

Chapter 1

Theorising Transition: Shifts and Tensions

Sue Dockett, Anne Petriwskyj, and Bob Perry

1.1 Introduction

Worldwide recognition of the significance of the early childhood years for later development and wellbeing and the importance of investing in high-quality early childhood education (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2006) has promoted a great deal of interest in transition to school research, policy and practice. Recognition of the importance of a positive start to school acknowledges not only social and educational advantages but also the potential impact of these outcomes on disrupting cycles of social and economic disadvantage and in promoting resilience among young people (Fabian and Dunlop 2007; Smart et al. 2008).

In recent years, international attention has been drawn to the transition to school through comparative studies such as the OECD Starting Strong reports (2001, 2006). Indeed, Starting Strong II (OECD 2006, p. 1) recognised both the opportunities and challenges associated with the transition to school and urged that

attention should be given to transition challenges faced by young children as they enter school ... Facilitating transitions for children is a policy challenge in all systems. Transitions for children are generally a stimulus to growth and development, but if too abrupt and handled without care, they carry – particularly for young children – the risk of regression and failure.

The growing international focus on transition to school reflects a shift from attention at the local level to recognition that transition forms part of national and international education agendas. International comparisons, such as *Programme*

S. Dockett (✉) • B. Perry

School of Education, Charles Sturt University, Albury Wodonga, Australia
e-mail: sdockett@csu.edu.au

A. Petriwskyj

School of Early Childhood, Queensland University of Technology,
Brisbane, Australia

for *International Student Assessment (PISA)* (OECD 2010) and *Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS)* (Mullis et al. 2012), compare children's performance well beyond the start of school but have the potential to influence what occurs within that transition, particularly around areas of curriculum and pedagogy. In several countries, such as Australia and the United States of America, state-by-state comparisons of standardised tests also drive educational agendas. These comparisons influence many educational debates, including those about curriculum continuity from prior-to-school to school settings, standards and expectations as children start school and the implementation of pedagogies of transition. In these countries, as well as in several others, it is not uncommon to hear regular media and research discussions about the age at which children should start school and the potential implications of this for their performance on later standardised assessments. Discussions of results and potential explanations for these often turn to the age of the children involved and the years of school education they have experienced at the time of the assessments (Peters 2010). As a consequence, interest in the transition to school extends well beyond the early childhood years.

1.2 Defining Transition to School

The term 'transition to school' is understood and applied in many ways in different contexts. Some approaches incorporate school readiness and adjustment, defining transition to school as:

...children moving into and adjusting to new learning environments, families learning to work within a sociocultural system (i.e. education) and schools making provisions for admitting new children into the system. (UNICEF 2012, p. 8)

Broader definitions move beyond this focus on readiness and adjustment emphasising transition as a set of processes as individuals move from one (in this case, educational) context to another or change their role in educational communities (Dockett and Perry 2007; Fabian 2007; Vogler et al. 2008). These definitions focus on changes in identity and agency as individuals, and those around them engage in different educational contexts and adopt different roles. Within these definitions, processes of transition are regarded as both individual and social experiences, actively constructed as individuals participate in social and cultural processes that, by their very nature, are communal events (Rogoff 2003).

Other definitions of transition emphasise the intensified demands for children (Fthenakis 1998) as well as families (Griebel and Niesel 2009). Some researchers suggest that these increased demands present almost overwhelming challenges for some children (Hirst et al. 2011), while others focus on the importance of providing support and acknowledging children's strengths as they navigate these challenges and develop an enhanced sense of their own competence (Fabian and Dunlop 2007; Page 2000).

Throughout the world, debates continue about the role of adjustment, adaptation, continuity and readiness in the transition to school, the timing of transition and the teacher and/or school practices that support transition (Broström and Wagner 2003; Dockett and Perry 2013, in press; Dunlop and Fabian 2007; Petriwskyj et al. 2005; Ramey and Ramey 1999; Vrinioti et al. 2010; Yeboah 2002). While there is no universally accepted definition of transition, there is acceptance that transition is a multifaceted phenomenon (Petriwskyj et al. 2005), involving a range of interactions and processes over time, experienced in different ways by different people in different contexts. In very general terms, the outcome of a positive transition is a sense of belonging in the new setting (Dockett and Perry 2004; Fabian 2007). The ways in which this outcome may be achieved vary according to the theoretical perspective/s adopted.

1.3 Shifts in Theorising Transition to School

For many of the contributors to this book, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory marks a common starting point for theorising transition (see MacDonald et al. Chap. 16). However, different emphases and different connections with other theoretical perspectives lead to considerable variation in the implementation of research using this one theory. Critical perspectives also feature in the work of several contributors to this book, as does focus on rites of passage and border crossing. These variations in theoretical perspective frame three sections of this text. Such variation serves to remind us of the complexity of transition, in terms of those involved, their perspectives, the contexts in which they are located, the institutions involved and the ways that people position themselves and are positioned by others.

