important that they learn some school discipline before what is to come.
> Now it becomes a little more serious in preparing for school.

Overall, these parents ascribe relatively high standards to the new school form, expecting that it will be "something else" to go to preschool class compared to attending preschool. The parents seem to describe their children as "tired" of preschool, and there are indications that both children and parents look forward to leaving the world of preschool, as well as leaving the toddler period of life. The children are more or less described as big and competent preschool children. Parents seem to regard the transition as crossing the border into a new world, the world of hard work and discipline.

The analysis reveals notions of *the child who is ready for school.* The descriptions within this theme come primarily from parents who already have older children in school, even though some first-time transition parents also elaborated on their expectations in ways that reflected this theme. One conclusion that could be drawn is that the parents whose comments were categorised in this theme seemed to express no or very little concern or worry about the transition. They mostly described their children as ready for school and further learning and also ready to enter a new context. They felt confident about their children (finally) leaving preschool and entering the new school forms that offered new challenges.

The parents also described preschool and the preschool class as two different contexts with a clear border in-between (Newman 2006). Here, the border concept obtains a positive connotation, as children's learning as well as new challenges come into focus – the border-crossing offers new opportunities for children (Wenger 2000). This implies that the UNICEF (2012) dimension *children's readiness for school* is the most visible in these parents' descriptions. This dimension of readiness focuses on the children's development and learning and refers to being prepared to enter school, ready and eager to learn in order to succeed in a structured learning setting (Kagan 1999). The parents described the transition as changes in participa-

tion in different contexts (Rogoff 2003); contexts that offer more differences than similarities and contexts with a clearly marked border in-between.

10.7.3 A Small School Child in Need of Care

Within this theme, parents described the transition from preschool to the preschool class as *a major adjustment* for both parents and children. In contrast to the parents in the previous theme, these parents described the transition as crossing a maybe too big border:

> He is leaving a safe preschool environment for the world of school. It feels like an enormous step.
> I do not want the children to lose the playful learning.
> I think about them being the smallest and youngest, and being mixed with older children, which can create a tougher environment.

One parent elaborated further on worries and expectations and the meeting with the school culture:

> I am afraid that the preschool class will be too much like "school", i.e. too high demands, too much responsibility and so on. I'm afraid that the preschool class has been coloured a lot by school instead of being characterized by pre-school education. Do not want to lose the playful learning for the children. I think it's too big a gap between the school forms for many children.

In statements such as this, parents also marked a border (Wenger 2000) for children to cross during the transition. The preschool class is described as a school form with maybe 'too high demands' on children. In contrast to the previous theme, the border concept here obtains a negative connotation suggesting difficulties, fragmentation and separation. Again, this border-marking reproduces a dichotomy between preschool and school as two separated socio-cultural contexts, but also a dichotomy between play and learning.

Within this theme, the parents also described their children as vulnerable and in need of *security and care*. Parents' feared that their children were not going to receive the support and help they need:

> As a parent, I feel that the children are still small and need a lot of support in both play and learning, and also need help with getting dressed when they go out.
> Will he be well taken care of?
> Are there adults present outside during all breaks? Do the teachers in school notice our children as the teachers in preschool do? Or will our children disappear in the crowd?
> I think of safety (from the small to the big environment), tying shoes, going to the toilet … are adults around?
> There's not as much supervision outside on the yard – this is a huge concern.

The parents also described how their children were *in need of safe relationships*, and that transitions may become a problem when the classes are too big or when present classes are split up and best friends end up in another class:

> I hope that the class is not going to be too big. And that he ends up in the same class as his friends.
>
> It's a bit sad that she did not get to keep some of her friends in the new class.
>
> 25 children in one class? Isn't that too many? Do the teachers have time to take care of all those children?

The parents described children's relationships with other children as important in the transition. This is a result that earlier studies have also indicated (Ackesjö 2014; Ackesjö and Persson 2014) – transitions between school forms can constitute relationship-breaking processes. From a parent's point of view, new relationship building may compromise children's feelings of safety in the transition.

The analysis revealed notions of *the vulnerable child in need of care and security*. These descriptions primarily came from parents whose oldest child was now making the transition to the preschool class, even though some parents with older children already in school also elaborated on their expectations of the transition within this theme. These parents did not describe the transition as a time for learning and new challenges as did the parents in the first theme. On the contrary, they had the children's social, relational and emotional well-being in focus, and seemed to worry whether or not the school was a safe environment for their children emotionally.

Even in this theme, parents described preschool and the preschool class as two different contexts, and noted that the transition involved changes in participation in the different contexts (Rogoff 2003). However, the expected differences between these contexts, and fear about an excessive gap in-between them, caused these parents to have concerns. These parents described the transition as crossing a border that was 'maybe too big'.

These parents' descriptions reframed the concept of readiness. Within this theme, the UNICEF (2012) dimension *schools' readiness for children* becomes most visible. UNICEF describes child-ready schools as child-centered and focused on children's holistic development and comprehensive learning. Such schools are inclusive and based on the principle that all children have the right to education (UNICEF 2012). This kind of environment seems to be what these parents wanted for their children – but they feared that they would not get it.

The parents' focus within this theme was predominantly on the social, relational and emotional needs of individual children. From these parents' perspectives, making the transition to the preschool class was about adjustment to new environments and relationships – and facing insecurity and unfamiliarity.

10.8 Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine Swedish parents' expectations and concerns about their children's upcoming transition from preschool to the preschool class. The results show that all parents, regardless of whether or not they have previous experiences of the transition to preschool, considered this transition as a big change and a critical event for children. Leaving preschool seems to be embedded in a

notion of "stepping into the adult life" (school) and "leaving childhood (preschool) behind" which could be perceived as both positive and negative.

The way the parents described their children in transition is closely connected to the concept of "school readiness". In this study, parents indicated that children can be more or less ready for school. However, research has shown that families, children and teachers may differ in the ways they interpret and understand what "being ready for school" means (Graue 1993). The two groups of parents involved in this study varied in the way they talked about their children's transition to the preschool class in terms of school readiness. From the results of the present study, school readiness can be described as a social and cultural construction that differs across contexts, situations, expectations and previous experiences. When parents described their children's upcoming transition to the preschool class, they tended to draw on previous experiences with older children starting school. If they did not have such experiences, they tended to express more worries about their children's transition.

10.8.1 An Emotional vs. An Academic Attitude Towards the Transition – Dimensions of Readiness and Continuity

Parents, primarily those whose oldest child was making the transition to the preschool class, seemed to be more concerned and worried about the transition than parents who had already had a child make the transition to the preschool class. Parents who were experiencing the transition for the first time described their children as "small and vulnerable" and not always ready for the transition to the school environment. They feared that their children needed to make significant social adjustments to the new physical and social environment after the transition. These parents anticipated that the children's emotional stability and security would need to be reconstructed after the transition to the school context. As they focused mostly on the children's security and emotional well-being, they presented an emotional attitude towards children's transition to the preschool class. Here, the border concept seems to obtain a negative connotation. This group of parents also seemed to prefer continuity in their children's learning journey as well as continuity of the preschool education and play programs after the transition. They seemed to desire some kind of "educational continuity" (Ackesjö 2014), with teaching based on the children's experiences from preschool, and at the same time opportunities for further development and deepening of already developed skills.

In addition, parents who had older children already attending school, had previous experiences and knowledge about the school environment and the transition to the preschool class. They felt quite confident about their children leaving preschool and entering a new school form with all the new challenges the transition offered. These parents described their children as 'ready' for school. They focused primarily on academic outcomes, higher standards, and the skills and knowledge their children demonstrated and/or are willing to develop further; these parents present a

Table 10.1 Summary of results

Swedish parents' expectations and concerns about their children's upcoming transition from preschool to preschool class	
Predominantly parents who have older children already attending school	*Predominantly parents whose oldest child is making the transition*
Children are ready for school	The transition involves a major adjustment for children
The transition involves new opportunities for learning	Children are in need of security and care in the transition as well as after the transition
Children are supposed to be educated and disciplined to be responsible pupils after the transition	Children are in need of safe relationships in the transition as well as after the transition
Feelings of excitement and eagerness toward the higher demands on children after the transition	Feelings of fear toward the higher demands on children after the transition
Children's readiness for school – An academic attitude towards transition	School's readiness for children – An emotional attitude towards transition

more academic attitude towards children's transition to preschool class. Here, the border concept seems to obtain a positive connotation. These parents mostly described their children's readiness for school and expectations of a clear break with preschool rather than a desire of continuity of the preschool education.

The way these parents described different attitudes towards their children's transition indicates a dichotomy between preschool and school as two separated sociocultural contexts – but also a dichotomy between (preschool) play and formal (school) learning. The results are summarized in Table 10.1.

Consequently, the results indicate a variation in the comments from the different groups of parents. However, there are also similarities. Above all, the parents described the transition as a big change and a critical event both for themselves as parents and for the children (see Chaps. 2 and 15). The end of the preschool period and the transition to the preschool class in school is, for all involved, experienced as an important step on a new journey. The parents seemed excited and enthusiastic.

Another similarity between the two groups is the excitement and/or worry about higher academic demands in school. This is perceived as both positive and negative. While some parents were looking forward to higher demands, more school-like education and more discipline, other parents feared the same, stating that their children were not ready. They feared that their children would miss out on playful learning after the transition. Based on this result one could say that parents, whose children were making the transition from preschool to the preschool class, were in an unstable time of synchronous exit and entry processes into and out from different school forms just like their children (Ackesjö 2013). This process generates a mix of emotions. Parents seem to be somewhat excited over the fact that their children are about to start school, but at the same time also worried about the actual transition to the school environment.

10.8.2 Implications for Practice

Based on the results, it is possible to discuss the concept of continuity in relation to transitions and to school readiness. In transitions, similarities and differences between different educational settings come in focus. Some parents desire "clean breaks" with preschool education and emphasise their children's readiness for school. Other parents desire continuity of preschool education after the transition and worry about the school's readiness for their children. These different expectations raise questions about continuity – in particular, about whether it is possible to construct continuity in transitions between school forms. Continuity can be described as the creation of consistency or coherence. However, consistency and transition are concepts that in themselves may seem contradictory (Ackesjö 2014; Dehnæs Hogsnes and Moser 2014). Transition implies crossing a border into something new. Results from earlier research (Ackesjö 2014) show that transitions are processes characterized by discontinuities, such as in environments and relationships. Transitions between different educational settings are about change and are rooted in a society with an educational system where cultural frameworks represent the conditions under which the transitions can occur.

Early childhood practitioners, professionals and researchers all seek to improve transitions between school forms and to provide opportunities for preparation, to minimize achievement gaps and to ensure that children's first experiences of school are positive and safe (Pianta and Kratft-Sayre 1999). With this in mind, it seems to be an important task to prepare parents for the transition and to help them construct fair images and proper expectations of the preschool class and of what it is like to be a pupil in school. This also correlates with Griebel and Niesel's (2013) research that shows how the well-being of parents in the transition of becoming a parent of a school child could be an important criterion for a successful transition for themselves and subsequently for the child (see Chap. 2). It is important for educators to recognize parents' concerns, their academic and emotional attitudes towards the transition, and to acknowledge the changes in parents' roles, in their identities as caregivers, and in their new responsibilities as parents of a school child.

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Chapter 11
Transition to School from the Perspective of the Girls' and Boys' Parents

Anna Kienig

11.1 Introduction

The aim of the study reported in this chapter was to examine gender as a factor that influences children's transition to school from the perspective of their parents.

Starting school is described in psychological and pedagogical literature as an important developmental and educational event, influencing both the child's wellbeing and his/her school performance (Alexander and Entwisle 1988; Dockett and Perry 2002; Ladd and Price 1987; Margetts 2013; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000). The change of educational environment presents multiple challenges to some children as they cope with many differences between home, the preschool setting and school: managing changes in physical, social and philosophical environments (Fabian 2013); developing resilience (Fthenakis 1998); and experiencing changes in identity, roles and relations (Griebel and Niesel 2002). The start to school is therefore of interest to teaching professionals, scientists, and politicians engaged in matters of education. The child's transition to school can be considered from numerous perspectives: the child; family; school; teachers; the broadly-defined local community; and educational system.

Researchers have identified various factors (such as psychological, organismic and behavioural child characteristics or family issues) that influence children's transition to school (Alexander and Entwisle 1988; Dockett and Perry 2002; Fabian and Dunlop 2002; Griebel and Niesel 2007; Harrison 2014). This chapter highlights gender as one of Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) "demand characteristics", exploring parents' expectations and opinions about school (family context) for their children as they make the transition to school.

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© Springer International Publishing AG 2017

S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_11

11.2 Theoretical Perspectives

The theoretical framework for this research was Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986, 2005; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) with the ecological transition as its key element. Details of the bioecological model and its application to the transition to school have been canvassed in earlier chapters in this book, particularly Chap. 1. These details are assumed in this chapter. The process of a child's transition to school can be considered and analysed at each of the levels presented by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model.

A bioecological approach enables an understanding of how convictions, cultural values and interrelations shape the ways in which educational transition is conceptualised and experienced on both an individual and macrosystemic level. In this sense, starting school is an ecological change and both a result of, and a stimulus to, developmental processes (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

11.3 Transition to School

In psychological and pedagogical literature the term *transition* is commonly used to describe the process of change which takes place in any individual's life (Brammer 1992) as the individual changes states of being. The transition takes place when an individual's status in his/her environment changes as a result of a transformation in the roles s/he fulfils (all the forms of activity and relations with others) or a change in his/her environment, or both these factors (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Transition results from both the biological changes that happen to an individual and from the changes in his/her external conditions.

Kagan and Neuman (1998) point out numerous conceptualizations of the term "transition". Some interpret "transition" as an act which children, families and educational programs undertake just once, such as when the children and parents first visit school. Others consider it as a sequence of extended efforts undertaken to connect the child's natural environment (including his/her family) to his/her educational environment outside the family (for example, pre-school). Others still consider transition to be a manifestation of the developmental rule of continuation, thus creating a new approach to educational programs. Transitions can be periods of intensified and accelerated developmental change, influenced by social situations and contexts involving the environment, social and cognitive learning, and as emotional turmoil (Fabian and Dunlop 2005).

Educational transition, in turn, is a process of change which occurs when children move from one place or stage of education to another (Fabian and Dunlop 2002). It is perceived as a process of transition to a new *setting*; in this case, a new school (Fabian 2007) and as a major transition in the life of children (Fabian and Dunlop 2002). This process leads to changes in identity, roles and relationships (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Griebel and Niesel 2002). Transition to school is one such educational transition and is nowadays considered to be a long-lasting process,

encompassing weeks and even months before and after the education has begun, and not, as it was thought previously, as a momentary event (Margetts 2014). Fabian (2007) notes that this process does not necessarily take a linear course, but is, rather, a series of comprehensive and varied interactions. To achieve an understanding and a sense of positive experience demands that everyone participating in this process – children, parents and teachers – communicate and cooperate with each other. A child's transition into the school system is an exceptionally important process not only for the child and his/her family; it is also a time in which all the stakeholders of this process enter a new educational landscape (O'Kane 2013).

Intrapersonal and interpersonal influences on transition to school (Harrison 2014) include psychological (for example, child characteristics of temperament), organismic (for example, gender, communication), and behavioural child characteristics (externalizing and internalizing behaviours), interpersonal relationships (such as child-parent attachment, student-teacher relationships), and contribution (emotionally supportive or stressful) (Birch and Ladd 1997; Harrison 2014). Several sets of factors influencing children's transition to school have been identified. Dockett and Perry (2003) noted the areas of: knowledge (ideas, facts, or concepts that children know); social adjustment to the school context (such as knowledge on interaction with peers and teachers; skills; disposition (attitudes toward school); rules (the expectations of behavior and action); physical attributes or characteristics (age and general health); family issues (family interactions with the school and changes to family life); and educational environment at school. Fabian (2013) listed the factors which influence successful transitions to school such as parents' and children's positive attitudes to school, learning, and teachers' expectations. Brooker's (2008) list of factors included a positive sense of identity, the presence of familiar adults and friends, understanding roles and routines, a sense of control and purpose, and having an environment of opportunities. There are many similarities and commonalities among these lists.

Bronfenbrenner (2005; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) argued that demand characteristics, including age and gender, can influence proximal processes (interactions at the level of microsystems) and determine their developmental outcomes.

> Demand characteristics are those to which he [Bronfenbrenner] had referred in earlier writings as "personal stimulus" characteristics, those that act as an immediate stimulus to another person, such as age, gender, skin colour, and physical appearance. These types of characteristics may influence initial interactions because the expectations are formed immediately. (Tudge et al. 2009, p. 200)

The gender "demand characteristic" is considered in this chapter.

11.4 Gender and the Transition to School

A growing body of research indicates that there are key differences between boys and girls that can affect both learning and achievement. These differences include psychological and behavioural child characteristics, such as non-cognitive skills,

achievement striving, self-control, motivation, and aggression (Kriesi and Buchmann 2014). Stereotypically, girls are characterized as compassionate, docile, diligent, conscientious, even-tempered and good in languages. Boys are perceived as physically active, boisterous, competitive, lacking discipline, and good at math, science, and sports (Liben and Bigler 2002). Girls tend to be able to plan and organize their work more effectively than boys. They are also more able to apply their skills to different learning contexts. Only a few studies (Harrison 2014; Kienig 2002, 2012; Kriesi and Buchmann 2014; Margetts 2013; Siu Ling Chen and Rao 2011; Upadyaya and Eccles 2014) have asked whether the transition to school is perceived or experienced differently by boys and girls and, if so, how these differences may affect further academic achievement. When boys and girls make the transition to school, they face the task of adopting student roles as defined by the particular institution: developing certain work and learning habits and motivation for achievement, and establishing positive social relationships with teachers and peers Dockett and Perry 2002; Entwisle and Alexander 1993; Entwisle et al. 2003; Ladd et al. 2006). According to Kriesi and Buchmann (2014, p. 56) 'gender-stereotypical socialization practices are assumed to be associated with gender differences in competencies, personality traits, and behaviors'.

Numerous studies suggest that gender is a factor determining the outcomes of educational transitions. In a new social environment, for example, girls are reported to function better than boys, enter new social roles with more ease, and perform tasks more effectively (Karwowska-Struczyk 2000; Kienig 2002, 2012; Kopik 2007; Kriesi and Buchmann 2014; Margetts 2013; Upadyaya and Eccles 2014). Kriesi and Buchmann's (2014) findings on the antecedents of boys' and girls' coping with the transition to school show that, before entering school, girls score higher on cognitive competencies, school-relevant knowledge, conscientiousness and have a more positive social self-concept than boys. These researchers concluded that girls were better prepared than boys for the transition to school – possibly because of boys' slower maturation and development or gender-specific socialization practices.

Gender is also a differentiating factor in the kinds of activity undertaken and in developing social and emotional competencies (Karwowska-Struczyk 2000). The connection between social and emotional maturity and gender was emphasised in a study by Kopik (2007), where girls achieved higher levels of socio-emotional maturity than boys. Moreover, girls achieved higher scores on measures of self-reliance: they were better at looking after themselves; more concerned with orderliness; better able to use and take care of school supplies; more able to find their way around pre-school or school; and better at performing tasks without assistance (Kopik 2007). Kopik's study also showed that girls were more able to engage in agreeable and friendly co-operation with peers and were more "truthful" than boys. Girls attained higher scores than boys in all the categories of group co-operation assessed by Kopik including: readiness to co-operate; ability to conciliate and compromise; and ability to judge the behaviour of peers. Kopik (2007) also noted that, when compared to boys, girls displayed more positive dispositions such as: attitude towards tasks; attitude to personal commands; perseverance; concentration; interest; and self-assurance when making decisions.

Girls experienced fear and uncertainty less often than boys, and reacted with anger less often than boys (Kopik 2007). The ability to empathize was higher in girls than in boys. From this study, Kopik argued that socio-emotional differences between the sexes were partially determined by stereotypical perceptions of social roles assigned to boys and girls but that another partial reason for the difference in achievement may be a faster rate of development for girls in their early years (Kopik 2007). Other research also suggests that boys and girls vary in terms of socio-emotional competencies (Kienig 2002). Ashiabi and O'Neal (2015, p.11) referring to Bronfenbrenner suggest that child gender modifies some of the effects of contextual factors on child social development and the effects of proximal processes on child social behaviors (positive and negative) differed significantly by child gender.

Teachers play a significant role in the gender socialization process, not only in supporting positive teacher-child interactions but also as they supervise peer interactions in kindergartens (Siu Ling Chen and Rao 2011). Findings from a range of studies have suggested that teachers uphold gender stereotypes (Kriesi and Buchmann 2014; Siu Ling Chen and Rao 2011). For example, teachers often describe girls as doing relatively well academically when compared with boys (Cowan et al. 2005). Some teachers give more feedback to girls than they do to boys. It has been argued that girls are more sensitive to teachers' evaluative feedback than boys and teachers' perceptions have stronger impact on girls' motivation and self-perceptions (Kriesi and Buchmann 2014).

11.5 Family Context and Transition to School

Numerous recent studies considered the role of family contexts in the process of transition to school (Cowan et al. 2005; Dockett and Perry 2002, 2007, 2013; Griebel and Niesel 2013; Johansson 2002; Margetts 2002). Children's developmental outcomes depend on the contexts and processes that are close to them (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006), and in which children actively participate (Ashiabi and O'Neal 2015). How, and to what extent, parents are engaged in what happens at the educational setting (preschool, school) can impact on the effectiveness of children's transition to school (Dockett and Perry 2013). Such engagement should be supported across the entire transition process. Often, "parent engagement" in their children's education defaults to fund raising and occasional official parent-teacher conferences. Recently, the importance of communication between parents and teachers has been emphasised as an integral part of the process of children's education. Parents are entitled to be included in decision-making processes and encouraged to participate actively in their child's education at home and at school (Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group 2011). The school, in turn, should take into consideration the substantial diversity among families and the ways in which this diversity might influence their engagement with school. Dockett et al. (2012) show that generally parents try to support their children when they begin formal schooling.

Griebel and Niesel (2013) noted the changing role and behaviour of parents when their children, especially their first born, begins their school education. They also noted that the beginning of school education can be a challenge not only for children, but also for parents. Strategies of coping with this new situation and adapting to the new role – that of the parent of a school child – are described. Challenges faced by parents when their children start school were categorised on three levels: individual; interpersonal; and contextual. The changes on the individual level concerned the construction of a new identity – the parent of a schoolchild, which on the one hand effected a sense of responsibility for the child's success at school and, on the other, a sense of losing control over the child. Parents had to adapt their expectations and aspirations to their child's achievements. As well, they become members of a group of parents of schoolchildren enrolled in the same class. On the interpersonal level parents had to restructure important social relations with their children's educators –pre-school teacher to school teacher; and with pre-school children's parents to parents of other children at school. Parents, mainly mothers, also noted significant changes on the contextual level – in their everyday routine and the routine of their week and year. The schedule of everyday lessons, the schedule of consecutive weeks and of the school year changed the habits that had been well established in children's families: family life had to be adapted to the framework determined by school (Griebel and Niesel 2013).

