Chapter 7
Critical Perspectives on Transition to School

Reframing the Debate

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Effective transition to school is a valuable contributor to children's sense of confidence in the school setting and to improving children's academic outcomes. However, traditional understandings of school entry have focused on children's readiness as a set of normative characteristics, rather than on the shared processes that support the change experience of children and families. A shift toward considering school transition as a procedural question in the late 1990s and early 2000s focused on narrow approaches involving preparation of children and on school structural provisions such as age of entry. Such approaches support binary constructions of children and rely on theories that draw from Western normative understandings of child development. The alternative use of critical theory offers opportunities to reframe transition as a more equitable process, by drawing attention to more complex inter-relationships between stakeholders and more respectful power dynamics. This chapter considers alternate ways of thinking about transition based on critical theory. It focuses on recent Australian research examples but also draws from the international literature base on transition to school. The chapter begins by discussing the terminology used to talk about school entry and then considers the implications of binary constructions such as "ready" and "unready". A brief outline of the limited way in which approaches to transition have been conceptualized is followed by an analysis of theories and pedagogies that promote effective transition. The chapter concludes with some suggestions for beginning to rethink practices that concern transition to school.

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Terminology

The way entry to school is named frames thinking about whether it is a question of children's normative characteristics (readiness for school), a set of characteristics of a school (the ready school), or a shared characteristic of varied stakeholders (preparedness). Despite inclusive educational policies, the titles of some initial school classes (e.g. preparatory) have continued to emphasize children's preparation or readiness for existing school circumstances, rather than change within schools to include all children and to support their school entry. A focus on children's readiness as normative developmental or academic characteristics is incompatible with contemporary policies of inclusion. In contrast, transition to school denotes a dynamic process of change involving multiple settings and stakeholders. Thus, transition is a broader construct accommodating a more diverse range of children and other stakeholders such as teachers, families, and communities.

The way in which diverse abilities and cultural background in young children are named also serves to frame thinking about children's characteristics, adjustment, and achievement as they enter school. Narrow attention to children experiencing transition difficulties has been supported by a continuing emphasis on need terminology (e.g. special or additional needs) rather than participation rights. Terminology such as "disabled", "at risk", and "minority group" frames a deficit image of children with non-prototypical abilities or backgrounds, instead of an image of competent and resourceful children. Using critical theory as a frame, Hyun (2007) contends that separate categorical labelling of children for service access (e.g. autistic, non-English speaker) serves to reinforce traditional group stereotypes and power differences. Separate categorical labels also fail to recognize multiple exceptionalities in individuals (e.g. giftedness in Indigenous children, Cronin and Diezmann 2002). Thus, policies on transition to school continue to focus on singular constructs such as age of school entry and processes for children with disabilities (e.g. Education Queensland 2007).

Binary Constructions

Simple binary divisions of "ready" and "unready" have been adopted as a means of identifying support program requirements of children with developmental delays associated with organic disabilities or diverse cultural experience. The outcome of such binary understandings of readiness is that its converse, unreadiness, is constructed as deficit, and grade retention as one solution. The concept of child readiness incorporates adjustment by children to the expectations of schools, and, once in the school setting, academic achievement (Dockett and Perry 2007). Normative constructions of children's abilities and cultural resources also support a simplistic binary division of children into typical and atypical. Differences from the norm are constructed as child-related deficits requiring a remedial solution (Davis et al.

2007). Thus, programs to support school entry in the past have often been specifically remedial in orientation, particularly for children from social, economic, and culturally diverse backgrounds or for children with developmental delays. However, such approaches are incompatible with contemporary views of diversity as a resource, and of children and families as competent co-contributors to learning (e.g. cultural resources children bring from home, individual strengths of children with disabilities) (Kilderry 2004).

The persistence of readiness notions signals reliance on traditional developmental stage theories, despite the lack of evidence of their relevance to non-European cultures (Grieshaber 2008). Stage theories imply deficits in children with delayed developmental progress or culturally diverse experience, and a lack of need for gifted children to receive any support or pedagogic variation. In recent studies of transition to school in Australia, teachers consistently emphasized children's readiness for school, and reported continued use of retention in grade or the use of remedial services for children who were deemed "unready" (Dockett and Perry 2007; Petriwskyj 2005). Such constructions have been actively supported by government literature for families, which used the title "preparatory" and discussed the role of kindergarten in children's readiness for school (Department of Education and Training [DET] 2007). Thus, it is not surprising that O'Gorman (2008) found that some parents expressed a preference for school-like or formal teacher-directed kindergarten activities to enhance children's preparation for school. This conceptualization of the year prior to Year 1 of elementary education is at odds with the play-based yet focused approach of contemporary Australian early childhood curricula, such as the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (Queensland Studies Authority 2006) and the national birth-5 curriculum: *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR] 2009).