However, it also raises a number of questions about the role of theory in transitions research. For example, what makes a sufficient theory? Is it possible to engage with part of a theory? What is gained, and what is lost, by an eclectic approach to theorising transition? How can theories be adapted and refined without losing coherence?

Theories do not exist in isolation. They reflect particular ways of being and knowing and exist in historical time. We should not be surprised that different contexts, cultures and communities give rise to different ways of looking at things and accord importance to different elements and factors. In reflecting on the role of theory in her research, Einarsdóttir (Chap. 2) comments

Theory helps me to see what is visible in a new light, notice novel things, and reveal new understandings. I also use it to help me understand the reality that I am investigating and explain what I see, why I see it, and what it means.

We invite readers to engage with theories and theorising transition as they explore the chapters of this book. We commence discussion of theoretical positions by considering the recent shift from a reliance on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory in efforts to understand the transition to school. While Bronfenbrenner's early conceptualisations have been influential, later refinements of his theory, as well as a range of different theoretical positions, inform current research.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. xiii) noted that ecological transitions occur as an individual's 'position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both'. Bronfenbrenner's systems model of nested concentric circles, locating the child at the centre, is familiar to many educators and researchers. It promotes focus on the many and varied contexts in which people exist and interactions at the intersections of these contexts. Bioecological theory, which reflects Bronfenbrenner's later work (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006), retained this focus on context and people but placed increased emphasis on the importance of processes and time. From this emerged the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). Key elements of this model are proximal processes – defined as increasingly complex reciprocal interactions between an individual and the environment; the individual characteristics of each person, including their experiences, resources, temperament and motivation as well as their agency; the context, or systems including those in which individuals interact (microsystems), overlapping contexts (mesosystems), that influence their actions even though they are not direct participants in these contexts (exosystem), and the broader societal and cultural context (macrosystem); and time, which incorporates both what occurs during a specific activity or event, interactions that occur consistently as well as the chronosystem, that is, the specific historical context in which people and processes are located (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). Life course theory (Elder 1996) pays particular attention to the chronosystem, arguing that people who inhabit different time periods can experience the same event in different ways. In relation to starting school, focus on the chronosystem could help explain differences in the experiences of parents and children and of children in different social, political and economic contexts.

The PPCT model provides a great deal of flexibility in researching transition to school. When applied in full, it prompts attention to the relationships and interactions associated with starting school, the characteristics and resources each individual (be they a child, family member or educator) brings with them to the transition, recognition of the various systems or contexts in which children and families are located as well as attention to specific events, patterns of interactions and historical context. It provides potential to explore issues of continuity and change, in terms of the individuals, the nature of experiences and interactions they have, the people with whom they interact and the contexts in which they are located. It also recognises that social and cultural contexts are dynamic, affected by processes of continuity and change. These elements are noted in the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition, developed by Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000), which emphasised:

...the transition to school in terms of developmental processes that take place within the transition ecology. It is a system of interactions and transactions among persons, settings, and institutions that are oriented to support progress of children...rather than understanding a child's transition solely in terms of the child's skills, or the influences on those skills at any given time, this perspective emphasizes the organization of assets within a social ecology, how this organization emerges and how it supports (or hinders) child competence over time. (Pianta 2010, p. 35)

While recognising the possibilities afforded by bioecological approaches, limitations are also outlined. For example, Petriwskyj (Chap. 15) argues that these do not account sufficiently for the diversity of children's lives or inform children's longer-term trajectories. Similar criticisms are outlined by Vogler et al. (2008, p. 25), who note that 'while the identification of multiple interacting systems is conceptually elegant, there is a risk of objectifying boundaries and assuming internal sub-system coherence'. In other words, we should expect blurring of boundaries and not expect that microsystems, such as the family or school, operate in similar ways for all children. A further criticism of bioecological theory is that locating the child at the centre does not necessarily reflect the priorities of the systems and contexts, or the social constructs and power relations, in which they are located (Corsaro et al. 2002; Vogler et al. 2008). That is, not all microsystems prioritise the individual child.