Families expect the best possible learning environments for their children (Dockett and Perry 2004). In the *Transition to School: Position Statement* (ETC 2011), transition to school was characterised through opportunities, aspirations, expectations and entitlements. This position statement notes that 'Children and families start school with a range of expectations about what school will be like and what it means to be a school student or parents of a school student' (ETC 2011, p. 3). Further:

> Families expect that their knowledge of their children will be respected at school. They expect that their children's educators will draw on this, as well as their own expertise and that of other professionals, to create the best possible learning environments for their children.
>
> Families expect to contribute to their children's education, and may seek guidance from educators about how partnerships can operate effectively. Families expect children's safety and wellbeing to be central features in decisions about educational provision. They expect schools to recognize the strengths their children bring, as well as to be responsive to their diverse learning needs. Families expect to be advocates for their children, and to be supported in this by the advocacy of other professionals. (p. 3)

11.6 The Study

This chapter reports research findings from a sample of 485 parents (482 mothers: and 3 fathers) of first grade children aged 6 years 4 months–7 years 6 months, and 73 first grade teachers from 30 primary schools. The data included responses from questionnaires of 20 questions for parents (opinion about transition to school of their children, parents' assessment of the work of school, parents' educational expectations and parental anxiety before their children start school) and 16 questions for the first grade teachers (opinion about transition to school of the children and parental involvement in children's education).

11.7 Results

11.7.1 Transition to School in the Opinion of Parents and Teachers

In general, parents and first grade teachers agreed about children's first few days at school. Both groups reported good adaptation by girls and boys to the new environments, with difficulties being observed slightly more frequently for boys than girls. Teachers perceived children to be better prepared for school than did the parents. As well, the parents of both girls (8.7%) and boys (10.8%) more often reported challenges concerning educational transition than teachers (6.7% girls and 6.0% boys).

11.7.1.1 Parents' Assessment of the Work of School

Parents suggested various categories they considered important for their children's well-being as they started school: ensuring the child's safety; ensuring educational care after school; good conditions for the child's intellectual development; well-prepared teachers; modern teaching aids; individual approach to each child; the possibility for the children to develop their own interests; fostering the child's independence; and the teachers' preparation.

Most of the parents thought that the work done by the school was good or very good. A few parents were displeased about the lack of educational care outside of lessons. The parents of children who attended pre-school before starting at school were used to all-day care and expected the same from school. Several respondents negatively evaluated the teachers' preparation for working with first graders, while 35% of the respondents evaluated it as wonderful. A similar situation was observed in the category of "individual approach to each child" where 25% of parents were very pleased, while others had several reservations. Most parents found that the school offered their children enough possibilities to develop their interests. Differences in the parents' assessment of the functioning of the schools attended by their children suggest that there are school differences. The child's gender was not statistically significantly related to parents' evaluation of the work of the school.

11.7.1.2 Parents' Educational Expectations

Most parents held high expectations of schools. These mainly concerned ensuring good conditions for the children's intellectual development and the possibility for children to develop their interests (more often voiced by parents of girls – 76.2%, than boys – 58.3%). Boys' parents more often expected the school to create conditions for their child's developing independence and self-sufficiency (25%) than girls' parents (14.3%). Less attention was paid to parents' ex[ectations about ensuring care outside of lessons on school premises, but it was more often expected by

the parents of boys' (16.7%) than girls (4.7%). The parents of both girls and boys paid little to no attention to the teachers' level of preparation for their work.

11.7.1.3 Parental Anxiety Before School Start

Parent participants were most often worried about their child experiencing difficulty adapting to the new environment (28.6% of girls' parents and 25% of boys' parents). They also worried about whether or not their child could face up to the formal demands of school (50% of boys' parents and 14.3% of girls' parents). Some parents, more often those of girls (19%) than boys' (8.3%), were concerned about whether or not their child would be able to find friends at school, and whether or not the children would feel lonely or rejected. Almost 30% of girls' parents and 8.3% of boys' parents had no fears regarding their children's school start.

11.7.1.4 Parental Involvement in Children's Education as Perceived by Teachers

Teachers claimed that most parents of girls' (77.5%) and boys (68.5%) were engaged in their children's education in a reasonable and balanced way expected by the teachers. According to the teachers, approximately 5% of girls' parents and 10.8% of boys' parents were engaged in matters happening at school, but contacted the school only in response to the teacher's initiative, while a small number of parents (0.4% of girls' and 3.4% of boys') failed to contact school and their child's teacher despite the teacher's attempts at establishing such contact.

11.8 Conclusions

Results of this study are consistent with results of Cowan et al. (2005), although there were no statistically significant differences between the parents' expectation for school and the child's gender. Research reveals that children who encounter similar environments and expectations at home and at school perceive the transition process as easier; in turn, the child who sees his/her school environment as unfriendly and different from the context of the family home tends to experience difficulties, disorganization and anxiety during the transition process (Dockett and Perry 2007). Transition to school is shaped by the expectations of the participants in the process. For example the support of a child's parents affects the course of his/her adaptation to school environment; the teachers' expectations – some formed during the transition process – directly determine the child's school experience (Entwisle 1995); children who were familiar with school environment before starting school (for example, through repeated visits) were more likely than others to have realistic expectations of school (Broström 1995).

Nowadays, emphasis is put upon a holistic approach to educational transition, transition being conceived of as a process engaging children, their families, preschool teachers and the teachers working with first graders, as well as educational authorities and political decision-makers (ETC 2011).

Parents are agents of their own transition process (Griebel and Niesel 2013; Margetts 2002), with the success of children' transition to school depending to some extent on the involvement of parents in this process. Brooker (2008) notes that teachers should consider the process of children's transition to school as an undertaking where the school and the family make concerted efforts aimed at preventing interruptions in the continuity of experiences of all participants, especially children. Close communication between parents and teachers is important in the transition to school because it is important to create positive mutual relationships among parents and teachers on the way to forming educational partnerships (Dockett and Perry 2014; Griebel and Niesel 2013).

This study indicates that when teachers and parents agree about a child's preparation for school, the more optimistic parents are in their expectations about the child starting school. The less positive the parents' evaluation of their child's competence, the less optimistic is their approach to their child's school start, irrespective of the opinions voiced by teachers.

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Chapter 12
Are We All Talking the Same Language? Parents, Practitioners and Teachers Preparing Children to Start School

Karen Wickett

12.1 Introduction

The care and education of children under five has shifted from being exclusively the responsibility of parents and families to being shared between the family and the state (Moss 2006). There have been two likely catalysts for this shift. Over time there have been changes in social attitudes to mothers with young children who choose to work (Fthenakis 1998), and in the political recognition that the early years of a child's life are key to their educational outcomes and life chances (Field 2010). Since the mid-1990s, in England, regardless of which political administration has been in power, there has been increased political funding and strategic planning of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. A key point during the early years, and one that influences a child's educational outcomes, is the transition to school (Brooker 2008; Dunlop and Fabian 2007; Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group 2011; Griebel and Niesel 2009). The nature of the transition is likely to influence the child's attitudes to school and school learning, which can last throughout the child's school career (Margetts 2009; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000). These understandings have led to an emphasis in government ECEC policy on the preparation of children to be ready for school. In 2012 the revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (Department for Education (DfE) 2012a, p. 5) stated that the purpose of the framework is to promote 'teaching and learning to ensure children's "school readiness"'. Parents/families, ECEC practitioners, and teachers share the role of preparing children for the transition to school. This chapter discusses the English political contexts around starting school and the findings of research that explored parents', ECEC practitioners' and teachers' beliefs about school readiness and their relationships and experiences as they prepared children for school.

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S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_12

12.2 Starting School in England

In England, children are required to start school in the term after their 5th birthday (DfE 2012b). However, due to the lack of strategic planning of the ECEC sector, younger children have been found in school (Hohmann and Savage 2004). To begin with, younger children were found at school as there was no one to look after them at home, as older siblings were at school and parents were at work. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, the decline in the birth rate, fears of teacher redundancy and falling school rolls led to 4-year-old children being admitted to the reception class (Hohmann and Savage 2004; Rogers and Rose 2007). In 1986, there were three points during the academic year when children could start the school reception class:

- the term before their fifth birthday
- at the beginning of the autumn or spring term, usually when the child was 4½ years old
- the September after the child's 4th birthday (Rogers and Rose 2007)

Children started school depending on the availability of ECEC provision and on the school's admission policies.

In 2009, Jim Rose was commissioned by the government to conduct an independent review of Primary Education. A recommendation of the review was that 'entry to reception classes should be the September immediately following a child's fourth birthday' (Rose 2009, p. 22). Rose's justification for the single start date was that it would provide parents with more 'choice and flexibility' and meet the needs of children (Rose 2009, p. 82). Although it was not a statutory expectation, since Rose's recommendation, there has been a nudging down of the school starting age, as children generally start the reception year in the September after their fourth birthday, a year prior to the compulsory school starting age.

12.3 The Early Years Foundation Stage and Transitions

Although the term transition is not explicitly referred to in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE 2014b), children who attend ECEC settings from birth can experience several "vertical transitions" during this phase. A vertical transition is usually linked to a child's age (Johansson 2007) and during the EYFS the vertical transitions can include the move from baby room to toddler room, toddler room to pre-school room, pre-school room to reception class and finally reception class to Year 1. The latter two transitions are referred to in the EYFS framework (DfE 2014b). The terms used in the EYFS which are associated with these transitions are 'ready for school' (DfE 2014b, p. 7), 'school readiness' (DfE 2014b, p. 5), 'readiness for Year 1' (DfE 2014b, p. 14) and 'ready for Year 1' (DfE 2014b, p. 9).

In contexts where children move from an ECEC setting to reception class, 'ready for school' (DfE 2014b, p. 7) and 'school readiness' (DfE 2014b, p. 5) can refer to this

transition. This is ‘an institutional transition’ (Woodhead 2007, p. 8) between generally distinct organisations. The terms ‘readiness for Year 1’ (DfE 2014b, p. 14) and ‘ready for Year 1’ (DfE, 2014b, p. 9) are then associated with the second transition, which is when children move from the reception class to Year 1 class. During this transition children move from an environment guided by the play-based pedagogy of the EYFS (DfE 2014b) to an environment following the expectations of the KS1 National Curriculum (NC) (Department for Education 2014a). This is a curriculum transition.

During both of these transitions the home and the child’s relationships in the home remain relatively constant. It is these relationships that will offer a ‘secure base’ (Woodhead 2007, p. 8), as the children leave the ECEC setting and start the school reception class.

12.4 Transition, Relationships and Adjustment

From an ecological perspective, how parents, ECEC practitioners and teachers establish and maintain relationships is of particular interest (Pianta et al. 1999). A healthy ecology, with supportive linkages between the settings (Bronfenbrenner 1979), will include respectful relationships between those supporting children (Gonzalez 2005). The qualities of these respectful relationships are ‘mutual trust, positive orientation, goal consensus and a balance of power’ (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p. 216). Such relationships also enable two-way communication and the co-construction of meanings.

Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) made the assertion that the qualities of the relationships between parents, ECEC practitioners and teachers can either support or delay children’s adjustment to school. Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta’s assertion highlights that children’s adjustment to school is also part of the transition. During the phase of adjustment, children are learning about their role as a school pupil and about learning at school (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Brooker 2008) and making sense of the differences and discontinuities between the contexts that they move between (Margetts 2009). It is likely that the relationships between those supporting children during the transition will support not only children’s adjustment to school (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000) but also their readiness for school.

An agreed goal is likely to foster mutual relationships among those preparing children. The foundations for the relationships between parents, ECEC practitioners and teachers is that they all want children to adjust quickly to school life and for them to succeed at school (Whalley 2001). Thus there is a consensus among parents, ECEC practitioners and teachers when they are preparing and supporting children during the transition to school. Despite this likely shared goal, parents experience different qualities of relationships with teachers compared with ECEC practitioners. Shields’ small scale research project found that parents tend to view their relationships with ECEC practitioners as ‘warm and friendly’ (Shields 2009, p. 241) and those with teachers as ‘more distant and less reciprocal’ (p.237). This could contribute to parents becoming less involved in their child’s learning as they progress through school (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003).

Successive governments have been aware that parents become less involved in their children's learning as they move to school and that parental involvement in their children's education has a positive influence on the children's educational outcomes (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Goodall and Montgomery 2014). Government policies have encouraged school leaders and teachers to involve parents in their children's learning and to acknowledge children's and families' experiences beyond school by reflecting these insights when developing the school provision. Provision can include childcare beyond school hours, health, social care services and parenting support (DfES 2003). Meanwhile the ECEC sector has had a long tradition of working in partnership with parents (Bruce 1997). These practices are reflected in the EYFS principle of working in partnership with parents (DfE 2014b). This principle guides the practice of ECEC practitioners and reception teachers when establishing relationships with parents.

12.5 The English Political Readiness Discourse

In England's education policy the "readiness discourse" has become increasingly apparent (Moss 2012). This perspective focuses on the preparation of children and views the preparation of children as straightforward, with children following a predetermined, uniform, linear path of development from the bottom to the top (Moss 2013). The emphasis is on the preparation of children, reinforcing the belief that the primary purpose of ECEC provision is to ensure that children are prepared and ready for formal learning soon after they start school.

In such contexts ECEC practitioners are positioned at the bottom of the epistemological hierarchy and the flow of communication is in one direction from Compulsory School Education (CSE) to ECEC. The "readiness for school" discourse can introduce 'the contents and methods of primary schooling' into ECEC, a practice which has been labelled as 'schoolification' (OECD 2006, p. 61). It is not only the ECEC practitioners' practices and understandings that can be positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy, but also the contribution of parents/families. In the EYFS there is an expectation that ECEC practitioners 'must seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home' (DfE 2014b, p. 10). The trickling down of the expectations of school can also infiltrate the home. This is the political context of this study.

12.6 The Case Study

The aim of my research was to explore parents', ECEC practitioners' and teachers' experiences of preparing children during the transition to school, by attempting to answer the following research question:

Fig. 12.1 Phases of the research design

What are parents', ECEC practitioners' and teachers' beliefs about school readiness and their roles and relationships as they prepare children for school?

The research design was a case study (Yin 2009). Participants' beliefs, roles and relationships, rather than the participants themselves, were the 'units of analysis' (Grünbaum 2007, p. 88) to be explored. Ethics approval was sought from Plymouth University. There were three phases of the research design and each phase informed the next (Fig. 12.1).

The data generating process started with individual interviews and then separate focus groups for parents or teachers, and a symposium when parents, ECEC practitioners and teachers came together.

I began in the field, gathering data during individual interviews. Afterwards I returned to my study to analyse the data and then returned to the field to share with participants the emerging themes that were becoming apparent. The purpose of the iterative process was to ensure that the participants' ideas and experiences were central to the participants' reflective conversations.

The case participants comprised of ECEC practitioners from an ECEC setting, teachers from the schools that the children would move to, or had moved to, and the children's parents. The neighbourhood was a white working class community in the south west of England: the Indices of Multiple Deprivation state that the Castleton neighbourhood (name changed for confidentiality) is among the most deprived 5% in England (Southwood County Council and Southwood NHS 2011). Residents may experience many of the issues related to poverty, including poor mental health, addiction and isolation. Table 12.1 outlines each participants' involvement during the research process.

Seven parents were interviewed. All attended the focus groups and three attended the symposium. Six ECEC practitioners were interviewed, five took part in the focus groups and four attended the symposium. Two teachers were interviewed. None took part in the focus groups. Two reception teachers, one head-teacher and one deputy head-teacher attended the symposium.

The data were generated during the summer term before children moved to the next phase of their education, which was at the beginning of September. Four parents were preparing their children for the transition from the ECEC setting to the school reception class, three parents were preparing and supporting children for the transition from the reception class to Year 1 and one parent was preparing her child for the move from Year 1 to Year 2. All children had started the reception class in the September after their 4th birthday. At the time of the study the ECEC practitioners were employed by the Local Authority (LA) and were line-managed by the leaders of the ECEC setting. The head-teachers line-managed the reception teachers.

The transcripts were uploaded into the computer using NVivo software which was used to code and categorise the data (Yin 2009) into the skills, knowledge and behaviours which children required if they were to be in the state of 'school readiness' (Fig. 12.2).

Table 12.1 Castleton participant involvement

Parents	Interviews	Focus group	Symposium	ECEC practitioners	Interviews	Focus group	Symposium	Teachers	Interviews	Focus group	Symposium
Samantha Child moving to reception	√			Sophie	√	√	√	Phyllis	√		
Beth Child moving to reception	√	√		Lily	√	√	√	Richard	√		
Simon Child moving to reception	√	√		Amber	√			1 head-teacher			√
Lynne Child moving to reception	√	√	√	Clare	√	√		1 deputy head-teacher			√
Louise Child moving to year 1	√	√	√	Annie	√	√	√	2 reception teachers			√
Janet Child moving to year 1	√	√	√	Flo	√	√	√				
Rosie Child moving to year 2	√	√									

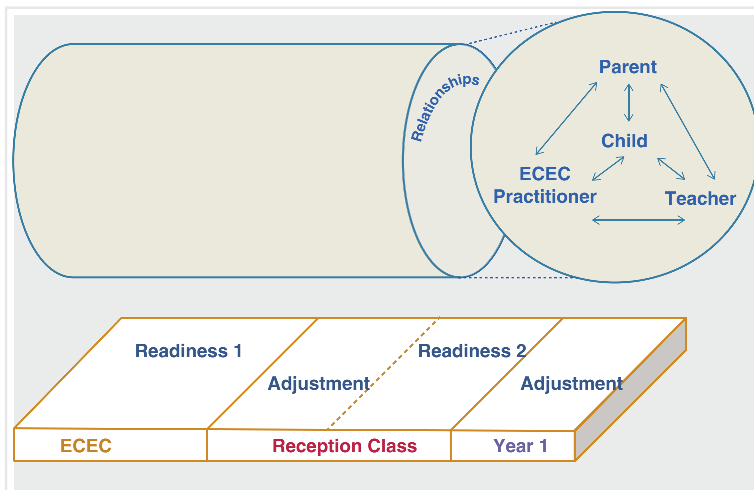

Fig. 12.2 The relational transition to school (Wickett 2016)

The conceptual framework *Relational Transition to School* (Wickett 2016) provided the 'descriptive framework' (Yin 2009, p. 131) within which the data could then be sorted into chronological order. Two phases of the transition were explored: Phase 1, the preparations during the year before the move; Phase 2, from the children's first day in the reception class to the end of the autumn term, and during the spring and summer term before the move to Year 1.

12.7 Findings

12.7.1 Parents', ECEC Practitioners' and Teachers' Beliefs About for What Children Are Being Prepared

All children had started the school reception class at the beginning of the September after their fourth birthday. Parents explained:

> … they have got to go school so when they get to a certain age they go to school. (Interview, Louise, parent, Castleton)
>
> I think, mainly that, everyone knows that they have to go to school...I don't think anybody questions or tells you, you know ohh they are going to school this year. (Interview, Simon, parent, Castleton)

Louise's and Simon's comments reflect the fact that in England starting school is an unquestioned expectation. These parents did not explicitly mention a specific age at which children should start school, but as all children in this case study had started school in the September after their fourth birthday, it is likely that these and the other parents believed that this is when children are expected to start. Even when

a mother was offered the possibility of starting her child in the following term, as she had medical issues, she preferred her daughter to start in the September.

> We had the choice to defer Alison till January because of all the medical problems. I just felt it wasn't for her, because she is already nearly five when she goes to school. She would be five years and three months…when she goes to school in January. But I just agreed with the school that I would try and get as much sorted before she goes to school. I didn't see the point in putting her back and also she should go with all her friends... I don't want her to be a social outcast. (Interview, Lynne, parent, Castleton)

Lynne did not want her daughter to be different from her peers. Not only would Alison be different if she started school after Christmas, but another difference would be she would be 5 years old when she started school. If Alison started school a term later at age 5 years, she could be viewed as being "held back". To ensure Alison was ready to start school Lynne had agreed, with the school personnel, that she would put in place the necessary support for her daughter's medical problems before September so that Alison could start school with her friends. The nudging down in the school starting age created a social pressure for Lynne to ensure her daughter was ready for school. The standardised starting date does not appear to have provided greater choice or flexibility for all parents, which was Rose's (2009) justification for a single point of entry to school.

This nudging down of the school starting age and the emphasis on children's readiness for school has also created two transitions with which the term "school readiness" is associated. Sophie, an ECEC practitioner, referred to both the institutional and curriculum transition when discussing the term "school ready". She made a distinction between the expectations of school readiness at each transition

> I suppose it depends on what part of school ready you're talking about at reception. I think when they leave here, they should be able to do those things like getting dressed and take themselves to the toilet. But possibly, may be the writing their name should be, once they've had that year in reception…(Focus group, Sophie, practitioner, Castleton)

To be "ready for school" when moving from the ECEC setting to the reception class, the institutional transition, she explained, children are expected to be independent in their personal care and prepared for a move from one institution to another. To be "ready for Year 1", which is a curriculum transition, she explained, children are expected to have acquired the necessary skills, knowledge and behaviours required for the formal learning of school.

The expectations that Sophie discussed were also apparent when parents, ECEC practitioners and teachers explained how they prepared children to be ready for school. Samantha, a mother, recounted:

> Umm, after she has been to the toilet, umm, I have tried and pushed and pushed her to wipe herself but she managed to do it for herself last night. Yeah, normally she shouts at me but when she starts going to school the teachers just won't be able to do it… And I mean she does like workbooks with numbers in and alphabet…Yeah she has got like dot to dot, you know, she can do her letters and all that and she can write her letters really well. (Interview, Samantha, parent, Castleton)

Samantha encouraged her daughter to go to the toilet independently, as the school start date drew closer. She also introduced opportunities and resources so her daughter could explore the skills and knowledge that she associated with school. These expectations are underpinned by the cultural expectation that when children go to school they should be mature enough to go to the toilet independently and the belief that children will learn about writing, letters and numbers at school.

Lily described how she and her ECEC colleagues prepared children for the move:

> …we need to build up their confidence, their resilience, their wellbeing. So that they can bounce back ….We try to bring [academic skills and knowledge] it into [the children's] everyday play.…I think with number, you just do it in part of everyday play. (Focus group, Lily, practitioner, Castleton)

Like the parents, the Castleton ECEC practitioners supported children to develop the skills and knowledge associated with school in everyday activities and during the children's play. They also fostered children's resilience so that they could adjust to school by making sense of the differences and discontinuities (Margetts 2009) that they would encounter at school.

Parents and ECEC practitioners prepared children for the move to the reception class by helping them to develop the necessary social and personal skills, as well as by fostering positive attitudes to change and dispositions which would be helpful for life and school. Whilst they introduced the skills and knowledge associated with school during their play and discrete activities in the home this was not the primary focus of these activities.

Sophie had mentioned that preparations for the second transition focused primarily on academic learning. This view was reflected in Phyllis' and Richard's, descriptions of their teaching methodologies and how the classroom environment changed during the reception year as children moved closer to Year 1.