Narrow Approaches to Transition

There has been a gradual shift towards broader understandings of school entry that go beyond children's normative development to consider the role of the school. However, this move initially resulted in narrow approaches to transition focused on structural provisions by schools, and preparatory practices prior to school to enhance children's school adjustment. Structural provisions include raising the age of school entry, introducing special transition classes or curricula, and providing support programs for children deemed unready. Changes to the age of school entry have included accelerated entry for gifted children or delayed entry for children with disabilities. Some Australian research continues to indicate the value of delaying the school entry age, particularly for boys (Boardman 2006). However, there is international evidence that children whose home environment is challenging may progress more quickly if school entry is not delayed, particularly if they gain access to a more enriched academic environment (Stipek and Bylar 2001). Therefore,

Australian schools have introduced reception classes based in schools to support transition (e.g. kindergarten, transition, pre-primary), transition curricula (e.g. *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines*) and specialized programs for groups whose progress has been an ongoing concern (e.g. Indigenous children, McCrea et al. 2000).

Following the Preparing for School study in the state of Queensland, Australia (Thorpe et al. 2004), the age of school entry was raised by six months. A transition class called "preparatory" was introduced, and a new early years' curriculum was developed to bridge prior-to-school and early elementary school programs. While the value of full time play-based yet focused programs located at a school was shown to support children's progress, there were concerns in relation to children from equity groups (Thorpe et al. 2004). For example, evaluation of classroom practice using the Classroom Observation Scoring Manual found that recognition of difference, particularly incorporation of cultural knowledges, was low (Thorpe et al. 2004). In a follow-up study (Petriwskyj 2010), schools were found to use structural changes to manage extreme class complexity (e.g. class streaming, in-class ability grouping, withdrawal classes). Teachers reported that they relied on cultural teaching assistants for cultural and linguistic knowledge, as access to professional education on culture was limited.

Preparatory practices have also been a valued strategy for improving children's sense of confidence at school entry (Dockett and Perry 2007). However, a simple binary division of responsibilities has placed emphasis on the sending setting, such as the family home or the preschool, rather than on the receiving setting, such as the school, or on shared responsibility. Approaches such as priming for a single change event of school entry and preparation practices to orient children to the school culture, environment, and expectations (Corsaro and Molinari 2000; Pianta and Kraft-Sayre 2003) have a demonstrated value in assisting children to adjust to school cultures and facilities. However, orientation practices alone fail to take account of children's prior experiences of learning, the differences between prior experiences and institutional settings such as schools, and children's trajectories over time. They frame transition as a single change event requiring the child to adjust, rather than transition as a lengthy and dynamic change process involving a range of stakeholders. Thus, difficulties in adjustment are deemed to be problems of the child or the family rather than an indication that school processes or pedagogies need to change. In a longitudinal study in an area of Australia characterized by economic and social diversity (Raban and Ure 2000), parents reported that ongoing adjustment difficulties arose from rigid expectations by the school, inexperience or frequent changes in teachers, and child boredom related to low teacher expectation. Teachers, in contrast, perceived difficulties in adjustment as lack of readiness. This emphasis on readiness is also supported by statutory assessment pressures in schools that promote a normative achievement focus. Teachers face a tension between achieving set learning milestones at prescribed time markers and providing for variations in children's learning speed.

In the context of inclusion, there has been some questioning of these narrow approaches to transition, resulting in a shift to considering longer term transition processes, readiness of schools, and shared responsibilities of stakeholders (Graue

2006). Contemporary classrooms and schools are complex contexts, which require a more sophisticated process to address the range of learners, adult stakeholders, teacher relationships, the contexts that are involved, and pedagogies that consider diversity. Structural provisions (e.g. support programs, ability grouping, additional resourcing) enhance opportunities to teach but do not necessarily enhance opportunities to learn for school entrants with diverse abilities and/or from diverse backgrounds (Hamre and Pianta 2007). Preparatory practices contribute to children's sense of confidence in entering an unfamiliar setting, yet such practices contain an assumption that children remain in the same area and system to begin school. Contemporary changes in family structure and family mobility together with policies of inclusion have increased the complexity of class groups and the demands on teachers (Henderson 2004). This requires change in pedagogies to support all children.