Many of the contributors to this book refer to the importance of bioecological theory in their work, either as a guiding theoretical framework or as a trigger for further conceptualisation of transition. For example, Dunlop (Chap. 3) outlines her adoption of bioecological theory, noting how it offers an umbrella that can accommodate related theoretical frameworks, such as life course theory (Elder 1996), which outlines the principles of historical time, timing in lives, linked lives and human agency. Life course theory and bioecological theory can be complementary in their focus on historical time (chronosystem) and agency. Both theories accord significance to the active role of individuals as they influence, and are influenced by, the contexts in which they live. They also identify potential for change as different systems or contexts, and those located within them, interact. The combination of interactions, change and time sets up a dynamic model in which the transition to school can be explored by focusing on the overlapping or intersecting contexts of children's experience. From this, it is expected that each experience of the transition will be different; not only would it be expected that children's perspectives would be different from those of adults, but also each child's experience of their ecology would be expected to be different. This is evident in Turunen's (Chap. 11) exploration of transition to school as part of life history, where memories of starting school are described as potential turning points in each individual's life course.

One area highlighted by the combination of bioecological and life course theories is the ways in which contextual, or environmental, factors have different effects on those who experience them (Elder 1974). This is one pathway to the exploration of risk and protective factors, the identification of resilience and vulnerability, which are explored by Harrison (Chap. 5), as well as concepts of adjustment and transition (Margetts Chap. 6). It is also part of the underlying argument for the focus on high-quality early childhood education for all children, contending that this has 'the potential of supporting young children and their caregivers in coping with adversities and improving their prospects of successful school transitions' (Vogler et al. 2008, p. 28).

Some contributors incorporate a base of bioecological theory, complemented or expanded by other theoretical frameworks and conceptualisations. Peters (Chap. 8) describes the ways in which bioecological and sociocultural theories underpin her approach to transitions research; and Einarsdóttir (Chap. 2), Murray (Chap. 4),

Harrison (Chap. 5), Margetts (Chap. 6), Mackenzie (Chap. 7), Graue and Reineke (Chap. 12), Perry (Chap. 13) and Dockett (Chap. 14) all incorporate elements of bioecological theory in their explorations of transition.

Murray (Chap. 4) combines a strong focus on bioecological theory with a commitment to incorporating the perspectives of children in her research, on the basis that a successful transition to school relies not only on personal characteristics but also on interpersonal (relationship) and institutional factors. Mackenzie (Chap. 7) applies a similar model as children make the transition to becoming school students, specifically in the area of writing.

Harrison (Chap. 5) locates her research in bioecological theory, focusing particularly on proximal processes and connections between the intrapersonal (e.g. temperament) and interpersonal (e.g. attachment) worlds of the school student. She combines this with a transactional model of children development (Sameroff 2009), which holds that such development occurs as a result of continuous dynamic interactions between children and their environments. Relationships are central to this model, as is the power of relationships to effect change to, and for, individuals. The model also proposes that individual characteristics predispose children to be affected differentially by their environments. Hence, it is possible to consider both risk and protective factors that can be associated with transition to school.

Individual child characteristics are also addressed by Margetts (Chap. 6), in her discussion of transition and adjustment. In her investigations of children's capacity to adapt to the new school context, Margetts highlights the importance of children's changing sense of identity and belonging as well as their adaptive behaviour within the school setting.

In drawing on sociocultural theory, Lam (Chap. 10) and Peters (Chap. 8) incorporate the importance of social context and social interactions that is a feature of Vygotskian (1978) theory. From this perspective, interactions that occur within historical, cultural and institutional contexts shape children's development and their view of the world. At the same time, children are viewed as active agents who learn to use cultural tools to master actions that are valued within that particular culture (Wertsch 1991). When applied to the study of transition to school, sociocultural theory prompts a focus on the ways in which children's social interactions provide a basis for new ways of engaging in different contexts, where the 'process of changing participation in sociocultural activities of their communities' (Rogoff 2003, p. 52) is paramount. This translates into consideration of how children, families and educators change as a result of participating in activities and events that are significant in the context of school (such as orientation visits) but also exploring the ways in which those activities and events change over time as a result of that participation.

Children's participation in different contexts is a critical element of sociocultural theory, used by Corsaro et al. (2002) to frame transition as a process of interactions between people and involvement in activities that results in children's changed participation in sociocultural activities. These researchers regard transitions as 'always collectively produced and shared with significant others' (Corsaro et al. 2002, p. 325) and argue strongly against models of transition that focus primarily on the individual or a set of individual variables.

In its focus on children's developing mastery of culturally valued actions, sociocultural theory posits an important role for adults and peers. To this end, Rogoff (2003) describes processes of guided participation, as more knowledgeable others guide children's participation in culturally valued activities. Similarly, Lave and Wenger (1991) describe a process of legitimate peripheral participation, where those new to a community move towards becoming members of that community by engaging in peripheral activities that help them become aware of the ways in which the community is organised and operates. Experts, or more experienced others, play important roles in guiding the participation of newcomers. While it is not only adults who are regarded as more experienced, there is a clear role for adults in cultural reproduction. Intergenerational influences are also important, with parents, grandparents and other significant adults reflecting different visions of school and what it means to make the transition to school. Their perspectives shape the transition to school experiences of children and families (Turunen Chap. 11). Family habitus (Bourdieu 1997) is influenced by family history and the stories told within the family about school and education. These contribute to dispositions that support and guide particular practices within families.