> They still learn through their play. Umm, so I still make sure that they still have lots of time to indulge in their interest but at the same time introducing that little bit more structure to prepare them. (Interview, Phyllis, teacher, Castleton)

> The environment changes throughout the year…But umm, actually I think it's quite a gradual thing, that in response to the children really, umm, obviously there is the kind of, overarching thought that next year they will be in Year 1. (Interview, Richard, teacher, Castleton)

Neither Phyllis nor Richard explicitly referred to this being a period of adjustment, but the description of their practices did suggest that they provided experiences that were similar to those in the ECEC setting. The overarching aim of these teachers during the reception year was to prepare children to be ready for Year 1 by introducing the skills, knowledge and behaviours required for the curriculum transition.

Findings suggest that parents, ECEC practitioners and teachers had an implicit assumption that children were being prepared to be in the state of "school readiness" twice during the EYFS. The first "school readiness" associated with the institutional transition, was the responsibility of the ECEC practitioners and parents.

The second "school readiness" was primarily the responsibility of the teacher who prepared children for the different teaching methodologies associated with the academic learning of the KS1 NC in Year 1.

12.7.2 Parents', ECEC Practitioners' and Teachers' Relationships and Preparing Children for School and Year 1

12.7.2.1 Phase 1 Preparations for the Move from the ECEC Setting to the School Reception Class

Nearly a year before the children moved to the reception class, parents and ECEC practitioners started planning for the children's institutional transition.

> In the October the letters go out to the parents, so we start approaching them and we just say that we can help you with that, we can help you apply online or when they fill out the forms we take them to Castleton for them. Because three years ago there was a big issue where a lot of them didn't do it. They think they can just leave it till the last minute and get their children in. (Interview, Sophie, practitioner, Castleton)

Sophie was referring to the information provided for parents by the Local Authority informing them about the application processes when applying for their child's school. Samantha explained how the ECEC practitioners supported her when planning for her daughter's transition.

> I suppose nursery telling me that I have got choices. I didn't realise …you had three choices. (Interview, Samantha, parent, Castleton)

The content of the information that ECEC practitioners shared with Samantha was useful and applicable to her at that time. The information shared by ECEC practitioners provided parents with information about the admission systems such as that they would be entitled to have three choices when deciding to which school their child would go.

As the move to school drew closer the preparations continued. Sophie explained that parents would ask ECEC practitioners for advice and information.

> Normally each year we do get quite a lot of questions from parents, a lot of them – especially new parents, around uniforms. (Interview, Sophie, practitioner, Castleton)

In response to the parents' questions, the ECEC practitioners had planned and held a transition group during the summer term before children start school.

> It was just a very informal laid back group… just an opportunity for the parents really just to come and share their fears. Umm, cos obviously if parents have got fears, it is going to rub off onto the children as well. It is quite an anxious time and it was an opportunity for the teachers to be invited down [to the ECEC setting], in a relaxed atmosphere, one that the parents know well and for them to ask any questions really. I'm doing it [the transition group] with Jackie this year. She's the family support worker over at the school. It is a little

> bit different but it will be interesting, I am looking forward to it. (Focus group, Clare, practitioner, Castleton)

Clare described the content of the discussion, which focused on everyday knowledge about starting school; the interactions were informal and instigated by the parents. There was two-way communication between parents and ECEC practitioners. Clare empathized with parents by acknowledging that when their child started school could also be a difficult time for them. She also explained that this year it was going to be different as the group was to be held in the school and not the ECEC setting and Jackie, the school Family Support Advisor (FSA), was going to join her to help to run the group. The school website describes Jackie's role as being to support parents in 'Building a partnership with school and supporting parents with family issues' (school website, 2013). Another opportunity for Jackie (the FSA) to meet parents was during home visits (research journal 8th July 2013).

This year Jackie and the teachers she had worked with planned visits to the children's homes before the summer holidays. Janet, the parent governor, explained why these had been introduced earlier.

> We did …groups to bring the parents to meet the teacher and out of twenty seven families only eight turned up. So the teacher went out to the …home visits … in July and then by September the ice has already been broken…to try and get the other parents in [to attend meetings]. (Focus group, Janet, parent, Castleton)

As parents had not attended meetings, the teachers considered other practices to establish relationships with parents. Like the ECEC practitioners the school personnel had developed their practices. Lynne preferred the earlier home-visits.

> I definitely think it was a lot better the way they did it. They [the teacher and the FSA] … asking them what they enjoyed doing, what they enjoyed at home and they took time to go around and look at their stuff and things like that. So when they went to school they were able to sort of do activities they knew the children liked. (Interview, Lynne, parent, Castleton)

Janet (parent, Castleton) reported that teachers meeting parents sooner would encourage them to attend school meetings. Lynne's (parent, Castleton) expectation of these visits was different. Instead, she explained that the teacher found out about her daughter's experiences beyond school and that this information was used to make links between the home and school. These practices enabled a two-way flow of information between the home and school. Her beliefs were that the teachers were establishing relationships with her daughter and not with her.

Although the school leaders had introduced earlier home-visits so that the teacher could meet family members sooner there were more opportunities for parents to meet the FSA. The primary role of the FSA was to establish relationships with parents and support them with a range of family issues. This can explain Lynne's (parent, Castleton) comments that the teacher is introduced to establish relationships with children and find out about their interests at home which can then be used to plan for the children's learning at school. At this phase of the transition the FSA and teacher have distinct roles as they have different remits when establishing relationships with families.

12.7.2.2 Phase 2: The First Day in the Reception Class and Preparations for Year 1

Soon after children had started the reception class, parents were invited to attend a program of workshops at school. Janet described these workshops as

> …fun learning in that you go in just one day a week with your child and we did different activities. So we did literacy and numeracy and shapes and stuff like that. (Interview, Janet, parent, Castleton)

The content of the workshops was "fun learning" activities that support children's skills in literacy and numeracy. The aim of the workshops was for parents to become familiar with these activities whilst learning with their child at school. There were opportunities for parents to make links between the learning at school and in the home. Lynne described her daughter's homework.

> I thought it was a bit much giving homework straight away. You know, four year old children having homework. Then I thought about it and actually I thought it was a really good idea. They get their homework book to do with their parent ….I quite enjoy sitting there on a Friday and doing making our puppets or talking about our feelings and this week it was like 'what makes you nervous?' and I had to explain to her like what nervous was, because she didn't understand the word. (Interview, Lynne, parent, Castleton)

Lynne was at first unconvinced that her daughter should be set homework but changed her mind when she became aware that the homework was to make puppets and talk about feelings. Lynne enjoyed doing these activities with her daughter. Parents also explained that reading books were also available for the children to take home.

> Yeah they come home with a book. You have got to read with them every week. A lot of parents will go in and change a book. I don't worry about that because I do read with them…I have absolutely loads and loads of books at home. I have just gone out and brought loads more as well, because work have an amazing website and you can buy ten books for ten pound…. when I'm reading to them I will be like, I will read part of the sentence and then I will stop and they carry it on. Because they know the books that well. (Interview, Louise, parent, Castleton)

Though Louise did not use the school books she still supported her children's love of books and reading. She used strategies to support her son's knowledge of text, letting her son finish the sentence. These reading activities in the home may be unnoticed if there are limited opportunities for teachers to find out about the family's reading habits or about the reasons why parents do not borrow books.

At this phase of the transition the flow of information was generally one-way from the teachers to parents. The information and the types of activities that the teachers shared and provided were of an informal nature, making puppets and encouraging parents to talk about feelings. There appeared limited opportunities for parents to tell teachers about the learning experiences they provided in the home.

During the reception year, as the move to Year 1 drew closer, the focus of the home work changed to children's academic skills and knowledge and the parents were expected to use specialized techniques. This sometimes led to teachers believing parents were either not involved in their children's learning or not able to support their children. Phyllis described how she had helped them to be involved.

> I've really been working hard on involving parents, lots of parents you know, they weren't doing their reading because they didn't know their phonic sounds because they can't read themselves so it's the case of 'come on in', 'welcome', 'we will go through it with you'. So getting them involved in terms of their child's education is really important. (Interview, Phyllis, teacher, Castleton)

She attributed the lack of parent involvement to some parents not being able to read or not knowing how to sound out the phonemes. To remedy this she invited them into the class to teach them how to support their child's reading and learning letter sounds. The involvement was t on her terms, the flow of communication predominantly in one direction and the content of the session decided upon by Phyllis. Although Phyllis believed parents were not reading to their children, Louise's comment above suggests that parents may be reading to children but not using books from school.

Rosie also explained that, as the year progressed, she had to approach the teacher and ask how her son was doing at school.

> Yeah you have got to be really pro-active in schools and go up to the teacher and say; 'how are they doing?' Because otherwise you just don't get anything back really. (Focus group, Rosie, parent, Castleton)

Rosie's comments suggested that unless parents approach teachers, they did not engage in conversation with parents. Louise's experiences can add light to why teachers did not approach Rosie. Louise described how teachers had approached and invited her to a meeting when there had been a dip in her son's academic performance and behaviour.

> I have been told by statistics of what is expected of a child of this age by the school. They've said he's behind because he [Kieran] can't count from one to ten. Ohh they say he is very immature for his age and that he needs umm one to one rather than group time because he can't concentrate and he has a very poor attention span Umm, a lot of it is I would say probably down to my mental health, is the fact that one minute I'm up, one minute I'm down. That made me feel really bad as a parent when I was told; 'he's behind on this, he's behind on this and he's behind on this. (Focus group, Louise, parent, Castleton)

If a child's progression is "normal" then teachers are less likely to interact with parents. It may have been that Rosie's son was meeting the expected levels of learning and development.

The discussion between Louise and the teachers only focused on Kieran's academic skills, knowledge and behaviours. The teachers implied that it was his immaturity that contributed to his behaviour, poor attention span and his low levels of achievement. Louise, however, attributed her son's delay in his learning to her mental health. By just focusing on Kieran's school learning, his teacher created a division between his learning experiences in and beyond school. There were limited opportunities for two-way communication, which could have contributed to Louise blaming herself for Kieran's lower than expected levels of achievement.

Throughout the reception year, as the preparations for Year 1 intensified, the systems that were introduced, such as phonics, created further divisions in roles between the parents and teachers. On the one hand, it was primarily the responsibility of the

teacher to prepare children for the academic learning of Year 1, but on the other hand, parents were also expected to teach children academic skills. This positioned the teachers in authority, showing parents how to teach their children. Communication was one-way, which limited the opportunities for parents to tell teachers about children's learning beyond school. The limited two-way communication led to learning experiences at school and beyond school being distinct and separate. For instance there were reading books for school and reading books for the home. This distinction led to relationships between parents and teachers becoming more distant. For parents whose child was progressing at the expected level of learning and development, there were fewer opportunities for conversations with the teacher.

12.8 Discussion

This research found that the nudging down of the school starting age and the emphasis on children's readiness for the next phase of their education (Moss 2013) have led to the term "school readiness" being associated with two vertical transitions during the EYFS. The first transition that school readiness is associated with is the institutional transition when children moved from the ECEC setting to the school reception class and the second transition when they move from an environment guided by the EYFS (DfE 2014b) to an environment guided by the KS1 NC, a curriculum transition. The expectations of children's school readiness at each transition are different. Although there were different expectations at each transition participants of this study had a shared understanding of the expectations of children and whose role is was to prepare the children. It was the role of parents and ECEC practitioners to prepare the children for the institutional transition. Children were expected to be independent in their social and personal skills, have positive dispositions and attitudes to change, and have experienced the skills and knowledge associated with school. For the curriculum transition, it was primarily the role of the teacher to prepare children. To be ready for school at the second transition, children were expected to have the skills, knowledge and behaviours necessary for school learning.

Whilst there is an expectation in the EYFS (DfE 2014b) that teachers and ECEC practitioners work in partnership with parents, the involvement of parents depended on the expectations of school ready children. This study found that the expectations of school readiness influenced the flow of communication and the type of information ECEC practitioners and teachers shared with parents. This would also influence the relationships between parents and ECEC practitioners and teachers. The information that parents and ECEC practitioners discussed when preparing children for the institutional transition is everyday knowledge about matters such as uniforms and the application process. The information is likely to be familiar and relevant to both parents and ECEC practitioners, which fosters two-way-communication (Bronfenbrenner 1979) between them. This can explain why parents believe they have mutually respectful relationships with ECEC practitioners (Shields 2009).

There was also two-way communication, where the information shared by parents and teachers was useful to both parties when preparing children for the first transition. Prior to starting school a parent recounted that teachers were interested in the children's experiences and interests beyond school and had used this information to plan for the children's learning in the reception class. During the course of the reception year, as preparations for the curriculum transition intensified, the flow of information changed to information flowing generally from the teachers to parents and the terminology used became specialised. For instance at the beginning of the reception year the homework was making puppets, but by the end of the year the homework expectations had become specific teaching of phonics. There were fewer opportunities for parents to share with teachers how they supported children's learning at home. This created a division in the knowledge and skills learned at school and those learned beyond school (Bronfenbrenner 1979). For instance there were reading books for school and reading books for home. As the information becomes more specialised the relationships and roles of teachers and parents also become more distant.

This distance in relationships between teachers and parents is further exacerbated as there are other school personnel who are expected to establish relationships with parents. It was the role of the Family Support Advisor (FSA) to support parents in establishing relationships with the school community and also support them with family issues. This can create further division between children's experiences at school and home. Whilst there is an aspiration to create schools that are shaped by the local community, the roles of other school personnel can lead to teachers only interacting with parents when there is a problem with the child's academic learning.

12.9 Conclusion

The focus on readiness limits the acknowledgment of the time it takes for children to adjust to being a pupil and to school learning and overlooks the relationships between those that are preparing children for school (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000). This oversight is more evident when preparing children for the curriculum transition, as the expectations of school readiness at this transition limit opportunities for parents and teachers to engage in two-way communication and establish collaborative relationships with each other. One implication for educational policy makers at a national and local level is to develop policies which enable parents, ECEC practitioners and teachers to establish collaborative relationships which are based upon two-way communication. This could have further implications for the practices in the reception class, as this is the final year of the EYFS (DfE 2014b). During this year, practices can be developed to foster relationships between teachers and parents and enable them to engage in two-way communication to co-construct meanings. This process would be more likely to support children's adjustment to school learning as there would be less of a division between home learning and school learning.

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Part IV
Relationships and Collaboration

Chapter 13
Preparing to Start School: Parent and Early Childhood Educator Narratives

Joanne S. Lehrer, Nathalie Bigras, and Isabelle Laurin

13.1 Introduction

Recent research and policy in Quebec (Canada) related to early childhood education and the transition to school singles out children living in "disadvantaged areas" and children with "difficulties" as targets of early intervention and education. For example, the official aim of early childhood educational services is 'to ensure the health and safety of the children […], particularly those with special needs or who live in precarious socio-economic situations, foster their development and wellbeing and provide them with equality of opportunity' (Gouvernement du Québec 2015). Furthermore, 'the development of childcare services equalizes children's opportunities by promoting their development, by better preparing them to begin school, and thereby contributing to reducing school drop-out' (Finances Quebec 2009, p.27).

Large-scale studies in the province have identified neighbourhoods where children are likely to be "vulnerable" with regards to "school readiness" (Agence de la santé et des services sociaux de Montréal, Direction de santé publique [ASSSM-DSP] 2008) or "child development" (Simard et al. 2013) as they begin kindergarten. Relying on the Early Development Index (Janus and Offord 2007), these studies have found that kindergarten teachers are more likely to rate children in low-income neighbourhoods as "vulnerable" in one or more developmental domain (ASSM-DSP 2008; Simard et al. 2013).

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S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_13

International perspectives on children's transition to school question the continued focus on readiness as a characteristic of children, despite efforts to propose a more complex conception of transition to school (Dockett and Perry 2009; Evans 2013). For example, Dockett (2014) asserts,

> The time has come to reflect critically on the impact of much of this transition research and to consider some of the unintended implications from this approach […] have we:
>
> - Generated normative expectations, expecting that some children, but not others, will find the transition to school problematic?
> - Positioned some children and families – particularly those considered vulnerable or disadvantaged – as necessarily needing support in order to meet these normative expectations? (p. 187)

Previous research on the transition to school and relationships with families in early childhood education has identified stigmatizing or marginalizing discourse concerning certain groups of low-income and racialized parents (Barberis 2008; Dockett et al. 2011; Doucet 2008). Popkewitz (2003) coined the term pedagogicalisation to describe the way parents are positioned as proxy teachers to meet the goals of the school, and are considered deficient if they are either unable or unwilling to meet these expectations. This is of particular concern given the importance of family-school relations based on mutual respect, confidence, collaboration, and shared decision-making for a successful transition (Dockett 2014; Perry 2014).

However, the majority of research on the transition to school focuses on kindergarten teacher reports, with fewer inclusions of parent and early childhood educator perspectives (Fabian and Dunlop 2006), despite a theoretical understanding of the transition as beginning before children enter school (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000). In addition, multiple points of view regarding the same child are rarely sought (Peters 2010). The present study was undertaken in order to understand how low-income parents and their children's educators narrate their relationships during the transition to school, and how they position themselves with regards to metanarratives of school readiness, deficiency, and pedagogicalisation.

13.2 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study adapts postcolonial theory (Memmi 1967; Spivak 1990) to question the notion of what counts as scientific knowledge, and focuses on narratives of experiences as sites for the construction and maintenance of identities (Andrews et al. 2008; Riessman 2007). Within a postmodern narrative framework, the subject is constrained by societal metanarratives, 'broad cultural meanings systems […] that underlie and give sense to any particular […] story' (Zilber et al. 2008, p. 1047). These metanarratives normalize and naturalize particular sequences of events and limit possible actions within a given situation. Yet, subjects are also active agents, capable of resisting these metanarratives through the proposal or adoption of counternarratives (Bamberg 2004).

This paper draws on the work of Griebel and Niesel (2002), Niesel and Griebel (2007), and Doucet and Tudge (2007), who view the transition to school as a co-constructed process involving changing identities, roles, and relationships negotiated jointly by educators, parents, children, and teachers. This approach emphasizes the active participation and expertise of all actors, consistent with the theoretical framework presented above.

13.3 Methodology

13.3.1 Research Design

As part of the first author's doctoral research project, this narrative multi-case study focuses on family-educator relationships and children's transition to school during the year prior to school entry.

13.3.2 Site and Participants

The participants were three mothers and four educators of four-year-old children attending their final year of childcare in three different childcare centres located in Montreal neighbourhoods identified as "vulnerable" with regards to school readiness (ASSM-DSP 2008; Simard et al. 2013). In addition, all the centres participated in the *Moving on to School* transition practice (CASIOPE 2008), consisting of a child development checklist completed by the educator and shared with the kindergarten teacher.

13.3.3 Procedure

Two individual interviews with each participant took place in the spring (March–April) and summer (June–July) before the child began kindergarten.[1] Narrative interviews involve open-ended questions designed to elicit descriptive recounts of specific experiences (Hollway and Jefferson 2008; King and Horrocks 2010). Examples of questions asked include: *Tell me about a positive/negative experience you had with this parent/the childcare centre; Tell me about a time when you worked with this parent/the educator to prepare the child for school.* Interviews lasted an average of 16 minutes (15 minutes 30 seconds for parents and 17 minutes for educators).

[1] While early childhood education runs year round, and is overseen by the Ministry of Family, kindergarten takes place in primary schools and is overseen by the Ministry of Education. The school year in Quebec runs from the end of August to the end of June.

13.3.4 Data and Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analysis was carried out by case (child), with a multi-voice narrative constructed by the researchers. We analysed the content of the narratives using narrative thematic analysis without disturbing the temporality and repetitions used by the narrators (Riessman 2007). Then, we compared the narratives of the mothers with the narratives of the educators, in order to understand whether and how the same experiences were recounted by different narrators. Finally, we conducted contextual analysis to identify metanarratives and counternarratives. This was done both through emic analysis, when the narrators made explicit reference to metanarratives or counternarratives, as well as etic analysis, when the researchers identified the metanarratives and counternarratives based on the literature review undertaken for the project (Bamberg 2004; Riessman 2007).

13.3.5 Ethical Considerations

In order to ensure that the narratives, co-constructed during the research interview, were true to the narrators' intentions and to the identities they chose to share, all transcripts were sent to the narrators for member checking. In addition, a reflexive journal was used to keep track of personal reactions and biases that may have influenced data analysis. Finally, interviews conducted in French (nine out of thirteen) were analysed in French before being translated for the purpose of publication. In sum, these narratives do not reflect an unbiased 'truth', nor are they free from our choices and personal identities as researchers.

13.4 Findings and Discussion

Three cases will be presented briefly, followed by a discussion of the contextual analysis focused on school readiness, deficiency, and pedagogicalization.

13.4.1 Matéo[2]

Matéo is an only child who lives with his mother, Marie-Ève. She is in her mid-twenties, has a Secondary Two (Grade Eight) education, and receives social assistance. His educator, Anna, immigrated to Canada many years ago and was trained

[2] All names are pseudonyms.

as an educator in her home country. She has eighteen years of professional experience and two grown children.

During our first interview in the spring, Marie-Ève's narrative centred around her own sense of comfort and place at the childcare centre, as well as Matéo's excitement about starting school. She mentioned how difficult it was for him to transition from the three-year-old group to the four-year-old group, as evidence that starting school may be a little bit difficult for him. In the summer, Marie-Ève explained that Matéo was excited and motivated to start school and that he was getting tired of the childcare centre. She was proud of the progress he had made and of his positive *Moving on the School* report. Marie-Ève recounted a positive experience visiting the school with her son. She explained that she would miss the close relationships she has with the educators and the other children at the centre.

Anna confirmed Marie-Ève's involvement at the childcare centre, as well as Matéo's difficulty transitioning to her group. She added that the transition was difficult for Marie-Ève as well, and attributed it to her being a single parent. She went on to explain that the transition to school is harder for parents than it is for children. In particular, she said that Matéo is a social child and that he would do well at school. In the summer, Anna described Marie-Ève as insecure and returned to the difficulty she felt Marie-Ève had when Matéo transitioned to her group, but said that both mother and son had matured over the year. She stated that they would both do well at school next year.

13.4.2 Nicholas

Nicholas is in a double group in a bilingual centre. He has two educators: Suzanne, who speaks English, and Nadia, who speaks French. His parents separated while his mother was pregnant with his baby sister. His mother Audrey stays home with the baby and shares custody of the two children with her former partner. She has a college degree but her family income is below the poverty line. She is in her mid-twenties. The family speaks English. Suzanne has ten years of experience as an educator. She does not have any children of her own. Nadia is a recent immigrant who has been working as an educator for the past four years. She has two school-aged children. The spring interview was conducted with Suzanne, and the summer interview with Nadia.

Audrey's narratives focused on her love for the centre and on her positive relationships with the educators and two members of the centre's administration staff who helped her with personal issues, as well as logistical issues regarding school registration. In describing Nicholas' upcoming entry to kindergarten, she contrasted his excitement with her mixed emotions and feeling that she was not ready. In the spring, Audrey enthusiastically recounted how happy her son was at the childcare centre. She mentioned how attending the centre had helped Nicholas learn French, which was important as he would be attending a French immersion school the following year. In June, Audrey reported being happy about Nicholas' upcoming grad-

uation ceremony, and pleased that his French was improving. She expressed relief that she would not have to leave the centre because she had registered her daughter to begin in a few weeks.