Theories and Pedagogies for Transition to School

Relationships between stakeholders (e.g. between children, children and teachers, families and teachers, teachers in different settings) offer a secure base for effective transition of children (Niesel and Griebel 2007). Thus, models of transition to school have adopted ecological theoretical perspectives (Dockett and Perry 2007; Rimm-Kaufmann and Pianta 2000). Although ecological systems theory considers children within the context of their family and community, it does not account well for the diversity of children's circumstances. Transition models based on ecological theory offer limited consideration of children's progress over time, which is highlighted in transition literature that considers trajectories over extended periods (Burchinal et al. 2002). The assumption that the central place of the child in ecological theory is universally appropriate is questionable, as it overlooks the multiple priorities in families and communities, and diverts attention from the role of culture in mediating experience (Vogler et al. 2008). This is a key consideration for Australian Indigenous children, families, and communities whose cultural perspectives have not been accorded sufficient priority (Frigo and Adams 2002).

Socio-cultural perspectives take into account the influence of the cultural context on children (Corsaro and Molinari 2000). Reduction in the philosophical contrasts between cultural contexts (home and school, early childhood setting and school) could enable greater continuity of experience and enhance children's sense of confidence during school transition (Raban and Ure 2000). Continuity between early childhood education settings and schools may be seen as more structured lessons in classes for younger children (e.g. in preschool or kindergarten), the establishment of learning outcomes in play programs for younger children (e.g. DEEWR 2009), or incorporation of learning-oriented guided play in lower primary (Brostrom 2005). Links among teachers to share information about children and on teaching are needed to ensure continuity and graduated change.

Continuity of learning also involves home-school links, including use of home languages in schools and incorporation of culturally valued practices. This is partic-

ularly relevant in Australia for migrant, refugee, and Indigenous children; and children from economically and socially diverse backgrounds whose home and school experience may contrast (Frigo and Adams 2002; McCrea et al. 2000; Raban and Ure 2000; Sanagavarapu and Perry 2005). Therefore, partnerships between families and communities and schools are essential to ensure that children's prior experience is taken into consideration in their school program. An Australian study of impacts on children's outcomes found that improved adjustment and achievement were associated with high levels of family and community engagement (Thorpe et al. 2004). However, teachers focused on internal relationships within the school amongst children's peers, within the school staff, and between teachers and children. Relationships with families emphasized parents and other community volunteers engaging in classroom assistance tasks, rather than negotiation of transitions between teachers and families. Thus, teachers were unaware that some children from South-East Asian backgrounds were experiencing peer related difficulties and internalizing behaviours at school entry and throughout Year 1.

In studies of Australian Indigenous children's school transition, lack of family consultation and low expectations meant that teachers failed to capitalize upon strengths of Indigenous children such as responsibility or resilience (Cronin and Diezmann 2002; Dockett and Perry 2007). Interviews with Bangladeshi families in Australia identified a concern that children's school adjustment was hampered not only by their limited English proficiency, but also by school expectations of independence that were at odds with valued socialization practices at home (Sanagavarapu and Perry 2005). Further, narrow traditional constructions of family fail to capitalize on the potential involvement in transition of fathers, working parents, extended family members, and non-traditional families. Closer partnerships between teachers, families, and communities would offer opportunities to communicate more effectively about such concerns, alert adults to the complexities of children's lives, link learning more closely to children's experiences, and assist children to feel more confident during school transition.

Transitions are complex, and involve multiple, overlapping changes that are both vertical (from year to year) and horizontal (within the day or week). Some children may attend more than one setting (e.g. outside-school-hours care, specialist classes, English language classes, or learning support). For some children, there may be multiple transitions between locations or schools within a short space of time (e.g. children from geographically mobile families, Indigenous travel for cultural events) (Frigo and Adams 2002; Henderson 2004). Thus, children may experience confusion about behaviour expectations, or may resist changes about which they feel uncertain. Teachers need to take the added pressures of multiple transitions into account and minimize overlapping transitions within the school day. In a study of inclusive transition in Australia, teachers explored pedagogic continuity between year levels through teacher discussion, and minimized horizontal transitions by adopting more in-class support rather than withdrawing children for assistance (Petriwskyj 2010). However, an observed reliance on unqualified teaching assistants to provide support programs indicated that teachers were still negotiating ways to balance the demands of the whole class and the learning of individuals. This indicates that

more extensive and pro-active reform of transition approaches, framed by critical perspectives, may be required. Teachers also need to be more aware of the theories that underpin their practice and that of colleagues, in order to enhance continuity for children during transition (Wood and Bennett 2001).