In March, Suzanne reported caring about Nicholas and his parents, and recounted discussions with both parents about Nicholas' activities and their lives. Suzanne expressed concern about whether the teachers would be sensitive to Nicholas' needs when he starts school. She mentioned informing the parents about school Open Houses and discussing school choice with them.

As a recent graduate of an early childhood program, Nadia's narrative was peppered with phrases that seemed to be lifted directly from Quebec's educational program for childcare (Ministère de la Famille et des Aînés [MFA] 2007). In particular, she described Nicholas' strengths, but mostly his weaknesses, in each developmental domain, and how these weaknesses led to her concern about his transition to school. She prefaced many judgements, either about Nicholas or about his parent's separation, with exclamations such as *I can't judge, but…* or *I would never compare him to other children but…* She explained the strategies she employed to prepare Nicholas for school, individually, by helping him make developmental progress, and collectively, by organizing transition activities for the group.

13.4.3 Emma

Emma and her sister (one year younger) have been attending the childcare centre since September. Her mother, Christine, is in her late twenties and receives social assistance. She has a university degree, and is separated from the girls' father. Hannah, Emma's educator, has 18 years of experience as an educator, and ten years of experience as a school teacher in her home country. She has grown children. Hannah was on leave in June, and we were unable to conduct a second interview with her.

Christine's narratives centred on the concern both educators expressed about her daughters' development when they began attending childcare and her subsequent involvement in speech therapy and special needs services at the centre and the local health clinic. She explained how sending her daughters to childcare was difficult for her. Christine constructed her identity as a proactive mother who is "not in denial." She positioned herself as being willing and able to do everything the centre asks in order to support her daughters. She explained that when Hannah presented her with Emma's *Moving on to School* report, she was relieved that her daughter's language problems had been resolved, due to collaboration between the local clinic and the childcare centre. She also described her concerns about Emma's future teacher, who she hoped would be open and understanding of her reality as a single mother, and about the school, as she worried that it would not be as welcoming to parents as the childcare centre. She was also concerned about Emma being lost and confused, and not having friends when she began school. She explained that she was not sure if Emma understood that she would be starting school at the end of the summer.

Hannah's narrative focused on Christine crying during the first week Emma attended childcare, and how she had worried that Christine did not trust her. Hannah discussed her concern about Emma's language development and described Christine as collaborative. She concluded by saying that Christine would be disappointed when Emma started school because she would not be as welcomed as she was at the childcare centre, but that she would adapt. Hannah was also worried about how Emma would do at school, but was hopeful because of Christine's involvement and because the specialists at the school would continue the work that was started at the childcare centre.

13.4.4 School Readiness

The contested issue of school readiness (Farran 2011) circulates as "truth" in policy documents and research reports, and can be said to constitute a metanarrative. The more nuanced focus on transition as a time of opportunity, expectation, aspiration, and entitlement (Dockett and Perry 2015) or as a co-constructed experience (Doucet and Tudge 2007; Griebel and Niesel 2002; Niesel and Griebel 2007), can be understood as counternarratives often seen in the research literature, and sometimes in policy or professional documents (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir, et du Sport (MELS) 2010). Our analysis suggests that two of the mothers and two educators put forth counternarratives based on children's agency in determining whether they felt ready for school, and on the teacher's ability to adapt to the child. However, these participants did not reject the metanarrative of school readiness, as most of them referred to it in some way. The other narrators drew more explicitly on the metanarrative that focuses on children's preparation as a requisite for a successful transition, without contesting or proposing alternatives.

Both Marie-Ève and Audrey presented their children's school readiness in terms of the child feeling excited to start school. Marie-Ève (Matéo) referred to Anna's programming, *before in the other groups the educators were cuddlier, more affectionate, here it's more preparation for school*, as well as Matéo's sense of excitement and fear, *I think there will be a certain fear but he'll feel alright, 'I'm big, I'm going to school,' he's excited*. When we spoke to her again in June, she explained that Matéo was more and more motivated to start school, as they had visited the school and now he would often ask her, *Oh mom, my school is there, eh? I'm going to go to that school, eh?* She also explained that Anna told her that her son was ready for school because he was progressing well when she received the *Moving on to School* document.

Audrey also mentioned that Nicholas would point out the school each time they drove by. She discussed taking her son to the school to register him, *Oh, he was excited. I wasn't. I'm not ready, but he was definitely excited*. She went on to explain how he checks the mailbox every day for his bus pass, even though it would not arrive until August.

Similarly, Anna (educator) mentioned that she thought Matéo's transition would go well because he talked to her about starting school and expressed excitement about riding the school bus. She also explained that, *my children, I feel that they're already ready for school; I make them very autonomous (laughs).* She also predicted that Matéo would transition well because he is very sociable.

The idea that the child is able to determine whether or not they are ready for kindergarten, without any external assessments, appears to be consistent with the co-construction approach to transition that stresses the expertise of both children and parents (Doucet and Tudge 2007; Griebel and Niesel 2000, 2002; Niesel and Griebel 2007). While the idea of allowing the child to decide, through their words, actions, and emotions, whether or not they are ready for school seems blatantly obvious, it appears to be a novel addition to the research literature. Previous research on children's perspectives has identified their concerns regarding making friends, school rules, academic work, needing help, and a lack of play (Di Santo and Berman 2012; Dockett and Perry 2004; Einarsdóttir 2007). Ackesjö's (2013) research examined how children construct identities as ex-preschool children over time, and previous research has found that children were both excited and anxious about starting school (Elliott 1998, cited in Einarsdóttir 2007; Griebel and Niesel 2002). However, similar to our study, these studies do not appear to have asked children directly whether or not they feel "ready" to start school and why.

This finding appears to suggest that proposing a counternarrative does not necessarily contest or question the presence of the metanarrative, which is consistent with Bamberg's (2004) definition of counternarratives as only able to transform or reformulate some aspects of a metanarrative. This author asserts that narrators must leave the majority of metanarratives intact, given their pervasive nature; otherwise counternarratives will be neither credible nor comprehensible.

Suzanne's (educator) narrative conveys a different counternarrative. She expressed concern for Nicholas' emotional and physical wellbeing once he starts school, "I think it might be more challenging, like, emotionally for him […] he doesn't express himself that well, if he gets upset you have to take your time to calm him, to chat with him, and I know sometimes it's hard to do that in a school setting." She went on to explain how Nicholas gets cold easily and needs to wear extra layers when he plays outside, expressing concern that he would not get the attention he needs at school, and that the school would be unable to accommodate and adapt to his shared custody situation.

Suzanne made no explicit or implicit reference to the idea of the child needing to have any particular skills or abilities in order to be "ready" for school. The counternarrative she draws upon is present in the research literature focusing on ready schools, that suggests that the transition to school should focus at least as much on preparing the school to welcome the children and families as on preparing the child for school (e.g. Copple 1997; Dockett and Perry 2009; Pianta et al. 2007).

Christine, Nadia, and Hannah draw more explicitly and in more detail upon the metanarrative that the child must be made "ready" for school. Christine (Emma), describes feeling relieved that her daughter had "graduated" from speech therapy

before beginning school because, *I really wanted her to fit into the mould of a child that one would say is alright for starting school*.

Hannah also framed her concern about Emma's language delay as being related to her starting school:

> When I suspected Emma had gaps it worried me a lot […] then after observing I said, 'Oh she's going to school, it's her last year, her sister it's not bad, she'll spend another year, but for her, I need to talk to her, so I approached Christine.

Nadia (Nicholas's second educator) focused most explicitly on school readiness as a specific construct. She mentioned walking, speaking French, fine motor activities, concentrating during story time, and sitting on a chair as areas of concern in relation to Nicholas starting school. She also mentioned social skills as a strength that will help with the transition. The following expresses a tension between Quebec's educational program for childcare (MFA 2007), which states that all children are unique and develop at their own pace, and Nadia's concern about his development and "readiness."

> I don't want to compare him with the others because each child's developmental rhythm is unique, […] it will be a little bit difficult […] sitting on a chair to finish a collage, he doesn't pay a lot of attention, he doesn't have a lot of interest in that, but for sure with time it will also help, […] each child's developmental rhythm is different.

13.4.5 Deficiency

This metanarrative deals with the deficiencies of certain neighbourhoods, families, and children because of their socio-economic status or other characteristics that have been associated with negative child outcomes. The focus of much transition research, policy, and interventions on children from low-income neighbourhoods has been problematized in research literature (Dockett 2014; Peters 2010; Petriwyskyj 2014). However, Quebec policy and programs (e.g. Gouvernement du Québec 2015; Finances Québec 2009), as well as international research (e.g. Crosnoe and Cooper 2010; Oliver et al. 2007), continue to target entire neighbourhoods or groups of children identified as "at-risk" for difficult transitions. The purpose of this section is to identify how this metanarrative was experienced by parents and educators working and living in these neighbourhoods, and whether their narratives of the transition experience draw upon or contest the deficiency metanarrative.

Our analysis suggests that while not all narrators engaged with this metanarrative, those who did, did so in complex ways that were neither completely accepting, nor wholly rejecting of the metanarrative. Christine (Emma) mentioned that she was worried about whether or not the local school would be a good school, because *I was afraid because the neighbourhood is known as disadvantaged. I didn't want a cheap school without services and support for the students*. She said she asked around to find out about the school's reputation, and was pleasantly surprised by the

visit and the many services the school offered. She also mentioned how happy she was that the school nurse offered free dental service for the children, *there were free cleaning services and tooth sealant, that's super expensive the sealant, and I think for low-income families like me, it can be free, I was 'yay!'* Christine appeared to accept the metanarrative that the neighbourhood is disadvantaged. At the same time, she clearly identifies as a low-income parent and views the social services provided as beneficial to her daughter.

Anna's narratives positions Marie-Ève (Matéo) as *a mother who is all alone, a single mother*. She noted that she encouraged Marie-Ève to hire a babysitter so she could go out on evenings and weekends, and that when Marie-Ève followed her advice, this had a direct impact on her son and on herself as *right away she started talking about, 'I want to go back to school, and I want to find work.'* Marie-Ève herself did not share these plans when discussing Matéo's transition to school. Anna also explained that she had invited both Marie-Ève and another parent to participate in holiday activities at the centre, because *those parents are insecure, you need to get them involved […] so that they can be more confident with me*. While Anna did not appear to judge Marie-Ève or worry about Matéo's development due to his mother's socio-economic status, she did seem to want to help Marie-Ève improve her situation.

Similarly, Nadia recounted an experience where Nicholas cried one morning, interpreting the situation based on his shared custody situation.

> One time […] the mom dropped off Nicholas, that very night he would go to his dad's, so, he won't see the mom for a week, […] and when she left, I saw Nicholas crying, holding on like that to the fence, and he was crying, I swear to you he made me cry, he made me cry for real […] I can't judge because it is what it is […] but it's the child who paid for all that, that's what I told myself in my head, why? The parents did it but it's the child who paid for it.

While there are elements of judging the parents and normative expectations of a two-parent family in Nadia's narrative, the intense emotion and empathy (or sympathy) she feels for Nicholas complicates her experience. We wonder if another child, whose parents lived together, had cried when his mother dropped him off, would she have reacted with the same degree of emotion?

We contrast Nadia's narrative to Suzanne's, who recounts a different experience with the same parents' break-up.

> So since they separated and Mum came in pregnant and, it was hard to be the buffer because then other parents were saying congratulations to the dad and it was just like 'oh, can you please just?' it's *awkward* (laughs) so that's been hard but, they're dealing.

It appears as if Suzanne empathizes with the parents, especially the father, and in so doing, crafts a counternarrative focused on his well-being as a member of the childcare centre community.

13.4.6 Pedagogicalization

Dominant discourses about early childhood education focus on its indispensable role in preparing children for school, thus ensuring their future educational achievement and productivity in a globalized economy (Heckman 2011; McCain et al. 2011). Within this paradigm, parents are understood as playing a crucial role in their children's education. The institutionalization of particular parenting practices in support of school agendas has been labeled pedagogicalization (Popkewitz 2003) and is particularly problematic for low-income families who are identified or constructed as marginalized and lacking the skills necessary to prepare their children for school (Humblet and Vandenbroeck 2007).

Each of the mothers drew upon this metanarrative, while two of them also proposed a counternarrative focused on their sense of community and belonging at the centre, similar to Suzanne's concern for Nicholas' father's wellbeing in the previous section. The educators also referred to this metanarrative to varying degrees.

Marie-Ève appeared to be preoccupied with changing Matéo's bedtime routine, indicating that she planned to change the structure of her family routine in order to accommodate the school's rules for arrival at a specific time in the morning.[3] Audrey (Nicholas) referred to working hand-in-hand with the educator to improve Nicholas' French. Christine (Emma) described her engagement in activities with her daughters to prepare them before they started attending the childcare centre. She reported introducing books at home, taking her daughters to the library, establishing a routine, buying workbooks, and teaching her daughters how to draw recognizable people and bunnies. She was proud, stating, *I think it's good, it's the little I was able to do on my own*.

In discussing her collaboration with the centre to support her daughter's language difficulties, Christine presented herself as a *super mom who is open, available, and willing to do whatever they suggest to help her daughter*. However, she encountered a conflict with the centre when her younger daughter was required to take eye drops and was advised to wear sunglasses each time she went outside. Christine explained that because there was no prescription for the sunglasses, the educator was not willing to put them on her daughter. She expressed feeling frustrated, *It was difficult to work […] we had difficult debates*. Despite her frustration and worry, she went on to say, *it stressed me out, but in the end you have to be open, you have to understand how the procedures function, because there is abuse all the time.* We view this attempt to rationalize and mould herself into a collaborative and pedagogicalized parent, willing to overlook instances where she is in conflict with the childcare centre, as a process of identity construction, or maintenance, as Christine attempts to rationalize her acceptance of the centre's procedures and distance herself from other parents who "abuse" the system.

[3] Childcare centres are not permitted to impose a particular drop-off time, they are required to be open from 7am to 6pm (Gouvernement du Québec 2015), while schools have fixed class hours (Gouvernement du Québec 2016).

Both Marie-Ève and Christine reported being present in the childcare centre and accompanying the educator on field trips. Marie-Ève's emphasis on her own sense of comfort and community in both the childcare centre and the school can be seen as a counternarrative that focuses on these institutions as places that create a sense of community for the parent, as opposed to the parent working to further the educational goals of the school. She explained, *I get along well with everyone here, they are all my age, we went to school together, if I don't know them, they know my brother, or they are friends of friends.* She mentioned that she will miss these close relationships when Matéo goes off to school, but added that she is happy with her choice because her godmother works at the school lunch program, and she is familiar with the school, *I already know the school, and they know me, the secretary knows me, because my friend's kids go there*. Similarly, Audrey explained that knowing some people at the school will help ease the transition, *I know one of the teachers at the school because she is one of my old boss' wife, and one of the lunch monitors because some of the children in our playgroup go to that school*.

The educators also confirmed parent involvement and collaboration. Hannah reported that she found it "magnificent" that Christine was always present at the meetings with the speech therapist, that she arrived on time, and that she collaborated to help her daughter. In describing Christine's participation on field trips, she described her as helpful but also as happy: *I think that's she happy here, that's what I see, I see her smile*. Anna confirmed Marie-Ève's reports of her involvement at the childcare: *Marie-Ève's a mother who always likes to talk to all the children, she comes on field trips, she is very involved, she looks at the agenda, she asks questions.* Both of these educators appear to be both drawing upon the pedagogicalized role of the parent in supporting the centre's educational mission (through participation in meetings, helping on field trips, and reading the daily communication agenda), and introducing a counternarrative regarding the parents' place in the childcare centre and the importance of parental satisfaction and happiness. Suzanne, who mentioned that, *They're lovely people […] I hope they feel the same way about me* seems to have drawn on this same counternarrative.

Nadia, however, positioned herself as an expert who described telling Nicholas' father that he must help her and collaborate with her so that Nicholas could learn French, by reading stories and singing songs in French. She explained that the father "accepted" this task. We understand this as a lack of shared decision-making or power within the family-educator relationship and a more straightforward acceptance of the pedagogicalization metanarrative.

13.5 Conclusion

This study challenges the assumption that children from low-income families have difficult transitions to school (Crosnoe and Cooper 2010; Fantuzzo et al. 2005), and that low-income parents are either disinterested or incapable of supporting their children through this process (Brooks-Gunn et al. 2007; Ramey and Ramey 2004).

The mothers in this study were satisfied with their relationships with their children's educators and childcare centres, and had positive expectations about starting school. While some educators had concerns about the children's development or school readiness, and a tendency to judge certain families, they all described the parents as open and collaborative. The mothers and educators drew on the metanarratives of school readiness, deficiency, and pedagogicalization in complex ways, often proposing counternarratives but never directly challenging the metanarratives. The counternarratives identified were that the children are able to determine whether or not they feel ready to start school; that the school should be ready for the child instead of the child being ready for school; and that the parents' happiness and well-being at the childcare centre are as important as their "collaboration" with the centre's educational goals or logistical needs.

13.5.1 Limitations

While this study presented the narratives of parents and educators, often missing from discussions about the transition to school (Fabian and Dunlop 2006), the narratives of the children themselves were not included in this study. Given the finding regarding children determining their own "readiness," this is an important omission. Similarly, the voices of fathers and kindergarten teachers were also absent. Finally, childcare administrators were mentioned by one mother as being a source of support during the transition process; their voices would also add to a richer understanding of children's transition processes.

13.5.2 Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

In order to deepen our understanding of the transition to school, similar projects with middle-class or high-income families could be undertaken. In addition, following children and families from childcare to school, and comparing the narratives of early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers, as well as school-based educators in extended care programs, could be envisioned as future research projects. One of the aims of this project was to counter the metanarratives present in official policies and population studies. It is our hope that simply telling these stories, and taking the time to think critically about the assumptions behind them, will lead to more thoughtful practice and consciousness for policy-makers and practitioners about the unintended consequences of pathologizing entire neighbourhoods or groups of people.

Acknowledgement The authors would like to acknowledge the financial support of the *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada* as well as the *Fonds de Recherche Société et Culture Québec*. We would also like to thank Maria Frangos for editing and proofreading assistance.

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Chapter 14
Partnering in the Periphery

Wendy Goff

14.1 Introduction

The family is a fundamental contributor to a child's learning and development. It is the primary context in which learning takes place and, in usual circumstances, is a consistent and important component of a child's life. The family is also diverse, and although some families might share certain characteristics, no two families are exactly the same. Similarly, educators play an important role in nurturing the education and developmental outcomes of young children. The contributions that they make to children's lives are significant. Educators are also diverse and as such have different skills, characteristics, experiences and personalities that they bring to their interactions and work with children. When families and educators come together to support the learning and development of children it is a complex undertaking that is unique and multifaceted.

A variety of researchers around the globe have highlighted the benefits of families and educators coming together to support the learning and development of children (Ahtola et al. 2011; Daniel 2011; Gillanders et al. 2012). Such benefits include gains in academic achievement (Galindo and Sheldon 2012; Siraj-Blatchford 2010); increased family involvement in school-based learning (Ahtola et al. 2011), and improved social and developmental outcomes (Sylva et al. 2010). However, despite the wide recognition of such benefits, *how* families and educators might come together to support the learning and development of children in practice remains an ambiguous notion.

Over the past few decades there has been a variety of different models of family-educator partnership presented in the research literature, each with their own unique conceptualisation of what the action of coming together to support the learning and

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S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_14

development of children might resemble (Epstein 1987, 1995, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997; Rosenberg et al. 2009). Such models emphasise different aspects of relationship and provide different insights into the complexities involved in coming together. They also position educators and families in different ways and highlight different challenges and opportunities. For example, Epstein and colleagues place emphasis on the shared responsibility of parents, educators and community in supporting the learning and development of children by highlighting the synergies between them (overlapping spheres of influence). According to Epstein and colleagues when there is little synergy, several strategies must be put in place to build on and work toward collaboration (Epstein and Sheldon 2006). In contrast, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's psychological model of parent involvement places emphasis on the role and perspective of parents in children's learning and development. This model highlights parents as the most important influence in supporting the learning and development of children and therefore positions families at the core of all interaction (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997).

Different models of family-educator partnership also conceptualise and define the term 'partnership' in different ways. Such conceptualisations and definitions include partnership portrayed as parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997); shared responsibility (Epstein and Sheldon 2006); family engagement *and* shared responsibility (Rosenberg et al. 2009); and partnership as enabler and empowerer (Dunst et al. 1992). Such difference highlights the complexity of the nature of coming together and the different motivators sitting behind the family-educator partnership rhetoric.

Whilst models of family-educator partnership provide important understanding into how families and educators might come together to support the learning and development of children, individual models do not account for all diversity, and therefore might stifle opportunity, or set people up for failure when used as recipes for success or as measures of effectiveness. Each model emphasises different aspects of family-educator partnership, and places priority on different elements of action. In essence they should not be used as a prescriptive formula for coming together, but each model acts as a guide to be adapted and changed according to people, needs and context over time.

Educators and families are drawn together through a variety of circumstance and situation, and family-educator partnerships come into fruition in different ways. For over a decade there has been growing consensus around the world that the best outcomes for children occur when educators and families come together to support their learning and development (Allen 2009; Boethel 2003; Fantuzzo et al. 2004; Melhuish et al. 2008; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002). Therefore it is reasonable to suggest that determining the optimal times to develop such connections is important. The Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group suggest that, as children make the transition to school 'an opportunity to establish and maintain positive, respectful collaboration between home and school contexts that sets a pattern for ongoing interaction' (2011, p. 2) emerges.

The transition to school is a unique life transition in that although children have agency within the process, the responsibility of many of the decisions during this

time lies with the adults who support them. It is also a transition that extends beyond the child, as families and educators also adjust to new circumstances and come in to contact with new people, new roles and new relationships (Dockett et al. 2012). In relation to family-educator partnerships, the transition to school provides the impetus or reason for the adults in the lives of young children to come together. It also lays the foundations for family-educator partnerships to emerge as adults navigate and work through change both individually and collectively, and provides a space for supporting the travel of children's learning between and across different contexts.

In the remainder of this chapter, data from a wider project that examined adult relationships as children make the transition to school are shared. The data presented in this chapter reports on a family-educator partnership that emerged within the wider project.

14.2 The Wider Research Project

This chapter presents data from a project that examined the processes that adults engaged in and with, when coming together to support the mathematical understandings of children making the transition to school. The project drew on a Design Based Research (DBR) methodology (Herrington et al. 2007). DBR is a pragmatic research approach that is conducted *with* people rather than *on* people. It is cyclic in nature and is embedded in real world contexts (Herrington et al. 2007). In the wider study DBR was drawn upon to create two teams at two different sites (research teams). Each research team consisted of a prior-to-school (PTS) educator, a first-year-of-school (FYS) educator, and the families of the children making the move to school. The teams were provided with a brief to establish the existing mathematical understandings of children and to devise a plan that would support those understandings as the children made the move to school. No direction was provided as to how this might be achieved in practice, although regular team meetings provided the researcher with the opportunity to pursue different avenues and guide the teams in different ways. The purpose of the wider project was to study the processes that were engaged in and with at the two different sites.

14.3 The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework employed was the Indigenous lens of the Cultural Interface (Nakata 2002). The Cultural Interface is a lens of convergence in that it provides a way to examine the spaces that lie between individuals. As children make the move to school these spaces emerge and are created as the adults in the lives of young children come together. When used as a conceptual framework the Cultural Interface provides a way to not only understand how individuals come together but

also to study what emerges through such meeting (Nakata 2002). Throughout the project, moving beyond the juxtaposition of 'us' and 'them' and into the space that emerges when difference meets, provided a way to examine adult relationships as they came into being.

Nakata (2007) describes the Cultural Interface as 'a space of many shifting and complex intersections between different people with different histories, experiences, language, agendas, aspirations and responses' and 'also a space that abounds with contradictions, ambiguities, conflict and contestation of meanings that emerge from…various shifting intersections' (p. 199). He further suggests that through this space, shared and new meanings can be created and recreated over time (Nakata 2002).

The conceptual framework of the Cultural Interface opens up new ways of thinking about the meeting of difference by drawing on a theoretical platform that has been developed in response to postcolonialism, and through feminist theoretical underpinnings (Anderson 2009). However, the Cultural Interface moves beyond postcolonialism in that it rejects the representation of the "collective other" by focusing explicitly on the individuals, and the space that is created when different people meet. When drawn on as a theoretical lens, the Cultural Interface provides a way to explicate what emerges as difference comes together, and also the possibilities that might arise through, and because of, such meeting. This moves analysis beyond notions of difference and into the space that is created through convergence.

The Cultural Interface was used as the basis for exploring the processes adults engaged in as they came together to support the mathematical learning of children making the transition to school.

14.4 Partnering at the Periphery

14.4.1 Background Information

The data discussed in this chapter were derived from the research team at Site 1. This team was conceptualised as consisting of a PTS educator, a FYS educator and the families of the children who would be making the transition to the primary school the following year. During the recruitment stage of the project the families at Site 1 were invited to be active members of the research team by attending team meetings and assisting in the creation of the plan that would support the mathematical understandings of the children making the transition to the primary school. The families at this site communicated that, while they were interested in what transpired and were prepared to talk to the educators about their children's mathematical understandings, that they did not want to be active members of the team or involved in the creation of the plan that was to be developed. Reasons provided included a lack of expertise in mathematics, a lack of time to engage, and a perception that

planning to support the mathematical understandings of children is "educators work".

As a consequence, data were not collected *from* families but rather *about* interactions with families (through the reports of educators). Appropriate University and Education Department ethics approval were granted to conduct the research, and families were made aware of the project and its intent through the initial recruitment stages.

14.4.2 Participants and Settings

The PTS educator worked at Site 1 for three days per week The FYS educator at Site 1 was the only FYS educator at her school. This government school was the feeder school for the prior-to-school setting (that is, most of the children attending the PTS setting would make the transition into the FYS setting). Both the PTS setting and the FYS settings were located in what is identified by the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013) as disadvantaged. A broad definition of "families" guided this project: Families were considered to include the primary adults who were responsible for the day-to-day care of the child who was making the transition to school.

Both educators at Site 1 were experienced teachers, having both been in their current roles for more than 10 years. Both the school principal at Site 1 and the director of the PTS setting involved were very supportive of the project and the participation of their staff. While the educators had met prior to their participation in the research project, they had not worked closely together.

14.5 Partnership at Site 1

The project involved providing the research teams at the two different sites with a brief to meet, find out the existing mathematical understandings of children, and devise a plan to support that mathematics as children made the move to school. In order to facilitate this process, the educators were released from teaching responsibilities for 3 h each week to work and spend time in each other's context. A component of this time was spent interacting with families in the PTS setting. The researcher provided this time release by working as a teacher in each of the different settings. The project took place during the last half of the school year and data were collected via recorded team meetings (where the progress of the team toward meeting the design brief was discussed), participant diaries, researcher field notes and email correspondence. The data presented in this chapter has been derived from the transcribed team meetings and participant diaries at Site 1.

14.5.1 Team Meetings

Throughout the project, there were four team meetings; three before and one after the children had started school. There was also an introductory meeting where the focus for the project was discussed and the intervention was refined to meet local needs. All meetings were structured as conversational interviews (Burgess-Limerick and Burgess-Limerick 1998). Conversational interviews are 'established interactively' and each 'individual and situation produces a unique agenda that allows the researcher to ground the research completely in the experiences of participants' (Burgess-Limerick and Burgess-Limerick 1998, p. 64). All team meetings – apart from the introductory meeting – were video recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The families were not involved in any of the team meetings. As noted previously, when approached to be part of the project, the families at Site 1 were reluctant to be actively involved in the team meetings, but were happy to discuss their children with the educators, and also happy for the educators to gather information and devise a plan that would support the mathematical understandings of their children.

The team meetings provided an opportunity for the educators to discuss their progress toward meeting the brief of creating a plan that would support the mathematical learning of children making the transition to school. It also provided an opportunity for the educators to share and discuss information about their interactions with families, and to draw on this information to develop and refine their plan. Even though the families were not physically involved in this process, the information garnered *from* families was used to formulate the plan that would support the mathematical learning of children as they made the move to school. With the permission of the families, this involved sharing information learned from families with one another (educator to educator). It also involved identifying components of the plan that would need to be shared and clarified with families, and adjusting the plan accordingly. The following section of this chapter provides insight into this process.

14.5.2 Working with Families

During the recruitment stage of the project many of the families at Site 1 communicated that they had little confidence in their own mathematical understandings and because of this, they perceived that they had nothing of value to offer to the educators in any formal planning stages. In the initial stages of the project, when this was communicated to the PTS educator at Site 1, rather than dismiss the notion of working closely with families, she suggested that the families did have something to offer, but that *it might just take some time for them to realise [that] what they know can help*. This sentiment was also expressed by the PTS educator during the first team meeting when she suggested to the FYS educator that *these parents don't*

realise they can help that's the problem. You're going to need to tell them you need their help otherwise nothing will be offered.

Knowing when and when not to partner is a difficult notion for educators, and one that has received little attention in the research literature. It relies on educators' intuition and knowledge of the families within their contexts, a pre-existing (or the building of a new) relationship between the educator and families, and also a high level of educator social and emotional intelligence. Mayer et al. (1999) suggest that in relation to emotional intelligence it involves 'an ability to recognise the meanings of emotions and their relationships, and to reason and problem-solve on the basis of them' (p. 234).

In this situation, the families at Site 1 had previously communicated that they did not want to be active participants in the research project. However, the FYS educator at this site (who had an existing relationship with the families) perceived that what the families had to offer would make a valuable contribution to the project and, in turn, a positive contribution to children's mathematics learning. The educator also demonstrated an understanding of her relationships with the families, and how they positioned themselves within those relationships. This knowledge not only provided her with insight into the power dynamics of the relationships that had been established, but it also provided some insight as to where she and the FYS educator might need to position themselves if they were hoping to forge partnerships and access family expertise.

The interaction that took place during this first stage of the project was crucial in that it did not dismiss the families' involvement in supporting their children's mathematical learning. Nor did it dismiss the notion of the educators and families coming together. Instead the PTS educator was able to share her previous experience of working with the families to communicate to the FYS educator their strengths and capacities.

After this communication took place, the FYS educator was responsive to the PTS educators communications and proposed that she *would like to know what sort of things they [the children and families] do at home.* She also agreed with the PTS educator and expressed that she too believed that *parents have got a lot to offer.* Deslandes (2001) suggests that educator perceptions and attitudes influence their interactions with families and, through this, the types of partnerships that can be forged. At this stage of the project, both educators had indicated that their work would be enhanced through coming together with families but, more importantly, they both expressed a perception that the families in the PTS setting had something valuable to offer.

14.5.3 Team Meeting 2

By the time the second team meeting was scheduled, both educators had been working with one another toward meeting the brief that they had been given. During this meeting the PTS educator explained, *I've found that the project has been a really*

good way to talk [to families] about some of the things they do at home. When asked how this was being achieved the FYS educator elaborated, *just mentioning what we've seen their kids doing and asking whether they've noticed it at home, or whether they do similar things at home.*

This communication provided some insight into how the educators were initially coming together with families to support the mathematics learning of children making the transition to school. Rather than directly asking the families questions, the educators were sharing information from their own observations and asking families for advice and clarification. Such an approach not only took into account what had previously been communicated by families (their preference to not be actively involved in the work of the teachers), but it also repositioned families as experts on their children's mathematical learning by providing them with a non-confronting space to offer and share information.

By the time of the second meeting, both educators were working closely together. While the families at this site were not working within the same close proximity as the educators were to one another, it was evident that they too were contributing to the work that was taking place, and that a partnership was beginning to emerge. The FYS educator provided some further insight into this emergence of partnership in one of her diary entries where she explained an interaction that she had with a child's father:

> Today I spoke to one of the parents about maths. We were just talking about the weekend and he told me that on Saturday he watched the football and then went outside and drew stripes up and down the driveway with his child. My ears pricked! A pattern! It started a long discussion about mathematical learning! I told him that football is great for maths. We talked about the scoring, reading numbers, the multiples of 6 and all of the player stats that pop up on the screen. He seemed so amazed that he was teaching his child maths by watching the football. I also told him that patterns are the foundation of mathematics so when he made a pattern with his child on the driveway he was actually setting some really strong mathematical foundations. He told me that he left school in year 7 and that he didn't really think that he could help his child with maths. This made me sad but it also made me feel good about what we had shared.

Such insight provided evidence that the interactions that were taking place with families were not simply focused on obtaining information to meet the brief that was provided. The interaction described provided evidence that both educator and parent were actively focusing on enhancing the mathematical learning of the child, and supporting mathematical learning into the future. Christenson and Sheridan (2001) define this particular type of interaction as engaging relationally. They suggest that both parents and educators benefit from engaging relationally with one another, and that the learning of children can be supported through and because of such engagement.

Engaging relationally was a notion that was also reflected in the PTS educator's diary where she described her thoughts and feelings about what was emerging at Site 1:

> I am really happy to be working with Valerie. The parents love her and she is just so good with them. They have warmed to her much quicker than they warmed to me. I think that she

has a natural way with them. She just knows people and people trust her. They are sharing all kinds of things with her and I'm really glad they feel so relaxed because they put a lot of pressure on themselves to do the right thing. I am learning a lot also. She is a gun when it comes to numeracy so I do not think that any of these children will have any problems next year.

This kind of engagement provided the adults in the lives of young children with various opportunities to move beyond the task at hand (developing a plan), and toward working in partnership with one another to better understand and support the mathematical learning of children. It was through such engagement that partnership emerged.

14.5.4 Team Meeting 3

The third team meeting took place in the weeks before the end of the school year. One of the purposes of this meeting was to gain some understanding of the plan that was devised and how it came into fruition. During this meeting the educators were asked to describe their own roles, and the roles in families in the development of the plan. The PTS educator explained, *no one really had a role or had certain things that they needed to do, we just sort of all shared information. We just all worked together, it just all came together.* The FYS educator explained this further by adding, *[w]e shared information but we also talked things over with each other, and got each other's opinions on some of the things we were thinking about or were puzzled about.*

According to Kaiser and Trent-Stainbrook (2010, p.288), 'partnerships are mutually supportive interactions between families and professionals that focus on meeting the needs of children and families with competence, commitment, positive communication and trust' In team meeting 3 it was evident that such mutually supportive interactions had been achieved through the sharing of information:

[w]e shared information but we also talked things over with each other, and got each other's opinions on some of the things we were thinking about or were puzzled about

but also through a responsiveness and receptiveness of the families' needs by the educators:

some of the parents told us that they were worried that their children couldn't write the numbers, so one of the table activities [that were planned to support the children] involved number cards and [the children] writing the numerals off the cards.

The description of the work that was provided by the PTS educator: *we just all worked together, it just all came together* was also a representation of what is defined by Kaiser and Trent-Stainbrook (2010) as partnership.

By the third team meeting, the educators had formulated their plan to support the mathematical learning of children and were asked to think further about and describe what they perceived as the families' role in the development of the plan. The PTS

educator answered, *they actually had a lot of input because we used all the information they shared with us.* When asked to provide an example she explained:

> well…I've been counting how many children are at school each day, you know how many boys and how many girls. We've both had feedback from parents that their kids love this, and have started counting different groups of things at home, so we thought that we'd start off each session [of the transition to school sessions] by doing the same thing.

The FYS educator explained further, *in a way we've sort of tried to keep it all the same, the materials, everything.* When asked if they thought that working this way would support the mathematics learning of children as they make the move to school the FYS educator answered, *I think it's going to make a huge difference.*

The information offered by both educators highlighted the mutuality between families and educators, and also the level of trust that had been built through the interactions that took place. The responsiveness of the educators to the needs of families, and the incorporation of information that was shared during interactions reflected what Kaiser and Trent-Stainbrook (2010, p. 288), define as 'mutually supportive interactions between families and professionals that focus on meeting the needs of children and families with competence, commitment, positive communication and trust'.

14.5.5 Final Team Meeting

The final team meeting at Site 1 took place after the children had made the move to school. This meeting was designed to provide the educators with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences within the project, and also to reflect on the plan that had been created. During this meeting the educators were asked to describe how they would explain to their colleagues the best way to work with each other (across the two contexts), and families, to support the mathematical learning of children. The FYS educator explained that she would suggest that, *[y]ou have to be out there talking to one another, and spending time together whenever you get the chance.* The PTS educator shared this sentiment but added, *[y]ou have to really believe [families have] got something to offer. And it's the same with the primary school. You have to believe that you've got something to offer them, and that you can learn something too.*

These final comments provided further insight into their work with families and each other, and suggested that while ongoing communication and interaction was an important component of their work, that the belief that everyone had something to share and contribute was also an important consideration. The belief held by each of the educators that families had something valuable to contribute (regardless of how this contribution was made), provided the foundation for the family-educator partnership to come into fruition. That families had chosen to remain on the periphery was not considered a problem to be addressed or an issue that would impact on working together.

14.6 Partnering in the Periphery

The development of the plan that was devised at Site 1 involved seeking out similarity across the different contexts in which children live and learn. More specifically, it involved determining similarities in the practices that sit around mathematics and then bringing these practices together in the context of starting school. While the plan itself is important and has the potential to influence the mathematical understandings of children, just as important was the processes whereby adult came together to focus on building continuity across different contexts.

The partnership that emerged at Site 1 was unique. It followed no set formula, and there was no measure of the effectiveness of working together (apart from individual reflection on the experience). There were no specific or prescribed strategies or skills that could be employed by the educators, and there was no way to gauge what strategies might be more or less effective than those they were using "on-the-run" as the work was unfolding. The families and educators at Site 1 did not have prescribed roles to enact, nor did they share the work equally. Despite such omissions, a partnership that focused on supporting the mathematical learning of young children as they made the move to school emerged.

The partnership that unfolded was borne out of educators' perceptions that everyone involved in the lives of young children had something valuable to offer. More importantly, it stemmed from the notion that everyone could contribute to the process of supporting children's learning in their own unique ways. In this partnership, the families' choice to remain at the periphery of the work did not pose any significant issue for the educators, despite both educators communicating and recognising that family contribution to their work was important.

An important aspect of the partnership that emerged was the opportunity for both educators to draw on their own professional expertise to work with people. Developing such expertise is a significant component of teacher education programs, and also an educator's everyday work, but it is an area that is often only recognised by the profession through leadership initiatives (Darling-Hammond et al. 2007). As a result, prescribed ways of working with people are frequently imposed on educators, or put forward as the "correct" ways to engage with people. Such practice has the potential to restrict possibilities, and to position those involved in partnership work in specific ways. It also runs the risk of setting people up for failure if they do not have the capacity or opportunity to engage in ways that are expected or "correct".

There are some limitations to the study reported on in this chapter. However, these limitations provide windows for future research opportunities. For example, the families' decision to remain on the periphery and to not be actively involved in the research project eliminated the possibility of collecting data on the personal experiences of families. Research that highlights the experiences of families who chose to work with educators this way may provide better understanding into the perceived effectiveness of this form of partnership. Likewise, the affordances to children when adults work together this way, opens opportunities for future research.

Identifying and building on the professional expertise of educators in engaging with people is also an important consideration, and one that demands attention in future family-educator partnership research. The educators involved in the partnership were instrumental in coming together with families to forge partnership, and were creative in how they established and maintained this work. Had the educators adopted a model of partnership as their frame from which to work (Epstein 2011) this might have restricted this process and shaped what transpired in different ways. More research is needed that compares the different ways adults come together, including the effectiveness of different approaches.

In this partnership, educator perspectives were an important component of the developing partnership. Both educators held a sense of perspective that families could provide valuable insight into the mathematical learning of children, and therefore actively sort out this contribution. This is an important notion and one that demands further attention in the research literature.

The development of educator expertise in engaging relationally with families might also be an area for future research. At site 1, both educators engaged with families in ways that were unconventional within traditional models of partnership. This engagement involved moving beyond specific roles or tasks to perform, toward coming together to focus on the learning of children. Documenting less conventional ways of educators and families working together might provide additional insight into the skills and expertise that educators need to engage relationally and, in turn, provide new directions in which educators and families might come together.

14.7 Conclusion

While there are limitations in relation to family perceptions of the experience of working this way, this project demonstrates that families can choose to remain on the periphery of partnership activity, but still work together with educators to support their children's learning. In this project, this involved developing a plan that focused on supporting the continuity of practice across different contexts. Although families were not actively involved in the preparation of this plan, their interactions with educators provided the foundations from which the plan was developed, refined and implemented.

As highlighted in this chapter, partnerships do not have to be equal, nor do the people involved in such work have to follow a prescriptive set of strategies or directions. People are different, and therefore they come together in different ways. When these ways are determined by, and suitable for, the people involved in developing the partnership, they have the potential to be inclusive, rather than only reserved for *some* people – those who can come together in the ways that are expected. This is an important consideration if the adults in *all* children's lives are to be invited to come together with their child's educators to support the learning and development of their children.

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Chapter 15
The Transition to Primary School as a Challenge for Parents

Petra Hanke, Johanna Backhaus, Andrea Bogatz, and Majdah Dogan

15.1 Introduction

The transition to primary school is considered an important stage in children's and parents' lives. Both parents and children are faced with the challenge of coping with the transition to school and successfully and actively participating in the process. According to the regulations of the German federal states, children reaching the age of six by a certain cut-off date must start primary school. In Saxony-Anhalt, for instance, the cut-off date is June 30; in North Rhine-Westphalia it is September 30; in Berlin it is December 31. In recent years and with increasing frequency, children attend Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres for 3–5 years prior to starting school (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2014). Since 2013, children in Germany have had a legal right to attend an ECEC after the end of the first year of life. Between 2006 and 2012, this right applied to children only over the age of three.

Parents play a supportive role influencing how their children cope with the transition. Reichmann's studies (2011/2012) have shown that parents' views about the start of primary school are reflected in their children's attitudes. One of the roles of educators and teachers is to positively influence parents' attitudes regarding the start of school through information on, and transparency about, collaboration activities between ECEC centres, primary schools and family homes. This encourages parents to accompany the transition of their child in a supportive fashion.

In recent years, the organization of the transition as a partnership between ECECs, primary schools and parents has become part of Germany's educational policy (KMK/JMFK 2009). The demand for collaboration between educators and teachers in managing the transition is based on the assumption that collaboration

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S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_15

between ECEC and primary schools during the transition to school has positive effects on children, parents and educational activities. However, there is a lack of studies that examine how collaboration actually supports the transition for parents and children and the ways in which it can be constructive for education.

The major focus of the project WirKt (Collaboration between ECECs and Primary Schools in Transition from ECEC centre to Primary School) was to investigate the perceptions of all participants (children, parents, educators, teachers) of the effects of collaboration between ECEC centres, primary schools and parents during the transition to primary school and on the educational activities of educators and teachers. This project specifically examines the perspectives of parents because they take an active role in coping with the transition and supporting their children.

15.2 Background and the Current State of Research

15.2.1 Transition to Primary School – A Challenge for Parents

A theoretical model incorporating a multiperspective approach for investigating collaborations between ECEC centres and primary schools can be found in the work of Cowan (1991), Griebel and Niesel (2015) and Dockett and Perry (2007). They describe the transition to primary school as a process of transformation in which certain aspects of the lives of children and families undergo reorganization and in which intensive learning occurs. Adjustments and changes are needed at the individual, interactional and contextual levels, building intra-psychological processes and relationships with others (Griebel and Niesel 2015). The transition from ECEC centre to primary school is understood as a constructive process that is managed and organized by the child, the family and the environment as well as by the ECEC centre and primary school (Dockett and Perry 2007; Eckerth and Hanke 2015; Griebel and Niesel 2015). This approach distinguishes between the active participants in the process – the child and the family, say – as well as participants such as educators and teachers who organize the process so that children and their parents can relate to it. The general goal is to manage the child's transition so that school becomes a normal part of his or her life. The point is for children to feel comfortable at school and take advantage of what it offers for cognitive, social, emotional and psychological development (Niesel and Griebel 2007).

Because children and parents are involved in the transition, Nagel et al. (2012, p. 22). refer to it as a 'family affair'. Parents have a dual role: on the one hand, to support their child's transition; on the other, to cope with the challenges and changes the child's transition involves for them personally at the individual, interactional and contextual levels (Griebel and Niesel 2015; Eckerth and Hanke 2015).

At the *individual* level, parents of an ECEC child become parents of a school child with particular demands. School success is also their responsibility. At the same time, parents must relinquish a certain degree of control and responsibility

because teachers are responsible for the school education of the child and must follow mandatory curriculum (Griebel and Sassu 2013). Hence, parents consider school very important for the further development of the child (Nagel et al. 2012).

At the *interactional* level, there is a loss of attachment figures at the ECEC centre – they must say goodbye to educators and other parents– but a gain in the new relationships formed with teachers and parents of primary school children. Interaction and communication with teachers works differently at the primary school level because the central topic is focused on a child's school success. The role of the teacher is also of great importance for families because the teacher provides information about children's achievement (Griebel and Sassu 2013; Nagel et al. 2012).

At the *contextual* level, parents are confronted with the task of combining three spheres of life – the worlds of family, school and work. School greatly shapes the daily and weekly routine throughout the year, including the holidays. Some parents may have to make use of additional care for children so that they can return to work. At the same time, parents must also participate in their child's education and in the school community in general in order to establish an educational partnership (Griebel and Sassu 2013; Nagel et al. 2012).

Starting primary school is a prominent theme in families. Using a qualitative survey, Graßhoff et al. (2013), interviewed 74 parents before the transition, and some again after the transition. The survey showed that parents regarded the school start as a fundamental change and challenge. Parents considered the beginning of school as the beginning of the 'seriousness of life' (Graßhoff et al. 2013, p. 129), with changes in a family's daily routine the most often mentioned aspect in parental interviews. Reichmann (2010) reported that parents experienced the new daily routines and their efforts in supporting their children's adjustment as a stress factor. The study concluded that meeting the new requirements and adapting to the change takes time.