In contrast to ecological theory and sociocultural perspectives, critical theory (Giroux 2006) attends to the unequal distribution of power according to social class, gender, race, disability, culture and language, and to the ways structural factors (e.g. low funding) and low expectations can impede the achievement of some groups. Critical theory moves away from normative ideas that underpin categorizations of children to recognize the right to participation of all individuals (Woodhead 2006) and the role of social institutions such as schools in creating circumstances that enable or disable children (McLaren 2007). Pedagogy based on critical theory breaks from past blaming of children for educational failure. It re-focuses on more socially just teaching approaches based on teachers' critique of normative assumptions, and of the hidden curriculum of unequal power relationships (Davis et al. 2007).

Critical pedagogy has drawn attention to the agency of children, through which children feel empowered to value themselves and others (Kilderry 2004; McLaren 2007) and to the need for broader educational reforms that reflect equitable and respectful relationships (Giroux 2003). Such reconsideration is particularly relevant in Australia as the definition of inclusion has been extended to consider the sense of belonging of children from varied social, economic, cultural or family structure backgrounds, as well as gifted children and those with disabilities and varied learning styles (DEEWR 2009). Early childhood education in Australia has been challenged to reframe practice around theories that go beyond traditional Western developmentalism, and to transform pedagogies such that the participation rights of all children are considered (Grieshaber 2008). Australian transition studies have drawn attention to diversity considerations such as gender, disability, cultural and linguistic experience, social circumstances, and giftedness (Nyland 2002; Raban and Ure 2000; Whitton 2005). Therefore, inclusive transition processes need to take into account a range of variations within a class, and the multiple forms of diversity existing within any individual child. They need to be non-stigmatizing, yet provide support to individual children and families in negotiating their changing circumstances and roles.

These are pedagogic concerns, rather than issues that can be addressed through structural change such as altering the age of school entry, or through pragmatic additions to repertoires of practice such as orientation programs. Critical pedagogies prompt teachers to name a perceived problem, reflect critically on the circumstances, and to act pedagogically in ways that are more respectful and inclusive. Pro-active transition reforms are needed to enhance opportunities for all children both prior to school and in early elementary contexts, and to balance continuity between settings with challenges to children to engage with new learning. Such reform would include more equitable relationships with families and community that consider power dynamics. Areas for potential attention include assessment and non-stigmatizing transition processes.

Assessment of learning or development through tests that may be used to retain children in grade is inconsistent with contemporary policies of inclusion. In Australia, inclusion goes well beyond full or partial inclusion placement to mean a deeper pedagogic practice of differentiating learning to enhance the participation and sense of belonging of all children (DEEWR 2009). Assessment that relies on Western normative development (e.g. checklists, readiness tests) fails to take the range of young children's experience into account, is de-contextualized, and constructs diversity as deficit (Ryan and Grieshaber 2005). The use of such assessment strategies for decisions about the timing or location of school entry for children with diverse abilities or backgrounds will necessarily place them at a disadvantage. Further, they offer teachers little information on which to make pedagogic decisions to support continuity of learning. If assessment focused more on continuous assessment for learning, rather than assessment for school placement or statutory reporting, the form of documentation and analysis of assessment data could be framed more strongly by individual learning and influences on learning. Documenting observations of the group, not just the individual, takes into account the role of social influences in children's learning. If this documentation (e.g. digital images, narratives) is shared with children and family members, additional insights from the whole community of learners can support learning (Hatherly and Richardson 2007). This approach not only adds richness to pedagogic decision-making but also capitalizes on prior experience and on relationships supporting the child during school transition.

Transition strategies that take a more inclusive approach incorporate relationships and continuity of experience as well as preparatory practices that orient children to school. Stigmatizing strategies such as grade retention or targeted transition support programs need to be minimized. Critically aware teachers trying to incorporate a range of strategies into their transition processes also need to be vigilant and insightful regarding the hidden curriculum, which involves the unintended consequences of pedagogic decisions (Kilderry 2004). Hidden curriculum often refers to non-subject-related learning, such as learning about expected school behaviours, and the way this may disadvantage some children (e.g. by gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability category) in standardized learning situations (McLaren 2007). Giroux (2003) and McLaren (2007) identify resistance to rigid behaviour expectations and even academic learning by some children as being a reasonable rejection of undue repression, or of a struggle to have their own lives visible in their school experience.