The new role of the child – that of a child in primary school – also requires parents to make adjustments (Graßhoff et al. 2013; Reichmann 2010). Reichmann (2010) reported that parents at first showed ambivalence; they regret the end of the toddler phase yet welcome the independence that school brings their children. Parents must also contend with their new role as parents of a school child and with the tasks that accompany it (Graßhoff et al. 2013; Griebel and Niesel 2006) (cf. Chaps. 2 and 10 in this book).

15.2.2 Collaboration for Helping Parents Cope with the Transition

Researchers point out the importance of collaboration between ECEC centres, primary schools and parents in the transition process. They view collaboration as a process of cooperation and a form of social interaction based on trust that demands

a certain degree of autonomy (Hanke et al. 2013; Hanke and Rathmer 2009; Maag Merki 2009; Spieß 2004).

Of the various ways of organizing the transition to school, WirKt distinguished thirteen activities involving collaboration between ECEC educators, primary school teachers (and parents):

- joint conferences and meetings;
- joint work on pedagogical concepts and school curricula;
- joint support strategies;
- joint parent evenings;
- joint school festivals and events;
- joint projects and activities;
- visits of ECEC educators at primary schools (e.g. for observation or assistance);
- visits of primary school teachers at ECEC centres (e.g. for observation or assistance);
- visits of ECEC children at school;
- visits of school pupils at ECEC;
- joint work on observations and pedagogical documentation;
- joint transfer of pedagogical documentation; and
- joint implementation of monitoring and diagnostic procedures.

Following Gräsel et al. (2006), WirKt also distinguished three collaboration levels reflecting different intensities and qualities. These three levels are explained using the case of "parent meetings" to illustrate the differences for collaboration between ECEC centres and primary schools:

Level 1: Exchange of Information
ECEC educators and school teachers inform each other about goals, dates and contents of internal parent evenings at their institutions.

Level 2: Division of Work
Joint parent evenings at ECEC centres and primary schools are mainly organized by dividing the work between them. Each institution completes a task.

Level 3: Co-construction
Parent evenings are mostly organized and planned by ECEC educators and school teachers *together* at meetings and afterwards carried out cooperatively.

Studies of collaboration in everyday teaching situations indicate that joint activities with parents rarely occur (Faust et al. 2011; Liebers and Kowalski 2007). The most common activities include orientation day at school, open houses, discussions about activities and parent evenings (Liebers and Kowalski 2007). Similarly, Graßhoff et al. (2013) report that the most common activities involving parents are parent evenings and similar events such as information sessions in the afternoons and teacher/parent conversations. These activities have different emphases: the purpose of parent evenings is to communicate general information and circumstances, whereas individual conversations are more private and individual (something that

parents value more highly) (Graßhoff et al. 2013). Parents indicate that these two activities are the most important for them in relation to the school transition.

In their survey, Liebers and Kowalski (2007) asked 209 ECEC directors, 146 school principals and 129 parents about the importance of collaboration in the transition phase. Of the respondents, 88% completely agreed or mostly agreed with the statement that all participants (teachers, ECEC educators and parents) should determine the main transition issues together; 75% of the interviewed ECEC and school principals believed that a cooperative relationship with parents was important. Despite this, collaboration with parents was reported as a less frequent activity, even though parents were perceived as the most important collaboration partners. Generally, parents perceived school preparation as a less positive experience than did ECEC educators and school principals. There was significant disagreement between parents and professionals when it came to the statement that parents felt supported in their children's transition. Parents reported feeling less supported than was estimated by professionals (Liebers and Kowalski 2007). Graßhoff et al. (2013) take the view that parents perceived ECEC centres and primary schools as less compatible than teaching professionals did. What becomes clear here is the discrepancy that parents noted between the two institutions. Parents would like more involvement in the transition by, say, having the chance to observe at schools (Graßhoff et al. 2013).

Reichmann (2010) evaluated the transition program *School Children for Preschoolers* and its impact on children, parents and teachers. This program consisted of eight collaboration hours. Thirty-nine children, 26 parents and 11 teachers were interviewed at three different time points (before the program started, shortly after the program began and 4 weeks after enrolment). The program extended the usual collaboration activities and consisted of ten additional hours of parent evenings and visitations in schools and ECEC centres. Additionally, ECEC children could take part in a second grade class and receive mentoring from school children. During the evaluation process, special focus was placed on parents' understanding of their role in the transition, their emotional well-being and their impact on their children. It was found that parents who were positive and open-minded transmitted their attitudes to their children just as easily as those who were negative and stressed. Worries and uncertainties arose due to the low level of communication and to the lack of knowledge parents had about school routines (Graßhoff et al. 2013; Reichmann 2010). Hence, Reichmann (2010) recommended that teachers collaborate with parents to prevent negative attitudes from arising. The results indicated that collaboration and support can help parents cope with the transition and that parents who participated in the program had more positive attitudes about the start of primary school and less stress during orientation than the control group, who did not participate in the program. The interviews conducted by Graßhoff et al. (2013) also showed that parents were much calmer about school start when they had knowledge about coming events. The authors thus concluded that conveying information is crucial for parents. Many parents stated that they worried about upcoming events and expectations in the transition to school of their children. This was true for parents with little knowledge about the German school system (Graßhoff et al. 2013),

particularly so for parents who were immigrants (Nagel et al. 2012). Generally, parents wanted more information and greater transparency (Graßhoff et al. 2013). They wanted to be better informed about school routines and structures, materials, class organization and timetables. They were also interested in knowing who the teachers would be in advance (Graßhoff et al. 2013). Parents rated the opportunity to get to know the school, the teacher and other parents before the start of school as positive (Nagel et al. 2012).

One Australian survey has shown how collaboration activities can assist parents' involvement in their child's transition and learning. In their investigation of a collaboration program, Giallo et al. (2010) aimed to strengthen the knowledge and self-confidence of parents to improve children's adaptability. A total of 576 parents from 21 primary schools in the Australian state of Victoria participated in the survey. One group took part in a transition program especially designed for parents to give them more information about the transition process, to increase their participation and to improve their children's adaptability to school. All in all, parents who participated in the program reported a higher level of efficacy in the support of their children than did the parents in the control group (Giallo et al. 2010). The involvement of parents in school and in the enrolment phase was also higher than in the control group.

The international research consistently shows that when families and schools work together during transition to support their child's learning, children not only cope well with the transition but also tend to do better in school and actually enjoy going to school. In other words, collaboration can have benefits for children both academically and socially (Barnard 2004; Dockett et al. 2011; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Hirst et al. 2011; Lee and Bowen 2006).

Recent studies of the transition to primary school and the impact of collaboration between ECEC educators, primary school teachers and parents have focused primarily on the child. Although parents are considered important for their child's successful transition to school, their own transition and the tasks they have to master are often overlooked. A special focus of the WirKt project was to investigate the significance of collaboration between ECEC centres and primary schools in how parents cope with the transition.

15.3 Research Focus and Approach

The aim of the WirKt project was to capture the (perceived) effects of the collaboration between ECEC and primary schools on ECEC educators, teachers, parents and children and to examine the role of pedagogical documentation in the transition phase (Backhaus in preparation; Bogatz in preparation; Hanke et al. 2013). The triangular design included questionnaires and interviews with principals from ECEC centres and primary schools as well as interviews and test procedures for the social-emotional development of children shortly before and after school enrolment (see Table 15.1).

Table 15.1 Sample and enquiry period of WirKt

Survey in Early Childhood Centres	
March to June 2011	**Survey with principals (n=258 principals; response rate: 25%)**
	Survey with educators (n=98 educators; response rate: 59%)
	Survey with parents (n=550 parents; response rate: 59%)
	Tests for social-emotional well-being with children in their last year of kindergarten (n=163 children)
Survey in Primary Schools	
October to December 2011	**Survey with principals (n=162 principals; response rate: 64%)**
	Survey with teachers (n=91 teachers; response rate: 35%)
	Survey with parents (n=551 parents; response rate: 22%)
	Tests for social-emotional well-being with 1st grade children (n=163 children)
Interview Study: Documentation of Good Practice Examples	
April to May 2012	**Focused Interviews with principals, educators, teachers, parents and children from ECEC centres and School (n=44):**
	Focus on collaboration: 12 interviews (2 institutions)
	Focus on pedagogical documentation: 32 interviews (4 institutions)

This chapter will discuss particular results of questionnaires collected from principals of ECEC centres (N=258) and primary schools (N=162), and from parents with children in ECEC centres (N=550) and parents with children in primary school (N=551) conducted during 2011 in the federal state North Rhine-Westphalia shortly before and after school enrolment. The selected results include the organisation of collaboration between ECEC and primary school, the perception of the transition as well as the perceived effects of collaboration on parent's coping with the transition.

Further, an example of good collaboration practice in the transition to primary school was identified using the above mentioned questionnaires. Two principals, one educator, one teacher and four parents from an ECEC centre and a primary school were interviewed using a partially structured interview. The focus of the example lies on eight interviews about the collaboration between ECEC, primary school and parents. Interviews were evaluated using Mayring's (2010) qualitative content analyses.

15.4 Research Questions

The main aim of this study was to find out when collaborations occurred, to identify whether these supported parents in meeting challenges during the transition phase, and to determine how parents perceived the positive and/or negative effects of collaboration on their experiences of the transition process. It asked the following questions:

- What are the activities, levels and settings of collaboration identified in the transition phase?
- How did parents experience the transition to primary school and how content were they with its organization?
- What were the perceived effects of collaboration on how parents coped with the transition?

15.5 Results

15.5.1 Activities, Levels and Settings of Collaboration Between ECECs, Primary Schools and Parents in the Transition Phase

ECEC and primary school principals reported engaging in a variety of collaboration activities (see Fig. 15.1). The collaboration involved mostly traditional areas (Tietze et al. 2005), such as visits of ECEC children at school, festivals and activities or projects.

The collaboration levels for every activity were calculated from questionnaires with principals of ECEC centres and primary schools. A collaboration level was determined for each of the thirteen collaboration activities. Multiple entries were possible.

Figure 15.2 shows that a collaboration – if it occurs – mostly takes place at the level of 'exchange of information' (level 1). Parent evenings tend to be organized on the level of 'division of work' (level 2) and 'co-construction' (level 3). However, the last two levels are still exceptions. The statements of primary school principals about their occurrence and intensity are considerably higher than those of ECEC directors.

A cluster analysis was performed on the data from questionnaires with ECEC centres and primary school principals to identify various patterns of collaboration in terms of the design and the intensity of the collaboration (Bogatz in prep.). Three clusters were identified, reflecting different types of settings. Analysis of these settings shows that they vary according to the *number* of performed collaboration activities and according to the *level of* collaboration activities. An overview of the settings is provided below.

15.5.1.1 Collaboration Setting I – Traditional Informative Collaboration

This setting involves collaboration activities that focus on getting to know the school (like visits of ECEC children to primary schools, festivals and activities). This is a traditional form of collaboration between ECEC centres and primary schools. The collaboration consists of small, varying activities (M: 3.5; SD: 1.5) and is primarily based on an exchange of information (on average 3.1 (SD: 1.4) of 3.5 activities).

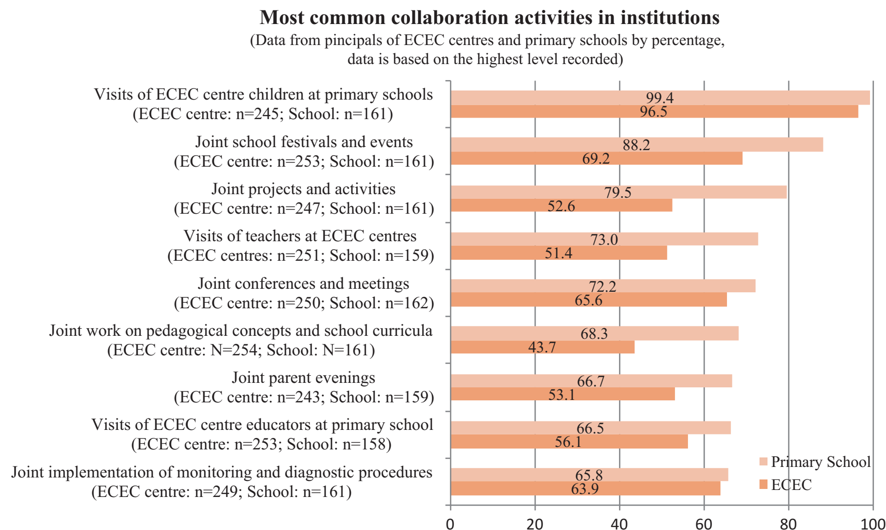

Fig. 15.1 Collaboration activities, data are based on the highest level recorded (Hanke et al. 2013, p. 42)

Fig. 15.2 Collaboration levels in ECECs and primary schools (Data from principals of ECECs and primary schools by percentage, data are based on the highest level recorded) (Hanke et al. 2013, p. 48)

15.5.1.2 Collaboration Setting II: Informative Collaboration with Many Variants

The collaboration involves many different activities (M: 9.3; SD: 2.2) and many variants, but it mainly occurs in the form of information exchange (on average 8.3 (SD: 2.0) of 9.3 activities).

15.5.1.3 Collaboration Setting III: Intensive Collaboration

The collaboration comprises many different activities (M: 10.5; SD: 1.7) and many variants. We found information exchange (M: 5.3; SD: 1.6) as well as intensive collaboration levels such as the division of work or co-construction (M: 5.2; SD: 1.9).

With regard to the distribution of institutions in the collaboration settings, it appears that most institutions – ECEC centres as well as primary schools – performed informative collaboration with many variants – as exemplified in collaboration setting II.

15.5.2 Parents' Transition Experience and Contentment

The questions about parents' transition experiences and contentment with the organisation of the transition were analysed descriptively by collaboration cluster. Using ANOVA, the project examined whether there were significant differences among parents' average data. As for how easy or difficult parents experienced the transition, the results showed that 77.1% of parents reported that the change was easier than expected. However, 23% of parents with children in primary school also stated that the change was more difficult than expected. There are no significant differences between the clusters.

At the same time, most parents of school children stated that they experienced the transition positively (91.4%). In all three clusters, the mean value is near positive. In addition, 4.2% of parents stated that the transition was neither a positive nor a negative event and 4.4% stated it as a negative experience. There are no significant differences between the clusters.

In general, there is substantially less approval in statements about contentment with joint transition activities. Overall, 44.3% of the interviewed parents stated that there were *sufficient* joint activities and 52.4% stated that there were *suitable* activities.

There were significant differences among the clusters. Cluster I differed significantly from cluster II and III with regard to whether or not *sufficient* joint offers exist, with an effect size of 5%. Further, significant differences between the clusters arose on the question of suitable joint offers in the transition phase. All clusters differed from each other at an effect size of 8%. That is to say, the mean value in both items was higher in more intensive collaboration settings. In summary, parents from

primary schools in clusters II and III were significantly more content with the number and suitability of joint offers in the transition than those reporting activities reflective of cluster I.

15.5.3 Perceived Effects of the Collaboration on How Parents Cope with the Transition

15.5.3.1 Results of the Parental Survey

Parents from ECEC centres and from primary schools were asked to assess various aspects of how they coped with the transition during the collaboration. To identify a scale in the questionnaires of parents of ECEC children, six positive items and six negative items were entered into a factor analysis. All six negative aspects were included in the scale: *To sense the change as stress; many concerns about the change; negative attitudes about the change of the child; uncertainty; feeling pressured;* and *feeling overstretched.* Two scales for positive effects – relief and the reduction of worry – were excluded because the loads were too low. The following four positive items were included in the scale: *feeling supported; feeling prepared; feeling informed about the child's preparation;* and *positive attitude towards the change of the child.* Parents' contentment with the collaboration around transition of the institutions was evaluated as a single item.

All items in the questionnaires of parents of primary school children were included in the scale for the examination of the positive and negative aspects of collaboration's effects. This produced the following scales for eight positive items: *change as a positive event; feeling prepared; feeling supported; fewer worries about the change of the child; feeling that school challenges could be met effectively; feeling that the change was facilitated; feeling relief at the change*. There were four items with negative aspects: *more worries about change of the child; feeling the change as stress; feeling that the change was made more difficult;* and *negative experience*. Parents' contentment with the collaboration was evaluated as an individual item. All scales showed highly reliable characteristics.

The differences between data from parents of ECEC children (Table 15.2) and parents of school children (Table 15.3) were analyzed for positive and negative effects as well and for contentment with the collaboration between ECEC centres and primary schools for the three collaboration settings: informative collaboration; informative collaboration with many variants; and intensive collaboration.

Positive Aspects of Effects

Parents of ECEC children (Table 15.2) were more likely to affirm the positive aspects of effects. The item *feeling relief at the change* was the only exception where the data is below the theoretical average. Data from collaboration settings I

Table 15.2 Comparison of collaboration settings: Scales for 'aspects of perceived effects' and 'contentment' of parents with children in early childhood centres – ANOVA

Scales		Collaboration settings			F	p	η^2
		I	II	III			
Positive aspects of perceived effects	*M*	1.73_a	1.71_a	2.07_b	6.664	.001	.035
	SD	0.79	0.76	0.63			
	Range	0–3	0–3	1–3			
	N	103	195	72			
Negative aspects of perceived effects	*M*	*0.54*	*0.55*	*0.43*	1.109	.331	.006
	SD	0.56	0.57	0.45			
	Range	0–2,17	0–3	0–3			
	N	101	194	71			
Contentment	*M*	1.46_a	1.77_b	2.22_c	17.420	.001	.094
	SD	0.87	0.79	0.74			
	Range	0–3	0–3	0–3			
	N	91	181	67			

Means with different subscript in the same row differ statistically significant. Effects: completely agree=3 | mostly agree=2 | mostly disagree=1 | completely disagree=0; Contentment: completely content=3 | mostly content=2 | mostly discontent=1 | completely discontent=0

Table 15.3 Comparison of collaboration settings: Scales for 'aspects of perceived effects' and 'contentment' of parents with children in primary schools – ANOVA

Scales		Cluster			F	p	η^2
		I	II	III			
Positive aspects of perceived effects	*M*	1.28_a	1.65_b	1.78_b	8.912	.001	.053
	SD	0.69	0.73	0.70			
	Range	0–2.88	0–3	0–3			
	N	54	165	102			
Negative aspects of perceived effects	*M*	*0.78*	*0.60*	*0.61*	1.935	.146	.012
	SD	0.65	0.59	0.58			
	Range	0–2	0–2.75	0–2.75			
	N	54	164	102			
Contentment	*M*	1.64_a	*1.90*	2.08_b	6.691	.002	.032
	SD	0.87	0.83	0.70			
	Range	0–3	0–3	0–3			
	N	67	201	131			

Means with different subscript in the same row differ statistically significant. Effects: completely agree=3 | mostly agree=2 | mostly disagree=1 | completely disagree=0; Contentment: completely content=3 | mostly content=2 | mostly discontent=1 | completely discontent=0

and II were similar, though there was a significant difference between the first two settings and the third collaboration setting, in which parents assessed the effect of the collaboration on their own transition process as more positive. The individual evaluations indicated that the data in the more intensive collaboration settings were mostly higher. Significant differences became especially apparent in the following

three items: *feeling supported; feeling prepared;* and *feeling informed about the child's preparation*. Parents from the more intensive collaboration settings felt more supported and knew how to prepare themselves and their children for the transition.

On average, parents of schoolchildren (Table 15.3) positively assessed the effects of collaboration related to how they coped with the transition. Data were mostly positive but still lower than data from ECEC centres. Data from the collaboration settings II and III differed significantly from data of collaboration setting I. Evaluation of individual items showed that parents assessed the collaboration as a positive experience, though they did not believe that it constituted a relief. On this item, parents' data were the lowest of all the other collaboration settings. A look at the differences between the settings showed that the data from parents of schoolchildren in the traditional informative collaboration settings differed significantly from at least one of the more intensive settings in each item. Data from these parents tended to be negative.

Negative Aspects of Effects

Parents of ECEC children and parents of schoolchildren mostly rejected the negative aspects of effects. There were no significant differences between the collaboration settings.

Contentment

Regarding parents' contentment with the collaboration, a significant difference existed between collaboration settings I and II for parents from children in ECEC centres and school children. The data for contentment was higher when the collaboration was more intensive.

All in all, parents offered a more positive assessment of how they coped with the transition when ECEC centres and primary schools collaborated in various and intensive ways. They were more content with the collaboration than parents from institutions where the collaboration primarily consisted of an exchange of information.

15.5.3.2 Results from the Interview "Example of Good Collaboration Practice in the Transition from ECEC to Primary School"

The analyzed collaboration between a primary school and an ECEC centre exemplifies the way in which collaboration can be organized in the transition. A working group made up of staff from each institution developed a collaboration plan and a schedule with a clear division of work. Employees of the ECEC centre and the primary school met regularly inside and outside the working group.

The collaboration activities were varied and took place regularly. There were plenty of opportunities for parents and children to get to know the school and become familiar with the rooms and personnel. The activities took place at level 1 "exchange of information" as well as at levels 2 and 3. All participants collaborated on organization, execution and follow-up.

The Effects of Collaboration on How Parents Cope with School Transition

Interviewer: How do parents experience school transition when accompanied by intensive collaboration?

Mrs E. (School staff): I think most parents, especially those who are immigrants or who come from immigrant families, get to know the ECEC centre and the primary school through a variety of projects, including "parent cafés" and the "Rucksack-project". This means that most parents are in touch with the school before enrolment and attend activities there. I believe that our intensive collaboration convinces most parents that the ECEC centre and the school are working together and want to help. It removes a lot of uncertainty and anxiety. I have experienced that parents with ECEC children approach us openly.

Staff from both institutions identified the following effects of collaboration on parents:

- positive feelings and attitudes about the school (openness; the sense they are being looked after and reassured);
- early opportunities for parents to collaborate with the school;
- the avoidance of negative attitudes and feelings;
- the feeling of support through advising; and
- early familiarization with the school (personnel, rooms, expectations, and processes).

Parents also stated that they developed positive feelings and attitudes towards school through collaboration (feeling supported, contentment with the school, feeling sympathy, feeling involved, feeling reassured and joy) and were able to familiarise themselves with the school. Some stated that collaboration between ECEC centre and school influenced their decision to put their child in that particular institution.

15.6 Conclusion

As other studies have shown, institutions collaborate in many different ways, but most concentrate on traditional activities and, in the process, neglect practices involving collaboration levels division of work and co-construction. If there is collaboration, it mostly involves the exchange of information.

The cluster analysis of this study identified three different collaboration settings: (1) a more traditional collaboration setting with few activities and a focus on information exchange; (2) a setting with many activities and a focus on information

exchange; and (3) a setting with many activities and an effort to realize division of work and co-construction in addition to information exchange. These collaboration settings are well suited for comparing parents' transition experiences and contentment levels and their perceived effects of collaboration on how they cope with the transition.

The results for parents' transition experiences and their contentment showed that parents mostly saw the transition as positive, although some reported it to be tougher than expected and portrayed it in a negative light. Parents at institutions that collaborated in a more intensive way were significantly more content with the collaboration activities between ECEC centres and schools than parents at institutions whose collaborations were less intense and less varied.

This study found that parents agree on the positive effects of collaboration and tend to disagree with negative effects. Furthermore, parents assessed their coping abilities more positively when children attended ECEC centres and primary schools that collaborated more intensively during the transition phase. Generally, in "more intensive collaboration" settings, parents were more content with what was offered by the ECEC centre and the school relative to parents of the first collaboration setting with a traditional informative collaboration.

The individual evaluation of positive and negative effects of collaboration in the transition phase revealed that parents perceived "more intensive collaboration" settings as helping them to cope with the transition. Parents felt more supported and better equipped to prepare for their child's transition in those settings than in settings that collaborated less intensively.

Data from parents in the collaboration settings of the ECEC centres did not differ significantly. Yet there were major differences among the settings in primary schools. Setting II *(Informative collaboration with many variants*) and setting III *(Intensive collaboration*) differed from setting I (*Traditional informative collaboration*). Parents from the more intensive collaboration settings felt more supported and prepared than those from other settings. They stated that the collaboration facilitated the transition and they felt less worried about it.

The qualitative results represent one example of a collaboration network. These institutions used many different collaboration activities at all three levels and thus fell under the more intensive collaboration setting III. The analysis of the interviews found that staff and parents from ECEC centres and primary schools positively assessed the collaboration, showed high levels of satisfaction and saw positive effects on how parents cope with the transition to school. Parents reported positive feelings and attitudes towards school, early collaboration and advising opportunities and early familiarization with the school. In addition, they reported the absence of negative attitudes and feelings about school.

Overall, parents believed that collaboration had a positive effect on how they coped with the transition. In particular, they saw collaboration involving various activities based on division of work and co-construction even more positively than collaboration involving few activities and based on information exchange alone.

In the future, collaboration between ECEC centres, primary schools and parents during transition can be expanded, including more institutional information, more

exchange and greater consultation on the child's development and more collaborative activities. These measures can aid parents as they cope with the transition and provide constructive support for the child's transition.

Acknowledgement This project was funded by the Ministry of Education and Research and the European Social Fund under project number 01NV1021/1022 and 01NV1221/1222. All responsibility for the contents of this publication is assumed by its authors.

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Chapter 16
Partnerships or Relationships: The Perspectives of Families and Educators

Susanne Rogers, Sue Dockett, and Bob Perry

16.1 Introduction

In recent years in Australia, there has been an increasing emphasis in national and state policy documents on the importance of partnerships between families and schools, including the *Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals*, (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs [MCEECDYA] 2008); the *Family-School Partnerships Framework* (Department of Education, Employment and Workforce Relations [DEEWR] 2008); and the *Department of Education and Children's Services Development Strategic Plan 2012–2016* (Department of Education and Children's Services [DECS] 2011). In addition, at the time of the study, the government in the state in which the study reported in this chapter was located had introduced a major change of policy regarding children starting primary school. It was, therefore, timely to review current transition practices from the perspectives of both families and educators and to consider the establishment of partnerships at the time of transition to school. While the terms 'transition' and 'partnership' are frequently used generically, at the policy, department and school level, interpretations and enacted understandings in settings are varied and it is at the level of individual settings that these need to be examined.

The major change regarding transition to school, at the state level, was the introduction of the *Same First Day* policy (Department for Education and Child Development [DECD] 2012) in 2014. Prior to this policy, children were able to start school at the beginning of each school term, following their fifth birthday, depending on the specific contexts and practices of the setting. The implementation of the *Same First Day* policy meant significant changes in the management of transition to school in local public schools, with only one intake per year. The change to starting

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S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_16

school practices provided opportunities to reflect critically and review current processes in order to gain insight into areas for improvement and, indeed, to explore new understandings of the need for cooperation between educational institutions and families at the time of transition (Griebel and Niesel 2009).

16.2 Families Making the Transition to School

Transition to school is understood to be a time of change and a period of adjustment for the entire family (Dockett and Perry 2007; Griebel and Niesel 2009; Pianta 2007, 2010) as new roles, responsibilities and routines are established. Viewing transition as a set of processes and relationships as individuals move from one context to another or change their role in educational communities (Dockett and Perry 2007; Fabian 2007), has led to a growing understanding of the complexities, opportunities and challenges involved. Factors contributing to these include the characteristics of the child; family perspectives and circumstances; connections between home, prior-to-school and school settings; and current political agendas (Griebel and Niesel 2007).

While transition to school is a normative event for most children (Dockett 2014; Dunlop 2014), it is an experience unique to each child and their family. Each child's transition is influenced by a range of variables, including the context and circumstances in which it occurs (Dockett et al. 2011; Dunlop 2007; Margetts 2007; Peters 2014). The processes of transition are both individual and social experiences, determined by the cultural and personal characteristics, prior experiences, expectations and aspirations of those involved (Dockett et al. 2014). At the individual level, children and families making the transition to school are involved in changes in identity and the acquisition of new skills. At the social level, transition to school involves changes in relationships and expectations and at the contextual level there are changes in the structure of the day, the physical environment and, frequently, the pedagogy used (Griebel and Niesel 2009).

An effective transition to school involves establishing relationships of respect and trust between the home and the school and ensuring that children develop a positive approach to school characterised by a sense of belonging and engagement (Dockett et al. 2011; Griebel and Niesel 2009; Kagan 2010; Pianta et al. 1999).

16.3 Family-Educator Partnerships

The introduction of a new school intake policy provided a timely opportunity to examine the nature, purpose and status of family-educator partnerships as a significant aspect of the transition to school process. Policy and research contexts have identified, over time, the critical importance of partnerships between families and educators and the ongoing benefits of family engagement with the school and their

child's education (Henderson and Mapp 2002; Hiatt–Michael 2010). The time of transition to school, when children and their families begin to engage with compulsory schooling, provides opportunities for the establishment or maintenance of these partnerships through the development of respectful relationships based on trust and two-way communication (Dockett and Perry 2007).

The terms "family-educator partnerships", "parental involvement" and "parental engagement" have appeared in the literature and policy documents over many decades (Anderson and Minke 2007; Emerson et al. 2012; Hornby and Lafaele 2011). Partnership is the concept of meaningful and cooperative relationships between families, schools and communities (Daniel 2011; Smit et al. 2008). Such relationships may incorporate both family involvement and family engagement, depending on the nature of a particular policy and its interpretation in an individual context. The research literature continues to highlight, however, the importance of differentiating between involving families in schooling and engaging families in learning as it is the latter that is shown to have the greatest positive impact on the academic achievement and participation of children (Emerson et al. 2012; Goodall and Montgomery 2014; Rosenberg et al. 2009).

There is widespread acceptance of the value of family-educator partnerships. However, interpretations of the terms and their respective implementations within education systems, and at the site level, are diverse. These variations in interpretation and emphasis can range from family engagement with learning in the home, to involvement in school programs including active participation in governance roles within the school context.

The Australian *Family-School Partnerships Framework* (DEEWR 2008) was prepared by national parent bodies; federal, state and territory government; non-government education authorities; and school principal associations. The framework defines family-school partnerships as: collaborative relationships and activities involving school staff, parents and other family members of students at a school. According to the framework, effective partnerships are based on mutual trust and respect, and shared responsibility for the education of the children and young people at the school.

Challenges with such a broad definition of partnership include the lack of recognition of social, cultural and economic diversity and the implication that such partnerships are unproblematic and desirable for all parties (Auerbach 2007; Bastiani 1993; Hanafin and Lynch 2002; Hornby and Lafaele 2011). In other words, the definition does not acknowledge social, economic or cultural differences within and between communities and families. This is despite the disparities between the interactions of schools and families from different social or economic circumstances being widely documented (Hanafin and Lynch 2002; Lareau 2011; Reay 1997, 2001).

16.4 Theoretical Foundations

The Person – Process – Context – Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) provided the theoretical framework for this study, guiding the examination of the interwoven connections and relationships involved in the establishment of family-educator partnerships. The notion of family-educator partnerships as an aspiration reflects the shared and interconnecting roles of families and educators in the education and development of children (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The PPCT model directs attention to the complexities of family-educator partnerships and provides a framework for mapping the interplay between the microsystems of family, school and community through to the influence of government policies, economic circumstances and social changes over time (Corter and Pelletier 2005).

16.5 Research Design

The qualitative study reported in this chapter investigated the processes of interaction and communication within and across contexts, between family members and educators, during the transition to school. The research was located in the interpretive paradigm, with the intent of understanding the subjective, lived experience of those individuals involved (Cohen et al. 2011). The research was conducted in four complex settings in Adelaide, Australia. Two participant groups were involved in the study. The first group consisted of 21 mothers of children who had recently made the transition to school or would be making the transition to school the following year; the second group comprised of 13 classroom-based teachers, principals and allied staff who worked with the children and their families during the transition period and the first year of school. The circumstances of complexity within the various communities included unemployment, poverty, mental and physical health issues for children and/or adult family members, social isolation or cultural and linguistic diversity.

16.6 Family Members' Perspectives

The definition of family-educator partnerships in the Australian *Family-School Partnerships Framework* (DEEWR 2008) incorporates terms such as 'collaborative, mutual trust and respect and shared responsibility' (p. 2). These are aspirational terms, but may be difficult to achieve in practice when adult family members and educators bring to the notion of partnerships their individual expectations and understandings based on their values, attitudes and expectations (Abrams and Gibbs 2002; Lareau 2011; Yosso 2005). In some instances, neither family members nor educators may be seeking, or feel equipped, to establish such relationships. Families

living in complex circumstances may not have a strong sense of self-efficacy or agency in the school context. Notions of collaboration and shared responsibility may, therefore, be difficult to achieve – if, indeed, they are sought.

Transition to school and the establishment of family-educator partnerships are both complex processes; generating challenges and opportunities. Factors that contribute to challenges during the transition to school can include the primary habitus of the child (Bourdieu 1990; Brooker 2012); lack of congruence between the cultural and social capital of the family and the school (Bourdieu 1987); and limited inter-setting connections between prior-to-school and school settings (Bredekamp 2010; Dockett and Perry 2007; Hopps 2014). At the same time, opportunities for effective transitions, along with the establishment of family-educator partnerships, are afforded through the establishment of relationships over time (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006); by utilising effective communication strategies (Hands 2005); and acknowledging that all children and families have capabilities and aspirations (Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group 2011; Moll et al. 1992; Perry 2014).

Family members in at least three of the settings in this study identified the importance of communication through interactions between educators and families. In particular, they referred to the importance of frequent communication and regular opportunities to have two-way communication with their child's educator:

> I'd like more communication. I'd like us to be on the same page. As to what he needs to do, what I need to do at home. Everyone on the same page and working towards the same goal. (Mother)

Mothers from all settings identified the importance of the establishment of relationships of trust and respect with their children's educators. They all described the notion of ready access as the educator being available, at a point in time, rather than their being required to make an appointment for some time in the future.

> It just means everything, it just makes it more comfortable. You know it makes me feel comfortable. You know to have trust in the teacher ... you know just having belief in the teachers. That I can go in any morning or any afternoon and make a time to see them or have that chat if necessary there and then. (Mother)

In keeping with other research, all the mothers interviewed aspired to positive outcomes for their children, both academically and socially, as they made the transition to school and beyond (Arndt and McGuire-Schwartz 2008; ETC Research Group 2011; Perry 2014). Mothers who were interviewed prior to their children starting school aspired to remain engaged with their child's learning, and sought ongoing information about their children's achievement, participation and wellbeing. The mothers were not seeking occasional or point-in-time events to have dialogue about their child's progress; nor were they seeking group information sessions about school programs or practices. The wanted the educators to be available for frequent and regular communication about their children. This was particularly so in the transition phase after the children had started school – the first few months of change and adjustment for everyone. The mothers regarded communication as integral to the establishment of relationships of trust.

The differences in processes and practices of transition to school across the settings impacted on the sense of agency and inclusion the mothers felt as stakeholders. In each setting, orientation visits to the school were undertaken by the children as part of the transition process. The orientation visits were organised by the prior-to-school and school-based educators and took place over several weeks during the children's preschool sessions, meaning that frequently family members were neither present nor involved. For four of the 21 mothers interviewed, this lack of participation in the initial processes of transition and the associated lack of information created anxieties for them and their children.

> They don't give you anything to welcome you to the school. You have to go and ask ... it's not given to you on your day one unless you know about it and you go and ask for it. (Mother)

Establishing relationships of trust and respect between family members and educators takes time (Bryk and Schneider 2003). Some family members find the structures and processes of the school are barriers to their participation (Auerbach 2007; Dockett and Perry 2007; Hanafin and Lynch 2002). Two mothers whose children had recently made the transition to school reflected on the importance of the relationships of trust and respect they had established with prior-to-school educators. From their comments, it was clear that these relationships had given them a sense of self-efficacy within the prior-to-school setting and had been a support as they prepared for the transition to school. The mothers reported, however, that establishing such relationships with school-based educators had taken time, with the structures and processes of the school and classrooms being barriers to their participation and sense of belonging.

> ... basically if you want something you need to go and talk to them, make appointments. It's frustrating. Really the kindys the only one—she's the only one that's helpful. (Mother)

At one setting, where the mothers interviewed had frequent and informal access to the educators working with their children, relational trust had been established over time through regular social discourse. This regular contact and communication provided opportunities to share information about their children and also to be reassured that their children were happy and successful at school. The mothers who participated in an extended transition program at another setting acknowledged the valuable opportunities for establishing relationships afforded by participation in the program; recognising the benefits both for themselves and their children.

> It helped me a lot the whole transitioning program. Just as I said before—being able to let go knowing that they're safe—this is a good environment, the school's run very well I think and the teachers are approachable. I think the transition is very important. (Mother)

16.7 Educators' Perspectives

Developing trusting relationships and highlighting the importance of regular communication were identified by educators in only two of the four settings. This disparity of responses in relation to the type of relationships and the importance of regular and frequent communication could be expected to influence the nature of the interactions and connections in these settings. The non-school based educators interviewed emphasised the importance of the availability of educators to talk with families. They acknowledged the necessity of dedicated time to talk with family members and respond empathetically to their circumstances (Bryk and Schneider 2003). There was also variation amongst educators regarding the ways in which families may have a presence in the school setting and be involved in school and classroom activities and programs. Two of the educational leaders spoke about the importance of creating welcoming physical environments for family members.

> So I would like the physical environment to really reflect the community that we're building partnerships with. I'd like all families to be able to have access to shared language so we could understand as well because, you know, we don't share a language. We share their children but we don't share a language. (Educator)

Educators at one setting wanted family members to feel that they were welcome to stay in the classrooms for extended periods in the morning, interact with their children, and be part of the learning environment in an informal and unstructured way. In contrast, in two other settings educators wanted family members to be involved in specific and regular volunteering activities, utilising particular skills and expertise to support school programs and priorities.

The educators' general emphasis was for families to attend information sessions and workshops as scheduled by the school. In some settings, these sessions were part of the transition process and were designed to provide families with information about school programs, expectations and routines. As one educator recognised, however, the provision of information relevant to all families during these sessions was difficult. The heterogeneity of families in all settings meant that families were seeking different types of information at any point in time. All educators identified the importance of family involvement and presence in the school setting, along with a desire to have adult family members attend workshops and information sessions. The ways in which this involvement and presence was expected, and/or aspired to in each setting was dependent on the context of that setting – incorporating factors such as the nature of the community, the attitude of educators and the influence of the school leader.

All the educators interviewed recognised the importance of family members actively participating in the transition process. There were, however, differences in the ways this might be achieved and the purposes of involvement. In one setting where family members participated in their extended transition program, educators argued for the importance of establishing relationships with children and their families and learning about the families, and also teaching the families about the value of play and ways of engaging with their children through play. At another setting the

educator interviewed indicated that involving families in the transition program was likely to increase the willingness of the family members to become involved in school programs once their child had started school. Despite the variation in the approaches and processes used to connect with families, share information and establish relationships, the common purpose was generally based on the school's agenda and information sharing through one-way communication.

The classroom-based educators also acknowledged the importance of regular contact and reflected on the benefits of dedicating time to these conversations and being responsive to the family members' questions and concerns. In addition, however, there were attitudes, initiatives and opportunities that could be supportive or obstructive to the establishment of trustful relationships. In three of the four research settings, mothers and educators differed in the importance or emphasis they placed on the establishment of family-educator relationships. For the educational leaders at two settings, the focus of relationships was largely to encourage family members to have a presence in the school with a view to their being taught skills, given information or supporting the school's agenda in some way. The responses of the classroom-based educators regarding family-educator relationships varied from focusing on assisting in the classroom to a desire to learn more about the family members and engage in two-way dialogue. The attitudes and behaviours of educators are fundamental to the ways in which families feel they are able to engage with their children's learning and have a sense of self-efficacy in the school context (Melton et al. 1999; Perry 2014).

Interviews with the community development coordinators provided quite a different perspective on family-educator relationships from those of many of the educational leaders and classroom-based educators. Their particular roles involved close connections with families and they emphasised the importance of strong, respectful relationships between family members and educators. Their responses reflected issues identified in previous research, noting a number of barriers for family members to the establishment of such relationships, including historical and unquestioned processes and structures; negative prior experiences; lack of acknowledgement of family members' skills and resources; and power differentials (Harris and Goodall 2008; Horvat et al. 2003).

The importance of trusting relationships was identified by three of the classroom-based educators and both the community development coordinators. For the educators, the notion of trusting relationships meant family members having trust in the educators – trust that the educators had their child's interest at heart, trust that they could ask questions of the educators and talk with them openly and trust that they were respected as individuals.

> I think it's important that we know their stories. Obviously they only share as much as they want us to know but I think it's important for us to get that whole picture. It's important in the relationships with the parents and with the children. (Educator)

The importance of communication in building effective partnerships was identified by the head of the early years at one setting serving a culturally and linguistically diverse community. In that context, she identified the challenge of ensuring

that the school was communicating effectively with the families. The community development coordinator at this school reflected on the potential of communicating with families by text messaging because of its immediacy. She added that, to establish effective connections with families, in contemporary times, schools needed to consider alternative methods of communication and new approaches: "I think in schools we think that [this way of communicating with families is] the only way to do it because we've done it this way for so long." Educators' understandings of family-educator partnerships were dependent on their individual values, experiences, expectations and context. The positioning of families by educators and the degree of agency afforded them in the school context was integral to the nature and identified purpose of the partnerships.

16.8 Relationships or Partnerships?

While it is acknowledged that, ideally, partnerships will involve relationships of trust and respect, effective two-way communication, and collaboration, it is also recognized, by researchers and practitioners alike, that such realisations are complex. It is well documented that families bring varying distributions of economic, cultural and social capital to the school setting, with resultant impacts on the relationships established with educators and the degree of involvement in the school (Auerbach 2011; Bakker et al. 2007; Lareau and Horvat 1999). At the same time, the unique social and cultural contexts of individual families – combined with their circumstances at any point in time – mean that some family practices and values have stronger alignment to those of the school setting than others (Bourdieu 1987; Lareau 2011; Moll et al. 1992; Perry 2014). It is, therefore, highly probable that in some contexts, and for some families, partnerships with educators are neither sought nor considered. In all situations, however, families are entitled to be respected as partners in their child's education (Dockett et al. 2011; ETC Research Group 2011), with opportunities to establish relationships of trust and respect with educators.

The unique nature of each context meant that processes for connecting with families, sharing information, providing ready access to the educators, and ways of communicating were varied. Despite these variations, across all settings in the study there was far greater congruence between the perspectives of the mothers interviewed than there was between those of the educators. While transition to school provided opportunities for the establishment of partnerships and the introduction of the *Same First Day* policy (DECD 2012) prompted the review of current practices in each setting, the opportunities were acknowledged differently. Across the four sites, none of the planning or implementation in response to the new policy involved collaboration with family members. While educators from every setting claimed to value the presence and involvement of family members in the school setting, neither the family members nor the educators interviewed indicated that there had been any consultation with families regarding the changed transition practices. Even where a transition program for children and families had been operating for a number of

years, mothers were not asked to be involved, or consulted about changes that were made. Two of those mothers had been involved in the transition program for over three years, but, despite this, they were not asked for comment, even at an informal level.

This lack of consultation and collaboration, in each of the settings, indicates that the positioning of families in relation to ways of engaging with their children's learning or being involved in schools is at the behest of the school. Transition to school is an important time for children, their families and educators. Effective transitions involve cooperative and collaborative relationships between these stakeholders. These collaborative relationships are only successful when it is recognised that family members and educators share the responsibility for children's effective transition to school. While family members and educators have different roles in the transition process it is important that both perspectives are recognised and respected (Wesley and Buysse 2003), with a view to establishing truly collaborative family-educator relationships.

All of the mothers interviewed indicated that the concept of a partnership with their child's educator was not what they were seeking, or was not the term they would use to describe their aspirations around working with their child's educator. Rather, they were seeking relationships of trust and respect, with opportunities to have two-way communication with their child's educator and to share information in order to work together to support the child.

The mothers interviewed at one setting reported that they had largely been excluded from the transition process and, as a result, lacked information about the expectations and routines related to starting school. They indicated that a further consequence of not participating in the formal transition process was the lack of connection with their child's educator. They were not seeking a partnership but did want to be involved in their children's transition to school, to receive timely information and have opportunities to talk to their child's teacher. They also expected that their concerns would be heard and appropriate responses made.

Two mothers who had regularly attended the transition program at another setting acknowledged the impact and benefits of their participation across a number of the programs offered at the school. These connections with the school context and the staff had enabled them to develop a sense of belonging and commitment to the school and the educators and this resulted in their confidence that their children would benefit from the familiarity and continuity of relationships.

All of the educators interviewed indicated commitment to the importance of establishing family-educator partnerships. For the educators, the notion of partnership involved working with families in relation to the school's agenda of children's achievement. However, there were varying interpretations of how these partnerships might be configured, their purpose, and their management. There was consensus that family presence and involvement in the school was important, as was attendance at information sessions and workshops, where families were invited to share information about their child or afforded opportunities to discuss their child's progress.

Family members and educators in several settings acknowledged that the transition to school period was an opportune time for establishing trusting and respectful relationships. While family members spoke about the importance of these relationships and the availability of educators to talk with them regularly, they did not describe these relationships and ways of working as partnerships. Educators, however, were familiar with the term. In this study, the nexus between the perspectives of adult family members and educators related to relationships of trust and respect, information exchange and communication. Partnerships between family members and educators are complex and multi-layered, and contextually bound by the particular setting and time. Identifying ways of working together and establishing respectful relationships of collaboration requires educators and family members to have opportunities to share their expectations and aspirations for both the transition to school and the subsequent establishment of partnerships. In this study, it appeared that the term *family-educator partnerships* was a policy term adopted by a system that did not resonate with, or reflect, the relationships or processes enacted or sought in the research settings.