Differentiated transition processes and ongoing pedagogic provision that capitalize on the life experience and strengths of all school entrants, offer opportunities for all children to feel valued and develop a sense of belonging. There is emerging Australian research evidence of tentative reforms to transition in some schools that have a high proportion of children with diverse abilities and cultural backgrounds (Petriwskyj 2010). At one school, teachers incorporated children's friendships and individual response patterns into differentiated transition planning (e.g. co-location of friends in the same Year 1 class). This illustrated ways of re-focusing on child agency and children's transition capital (Dunlop 2007) to utilize the personal and cultural resources that they bring to school.

Strategies that teachers could adopt to assist their progress towards more equitable transition approaches include critical reflection on practice and re-conceptualization of pedagogic planning as action research (MacNaughton et al. 2007). Critical reflection implies that teachers give deep consideration to questions of power dynamics in relationships, the inclusive and non-stigmatizing nature of their practices, and the degree to which they listen respectfully to a range of stakeholders regarding transition. Teachers in an Australian action research study of school transition (Petriwskyj 2005) found that external facilitation assisted them to negotiate ideas, undertake critical reflection, and intellectualize their work by moving discussion from narratives of practice to broader pedagogic issues. Deep negotiation of meanings is required for reforming transition pedagogies, since the complexities inherent in education need to be acknowledged, together with reflection on the ethics of interactions with the diversity of children, families, and communities. This suggests that the approach to teacher preparation and in-service professional development may need to change, to enable teachers to move beyond surface additions to practice and to engage more deeply with negotiation of understandings about inclusion and transition.

Conclusion

The development of more sophisticated multi-level strategies for supporting transitions of children and families requires a theoretical shift, changes in the terminology used to name and frame approaches, and the use of pedagogies that ensure transition processes are inclusive. Critical theoretical framing of transition can facilitate deeper pedagogical reflection about equity in relationships with families and children. But theorizing alone is insufficient. As well as changes in terminology and pedagogies, theorizing needs to be accompanied by support mechanisms such as school change, ongoing professional learning opportunities for teachers and significantly, time for teachers to understand, reflect, and change their ideas about transition to school. These approaches would support a shift in ways teachers think about transition as a professional responsibility towards all children, and about the input of stakeholders including children, families, and communities. We conclude with some recommendations for teachers, teacher educators, and policy makers, which are not exhaustive.

Suggestions for Teachers

- Recognize and acknowledge that diversity exists in any group.
- Focus on strengths and abilities that children and families bring so that they are seen as resourceful rather than as deficient.
- Recognize and acknowledge that multiple categories of diversity may be represented within an individual.

- Make differences and similarities an explicit part of the daily curriculum.
- Learn about deficit theories and how they position difference of any sort.
- Expect all children to learn and achieve.
- Recognize that categorical labelling of children for service access reinforces power differences and traditional stereotypes.
- Learn about your own biases and those of the children in your class, and work conscientiously against them on a daily basis.
- More equitable approaches come from reflecting critically on power dynamics and unexamined assumptions about neediness.
- Recognize that teachers can be subject to excessive demands, especially in with competing demands of international equity and inclusion trends and national testing and accountability measures.
- Identify children's learning preferences and use them pedagogically.
- Take up relevant professional development opportunities.
- Share what works with other practitioners.
- Involve and consult meaningfully with parents about their practices.
- Develop long-term transition processes that take into account current understandings of transition as a multi-year, multi-faceted process.

Suggestions for Teacher Educators

- Teach about the most recent theoretical perspectives that are being used in research about transition and inclusive educational practices.
- Make critical theory and other theoretical perspectives that challenge the dominant power relationships in society integral parts of pre-service teacher education courses.
- Make diversity a central part of curriculum in teacher education courses.
- Encourage student teachers to think beyond simple modifications to everyday practice to reflect deeply about the theories that underpin their decision-making and the lenses they use for decisions.
- Teach about both overarching pro-active pedagogies that attend to the realities of diversity in school entrants, and strategies for differentiated responses to individual children's reactions as they enter school.
- Explicitly link pedagogies of prior to school and early elementary education to assist student teachers in considering pedagogical continuity.

Suggestions for Policy Makers

- Re-write policies on transition to school so that they focus on pedagogical processes supporting a range of children (instead of singular constructs such as age of school entry, readiness, or risk).

- Provide opportunities for regular, ongoing professional development.
- Incorporate policy on family and community involvement, to reinforce the importance of broader stakeholder participation in transition.

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