While both family members and educators identified the importance of relationships based on trust and respect, effective communication, and the regular sharing of information, there were differing points of emphasis and understandings of purpose. For the mothers interviewed, the purpose was to maximise their support for their child's learning, development and wellbeing. For the educators interviewed, the purpose was also about children's learning and development but this was framed in a "whole of school" context, with focus on families and children as a group or as identified cohorts within the setting. Evidence from the study suggests that relationships of trust and respect can be established when educators are responsive and accessible to family members and willing to share information through two-way dialogue and regular communication. Through these relationships of trust and respect, family members and educators can work together to support the ongoing development and learning of children. There is also evidence that while family members seek regular information about their child, they also seek to understand the pedagogy that is being used, the benefits for their child and what their complementary role might be.

16.9 Future Directions

Much is to be gained if educators reconceptualise the ways in which they communicate with families, the information-sharing opportunities they create and utilize, and the recognition they give to the various ways families engage with their children's learning. From this study it is clear that family members were seeking information about ways of supporting their children, rather than generic information on particular literacy practices or the value of playing with their children. Similarly, all stakeholders will benefit from staff teams, educational leaders, educators and other personnel creating opportunities to learn about the families and community with

whom they are working. This may involve the close examination of personal world views and values, which can be confronting, but is essential if changes are to be made. A fundamental step in this involves educators establishing ways of having meaningful dialogue with family members, through relationships of mutual trust and respect.

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Chapter 17
Families and Transition: Transition and Families

Sue Dockett

17.1 Introduction

The chapters in this book recognise the transition to school as a time of continuity and change. Not only do the chapters highlight the nature of changes encountered and managed by children making the transition; they also acknowledge the dual roles of family members in supporting children and managing their own individual and family transitions. These emphases are consistent with the conceptualisation of transition as process, generating changes in role, status and identity. While the transition to school does involve specific events that are often marked by rituals, this conceptualisation of transition recognises the qualitative shifts that occur in roles and relationships at this time.

Across the chapters, authors link family roles, relationships and interactions with children's transition to school. Much of the extant research base around these links is dominated by the roles of the family in promoting children's school readiness and supporting the educational agenda of the school in home settings. While these roles are discussed by chapter authors, overall, they present a more complex, nuanced positioning of families, rejecting the deficit framing of families whose contexts do not mirror those of schools or whose support for children involves actions beyond those sanctioned by schools. Of particular importance in this positioning of families is recognition that their engagement with transition is also a process – influenced by family context, capital, habitus and intergenerational experiences – reflecting both continuity and change for the family as well as the individuals who comprise the family unit.

Families 'provide the social, cultural, and emotional supports that children need to function successfully at school' (Pelletier and Brent 2002, p. 46). There is

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© Springer International Publishing AG 2017

S. Dockett et al. (eds.), *Families and Transition to School*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 21,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58329-7_17

considerable research evidence to support the position that what happens within families impacts on children's preparedness for school, their transition to school, and their overall educational outcomes. Parents' actions – such as reading to the child and counting aloud – have been linked to children's school readiness. Parent's attitudes, values and beliefs about school frame the nature of transition practices available to children (Puccioni 2015).

While chapter authors support the view that what happens within the family has an impact on children's transition to school, they also offer several caveats. The first relates to families who do not enact behaviours traditionally associated with parent involvement and who may, as a result, be considered by educators to be disinterested in their children's education. The reports across several chapters challenge this view, indicating that the majority of families are active participants in their children's education, sometimes in ways that are neither recognised nor valued by the culture of school. As a result, broader recognition of how parents (and families) support their children is proposed.

A second caveat follows from this, with recognition that family involvement in education can take many forms. Recognition of this diversity requires moving away from a 'laundry list of things that good parents do for their children's education' (Calabrese Barton et al. 2004, p. 3), highlighting instead the relational spaces parents create to generate and maintain support for their children. Building on this perspective, several chapter authors offer broad, inclusive descriptions of parent involvement at the time of the transition to school, referring to family engagement or family partnership. These conceptualisations also are critiqued, noting particularly the often unequal power positions of parents and educators within these spaces. The notions of collaboration and coalition are proposed as alternative viewings of family participation in their children's education, with a focus on meaningful and cooperative relationships between families and educators that are responsive to the contexts and strengths of all involved.

Despite recognition of the transition to school as a pivotal time in children's lives and the importance of parental engagement in education, relatively little research attention has been devoted to exploring what happens for, and within, families as children make the move to school. The work of Griebel and Niesel (2009) has been pivotal in highlighting the transformational nature of the transition to school for families, as well as children. Across several chapters, authors note the changes at the individual, interactional and contextual levels as families – and the individuals within them – adjust to the new circumstances of school attendance and engagement. While the transition to school can result in considerable changes, it is also the case that families incorporate these changes within the established patterns of acting and interacting. These processes of incorporation and adaptation can generate stress within families. How families respond influences whether such stress has positive, negative or neutral outcomes.

The chapters in this book make a major contribution to understanding the impact of families on the transition to school and the impact of transition to school on families. Despite drawing on different theoretical frameworks, and reporting different data from different contexts, the chapters highlight some common issues. Across the

chapters, there is recognition of the commitments of parents to support their children; acknowledgement of the importance of context, particularly the capital that is available to, and activated by, families; and appreciation of the role of collaboration at times of transition. These same issues afford both opportunities and challenges – reminding both researchers and readers that there is no one simple way to explore, manage or understand the many experiences, expectations and perspectives that contribute to the transition to school.

Two major themes are emphasised across the chapters in the book: the importance of relationships between families and educators at the time of the transition to school; and the changes that occur within families at this time. These themes provide a framework to draw together the work reported in the chapters and identify some possible future research directions.

17.2 Family-Educator Relationships

The importance of positive relationships between families – particularly, but not only, parents – and educators features in much of the research reported across the chapters. This position reiterates the considerable body of work that attests to the value of parent engagement in their children's education. As noted across several chapters, there is agreement that parents influence their children's education in many ways, and that there are considerable advantages for all if this influence is extended to the school context (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Sheridan et al. 2010). However, there is less agreement about the type of influence, its enactment and who drives it. This is seen in the various descriptors used in reference to the ways in which families participate in education, which range from parent involvement, to family engagement to family-educator partnerships, coalitions or collaborations. While each descriptor is underpinned by a focus on schools and families working together, the terms themselves indicate variable interpretations of what that should (or could) entail.

Chapter authors draw on a range of different conceptual and historical lenses to explore family and school relationships at the time of transition to school. In doing so, they shy away from over-simplifying such relationships, recognising the complexities and nuances, challenges as well as benefits, associated with interactions across home and school contexts. The building of partnerships – or collaborations – between families and educators at the time of transition to school is regarded as an essential element in the provision of high quality education.

An important element of this theme is recognition that the family is itself an educational environment. Krinniger and Schulz (Chap. 7) explore notions of the family as a pedagogical community, influencing children's learning and development well before the start of school. The established patterns of family interactions change when children start school: how they change and how transition experiences impact on family practices will vary across families. From this chapter, and several others in the book, comes the caution that families are not homogenous units. Not

only are no two families exactly alike, but also, no two family members have exactly the same experiences, expectations or perspectives. In other words, families are made up of multiple actors who have had diverse experiences.

In some instances, recognising the family as a pedagogical community and the role of the family in children's education emphasises discourses of readiness. This is seen in Wickett's (Chap. 12) UK study, where the focus on readiness impacted not only on the expectations of early childhood educators, but also parents. While parents accepted that preparing children for school was part of their role, different understandings of what children required to become "ready" and what they were to become "ready" for, generated tensions and pressures for families. One consequence was that meeting the expectations of the school was equated with "good" parenting.

Notions of "good" parenting also come to the fore in discussions of school choice (Chaps. 6 and 9). While it is argued that family engagement is enhanced when parents take ownership of the decision about which school their children will attend, it is also the case that some families have access to wider choices than others. Across the chapters of this book, there runs a narrative that meeting the expectations of the school – whether it be through promoting children's readiness or making the "right" choice of school – is an indicator of "good" parenting. This narrative positions families who experience disadvantage or are marginalised in some way as having to work hard to "prove" their credentials as "good" parents, often in a context of relationships that privilege middle-class institutions and ways of parenting (Laureau and Horvat 1999).

There is a fine distinction between recognising and celebrating families as contributors to their children's education, and positioning families as responsible for children's perceived school readiness. This is particularly so for families whose social and cultural contexts do not align with those of mainstream school systems. Several studies reported in this book challenge assumptions that children who experience disadvantage are not prepared for school, that they will experience difficulty in the transition to school, and that their families either do not support them in the transition or do not have the requisite skills and understandings to do so (Crosnoe and Cooper 2010; Dockett 2014). In this context, Lehrer et al. (Chap. 13) question the trend to pedagogicalisation – particularly the emphasis on families providing a particular style of academic home environment that privileges school experiences and expectations. As an alternative approach, they highlight the counter-narratives used by some parents to describe contrasting definitions of readiness, based on children's sense of happiness and belonging, rather than academic narratives.

Across several chapters, there are calls for such counter-narratives to be recognised and taken seriously by educators. This can only occur when relationships between families and educators are reciprocal and respectful. Several of the studies reported note the importance of positive relationships between families and schools as a key element in promoting positive transition experiences for all involved. For example Griebel et al. (Chap. 2) note the importance of the quality of contact between parents and teachers as a factor in determining the outcomes of transition

processes and de Gioia (Chap. 3) highlights the importance of educators listening to families as a strategy to build supportive relationships.

Some families more easily form relationships with educators and schools than others. For other families, forming supportive relationships takes considerable effort. Several chapters (Chaps. 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 15) share the perspectives of both parents and educators at the time of transition to school, noting a range of similarities and differences in discourses and experiences. These chapters identify the normalised expectation that parents will be engaged in a partnership with their children's school, and explore what happens within families as they manage this expectation and the demands it contributes to family life and functioning. They also serve as a reminder that effective relationships are based on mutual understanding, rather than a standardised approach which holds the same expectations for all and treats each participant in the same way.

Positive connections between home and school recognise the strengths that each brings to the relationship. Some family strengths may not be immediately obvious to educators. These may include family efforts to generate effective and sustainable home routines (Chap. 4), manage multiple transitions (Chap. 3), adopt an advocacy role for their children (Chap. 4), and engage in the emotional work of parenting as they seek information and advice and make educational, as well as family, decisions (Chap. 6).

Linking the range of research and perspectives reported across the chapters of this book is evidence that regardless of their contexts, parents were interested in supporting their children during the transition to school. Across the board, parents expressed both hopes and worries as their children started school; thought long and hard about the decision to send the child to school and their input into the choice of school; and discussed their efforts to contribute to a smooth transition to school.

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) bioecological theory, several authors refer to the transition to school creating an intersection between the microsystems of home, school and often, prior-to-school settings. This intersection generates a space for interactions and relationships. At the same time, this intersection identifies the borders that surround each of these microsystems. Reference to borders can highlight their permeability, issues of access, routes for border crossing, or even the presence of bridges to connect different settings (Huser et al. 2015; Peters 2014). Borders can also generate new spaces for meeting and communicating (Moss 2013; Wenger 2000).

What occurs within these spaces can take many forms, influenced by different contexts, experiences and expectations. Some models of parent-school involvement posit this space as the location of family-educator partnerships (Epstein 2011), where parents and educators share responsibilities for supporting children's learning and development. Other models highlight the importance of educators recognising and responding to parental perspectives within this space as a means to promote parent involvement in children's education (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997) and empower families and children (Dunst et al. 1992). A further model to consider the ways in which families and educators come together is proposed by Goff (Chap. 14), who introduces the conceptual framework of the Cultural Interface (Nakata

2002). Defined as 'a space of many shifting and complex intersections between different people with different histories, experiences, language, agendas, aspirations and responses…that abounds with contradictions, ambiguities, conflict and contestation of meanings' (Nakata 2007, p. 199), the Cultural Interface focuses on the space created when different people come together. Rather than enacting predetermined ways of engagement, working together at the Cultural Interface involves participants establishing their own preferred ways of interaction, with the result that different people will be involved in different relationships in different ways.

Different models of partnership resist the temptation to regard parents – and families – as all the same. In some situations, the nature of parent-school connection is driven by the more powerful participant – often the school. The model offered by the Cultural Interface recognises that not every participant in this space wants the same thing in terms of relationships. Indeed, Goff (Chap. 14) and Rogers et al. (Chap. 16) argue that not every parent seeks a partnership with shared responsibilities between themselves and educators. Rather, parents in their studies sought connections that reflected mutual trust and respect, with opportunities to seek out information specific to their child as they started school. In other words, they sought an individualised connection with their child's educator – one that was based on recognition of their specific situations and their individual children. They were not seeking relationships based on a prescribed set of strategies; nor were they seeking a relationship that matched other relationships between educators and parents: they were seeking a relationship that was responsive to them and their families. Such relationships recognise the transition to school as a time of transition for the families as well as the children.

17.3 Change for Families

In combination with providing continuity for their children, families and family members themselves experience change as children start school. The work of Griebel and Niesel (2009) has been instrumental in recognising the dual role of families as they manage both the child's transition to school and their own transition as a family. Several chapters contribute to understandings in this area by exploring the nature and implications of the changes experienced by families. In particular, there is a focus on how families manage – or cope with – the transition to school and how this, in turn, impacts on family functioning. This emphasis aligns with the definition of transition as a process, rather than a single event.

Drawing on the base of family developmental psychology (Cowan 1991), several chapters highlight the coping mechanisms and approaches within families at the time of transition to school. This approach recognises that the transition to school may be a time of additional family stress – both in terms of events and emotions. Family members may experience both positive and negative emotions as children start school. Indeed, many parents report the mixed feelings of pride, sadness, loss, happiness, anxiety, and excitement as children start school. Families cope with

these emotions and the changed situation by adopting a range of actions (Folkman 2008). Wilder and Lillvist (Chap. 4) provide several examples of as they explore both emotions and responses in their investigation of the expectations of parents of children with intellectual disability as they start school in Sweden. In this study, as in other contexts, parents engaged in a range of actions to cope with stress activated by the transition to school. These included acting as advocates for their children; finding ways to have a physical presence at school – for example, through volunteering to help in the classroom, school canteen, or on school committees; or making regular contact with the teacher at the start or end of the school day. These actions are

> about how parents activate the resources available to them in a given space in order to author a place of their own in schools and about how they use or express that place to position themselves differently so that they can influence life in schools. (Calabrese Barton et al. 2004, p. 8)

In their positioning of themselves in the transition to school experiences of their children, parents are influenced by their own transition experiences as well as those of other family members. These past experiences impact on how parents engage with their children about school, the interactions they have with educators and the institution of school, as well as their sense of confidence and efficacy as parents. Chapters describe this impact across several levels as the experiences of grandparents (Chap. 8), parents (Chap. 6) and other family members (Chaps. 5 and 6) all contribute to the family habitus and social capital activated at the time.

The transition to school can be a time for additional work for families. The nature of this work varies, but could include managing other life transitions – such as a return to work for a parent; seeking to understand dominant cultural practices – particularly for immigrant or refugee families; or establishing a sustainable role within the educational context. In addition, the emotional work of supporting children in the transition to school is substantial. While this latter challenge may be relevant for many families, it is noted as particularly important for families with children who have special education needs. For some families, the transition to school requires additional levels of coping because of some of the other challenges being managed at the same time.

By the time children start school, families have usually existed for some time and have generated their own family history and practices. Families are not just places where children and parents deal with transitions. The family is shaped by both internal and external demands, and by the resources available to them. Families vary considerably in their access to, and their ability to activate, social, economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). This, in turn, influences the ways in which families approach, react to and manage children's transition to school and their own transition experiences as a family.

17.4 Future Directions

The chapters in this book position the transition to school as both an educational transition for children and a life transition experienced by children and families. Thinking about transition in this way promotes focus on both educational and psychological aspects, leading to the proposition that transition generates transformation not only in an educational sense but also in the everyday life of families. Two broad research directions reflect this perspective: reconceptualization of notions of family engagement and what it means at the time of transition to school; and consideration of psychological approaches to transition and their relevance to broader understandings of the transition to school.

17.4.1 Reconceptualising Family Engagement

The research presented throughout this book prompts reflexive analysis of the roles of families in support of children as they make the transition to school, and the ways in which families – and the individuals within them – manage and address the transition. One of the directions proffered by this research involves examination of notions of family participation, involvement and/or engagement in children's education, particularly as this relates to the transition to school. Part of this examination involves moving away from a list of practices employed by "good" parents to prepare their children for school, towards a sense of understanding what shapes the ways families engage, or seek to engage, with educational settings, and those within them. It also opens spaces to consider what families regard as the appropriate preparation for the children and the strategies they utilise to achieve this. Inherent in this approach is recognition that these ways of engaging vary for each family, influenced by previous educational experiences, intergenerational input, family habitus and capital. This approach positions engagement with families as a relational experience – 'existing within the relationships parents form' as 'more than an object or an outcome': 'engagement is a set of relationships and actions that cut across individuals, circumstances, and events that are produced and bounded by the context in which that engagement takes place' (Calabrese Barton et al. 2004, p. 11).

The time of transition to school helps to generate a space where home, school, and prior-to-school microsystems intersect and where relationships can be forged. Recognising engagement as a relational phenomenon prompts regard for the transition to school as more than event – more than the first day of school. Consideration of the transition to school as a process invokes reflection on what influences decisions about participation in transition activities, how relationships with others influence the actions of children and families, the history of transition experiences, and the resources available.

From this position, promoting family engagement at the time of transition to school is taken to involve educators and families building relationships. While this

may include inviting families to specific events or encouraging them to do specific things with and for their children, it also involves recognising the wide range of supports families provide for their children that may not be immediately obvious. Further, it requires recognition of family strengths as well as potential challenges.

Families are active contributors to the educational transitions experienced by their children. Even when it appears from the outside that transition "happens to" families, family members are likely to have implemented a range of strategies to act as agents and authors in the transition process. In the studies reported here, parents – regardless of their context or circumstances – were involved in decisions about children and school, sought information, engaged with social and professional networks, and positioned themselves in ways to provide input. In other words, the families positioned themselves in the transition narrative. This was particularly the case for families of children with special education needs.

Several possible research directions emerge from the research outlined across the chapters. These include:

- How do educators and parents view their involvement at the time of transition to school?
- Within each context, what strategies support the building and maintaining of responsive relationships between educators and families?
- How do educators engage with diverse families in ways that are both respectful and supportive?
- What supports do educators need to invest in the development of such relationships?
- What do families regard as appropriate preparation for school? What strategies do they employ to achieve this?
- What influences families to engage with transition experiences?
- How do families write themselves into the narrative of transition to school?
- What spaces are created for engaging with families at the transition to school?

17.4.2 Broader Understandings of Transition/Transition as Transformation?

Several perspectives of transition emphasise its transformational effect (Cowan 1991; Zittoun 2008), arguing that, as a result of transitions, individuals change the ways they view themselves and others, and others change the ways they view the individual. In other words, both internal and external changes accompany transitions. Starting school, for example, usually results in children conceptualising themselves as school students as they adopt ways of acting and interacting that reflect this changed role and status. New experiences and expectations accompany the role change from preschooler to school student. In addition, adults treat school students differently from preschoolers. Families also experience this change as parents become the parents of a school student. As children make the transition to

school, new strategies, skills and routines are required by all involved. The transition may also require re-organisation of family relationships and connections within social networks.

While these changes may appear to occur smoothly for many families, Cowan (1991, p. 19) argues that transitions involve periods of disruption and discontinuity as 'individuals and families go through a period of de-organisation in which almost everything is out-of-sync'. At this time, established patterns of interaction and family routines are disrupted, and adaptations are required to manage the changed context. For example, families need to establish how they will meet school drop off and pick up times, what arrangements are needed to access vacation or after school care, how they respond to homework expectations, and how they provide school uniforms, lunches and the like. In earlier studies, several parents noted that children's tiredness at the end of the school day resulted in earlier dinner times, and signalled their own adaptation as they became used to not knowing as much about their child's daily experiences as they had when children were either at home or attending early childhood settings (Dockett and Perry 2007).

Patterns of family interaction are particularly important at points of transition, as 'transition amplifies processes already in motion before the transition begins' (Cowan 1991, p. 19). Applying these considerations to the transition to school highlights processes of both continuity and discontinuity, as family practices, routines and interactions – family habitus – are maintained while, at the same time, new roles, experiences and expectations are incorporated within these. How individuals and families adapt to the changed roles and circumstances is a key element in the success of transitions. Integral to this adaptation are the demands of the change; the resources available and the meanings attributed to the changes (Cowan 1991).

Adaptation is promoted when new contexts are familiar or comfortable and where adaptation requires the acquisition of some – but not an overwhelming number – of new skills. When thinking of the transition to school, familiarity and comfort can be built on opportunities for children and families to visit the school setting, get to know it and those who use it. The need for new skills can be balanced by the recognition of the existing skills, strengths and understandings of both children and families.

The availability of resources influences how families adapt to the changes experienced at the time of children's transition to school. Several chapter authors have referred to the importance of families' access to, and activation of, social, economic and cultural capital. Encompassed within this is focus on social support – that is, the emotional, informational and instrumental support available from other people. Emotional support promotes feelings of self-worth. When family strengths are recognised and spaces are created to listen to and respect family perspectives, there are opportunities for families to feel valued contributors to the transition process. Families also seek informational support as they make decisions around transition, and instrumental support – such as helping with transport arrangements or after school care. The availability of social support encourages people to interpret events positively and to identify strategies to manage situations (Urquhart and Pooley 2007). Many transition to school programs recognise this when they include

opportunities for parents to meet with other parents who have already managed the transition to school.

The availability of social support is linked to the meanings attributed to the changes experienced within the transition to school. How families interpret what happens during transition is central to their meaning-making efforts and the narratives that accompany these. For example, some families regard the transition to school as a sign of children's developing maturity, their "growing-up"; for others the transition to school is a marker of their effectiveness as parents; and for others still, the transition may be an added complication in an already complicated life context. The meanings created as families engage with the transition to school guide their actions and responses. Drawing on Bruner's (1990) description, this view emphasises the role of culture and language in negotiating meaning within any given context.

Exploring the transition as a process of transformation for families offers opportunities for further research to investigate:

- the nature and impacts of family disruptions that occur as children start school;
- how existing family processes are adapted as children start school;
- the skills and understandings expected of families at this time;
- the availability of resources – particularly social support – for families; and
- the meaning-making processes of families as they adapt to having a child at school.

17.5 Conclusion

Throughout this book, a range of research evidence is used to explore the impacts of families on educational transitions and of educational transitions on families. The studies from Europe, Australia and North America highlight both similarities and differences in approaches to the transition to school, and the positioning of families at this time. One of the challenges for future research in this area is to broaden the range of contexts in which issues related to families and transitions are explored. Burgeoning worldwide research in South America, Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as well as the work that continues in Nordic countries, Europe, North America and Australasia, has the potential to contribute to the research field by both broadening and challenging the ways we conceptualise the interplay between families and the transition to school.

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