The historical, social, cultural and political contexts, in which transition to school is, and has been located, are the focus of the critical constructionism that underpins Graue and Reineke's (Chap. 12) investigation of the ways in which transition and readiness have been constructed in the United States. This theoretical orientation emphasises the sociocultural construction of knowledge (Vygotsky 1978) and incorporates critical theory through a focus on the construction of cultural myths and expectations (Habermas 1972). In arguing that the ways in which people think about and enact transition and readiness are located within specific social and cultural contexts and have historical legacies, Graue and Reineke align notions of time (bioecological theory) and sociocultural theory with critical theory, arguing for the contextualisation of knowledge, promoting the importance of critical reflection on what is known, how it is known, and to whom it is known.

Critical and post-structuralist theories underpin Petriwskyj's (Chap. 15) approach to the study of transition to school as she draws attention to inequalities related to power and the exercise of power. Post-structuralist theories examine the political nature of knowledge and the role of language in the politics of knowledge:

Poststructuralists believe that individuals may tell several – possibly competing – stories about themselves (identities) and about societies. The politics of our time and place influence which stories ...are told, when and by whom, which is why some stories are heard more often and given greater status than others ... identifying the sources ... that are silenced or marginalised and then sharing them is a political act. (MacNaughton 2005, p. 4)

Critical theory also examines connections between knowledge and power, exploring the social and historical contexts of knowledge and the ways in which some ideas direct our understandings and explanations of phenomena. In particular, critical theory questions inequities in access to power and resources. Critical and post-structuralist perspectives direct attention towards ensuring the educational participation of marginalised or ignored groups (including children with disabilities, refugees, children in geographically isolated locations, gifted

children), together with the implementation of more socially inclusive policies and practices. Transition to school approaches framed by these perspectives are directed towards listening to the perspectives of all involved in transition (children, families, educators and communities) and promoting their active engagement in decision-making around the transition.

Listening to the perspectives of children has been a hallmark of Einarsdóttir's research. In Chap. 2, she describes how her theoretical stance draws on postmodernism, arguing that knowledge is socially constructed and, because of its contextual nature, can be contradictory (Albon 2011). Moving away from accepted truths, Einarsdóttir questions assumptions about children and childhood. Her work positions children as competent and capable, able to share their perspectives and with rights to be heard.

Critical reflection characterises the approaches adopted by Perry (Chap. 13) and Dockett (Chap. 14) as each questions how power is exercised or operates in the construction of transition to school. Both chapters reflect on dominant ideologies and argue for the importance of critical knowledge in promoting social justice (Perry Chap. 13) and unsettling expectations about who is expected to experience a successful, or problematic, transition to school (Dockett Chap. 14). These chapters argue that issues of power are central to interactions and expectations and 'examine the social and political factors that produce dominant educational knowledge and practices, and ... ask whose interests they serve' (MacNaughton 2005, p. 9). Critical reflection is a central plank of critical pedagogy and of approaches to social justice. It provides a basis for identifying inequality and injustice in approaches to transition to school as well as a platform for promoting change. Critical pedagogy encourages educators to engage in a 'language of possibility' (Giroux 2005, p. 68) and so to

develop knowledge/power relations in which multiple narratives and social practices are constructed around a politics and pedagogy of difference that offers students the opportunity to read the world differently, resist the abuse of power and privilege and construct alternative democratic communities.

Studies of the transition to school recognise that schools, schooling and education are largely institutionalised. Bourdieu's (1992) description of rites of institution addresses the significance of the rituals associated with education and the function they serve to separate those belonging to the institution of school from those who do not.

Garpelin (Chap. 9) and Lam (Chap. 10) also invoke the notion of rites as they describe the transition to school as a rite of passage. To do so, they draw upon van Gennep's (1960) description of rituals associated with life transitions as rites of passage, marking significant transitions to positions of new social status across the life course. Rites of passage acknowledge the departure from one phase of life and arrival in another phase. Three phases contribute to thinking about rites of passage: preliminal rites (rites of separation, as people detach from the existing group), liminal (or threshold rites, where people are in-between states, having left one group or status, but not yet become part of another) and postliminal rites (where people become incorporated into the new group, assuming the new status and identity that goes with being a member of this group).

In considering the transition to school, it is possible to conceptualise the move from preschool to school as a process of moving from one group and status (preschooler) to another (school student). Both Garpelin and Lam emphasise the potential ambiguity for children and their families, as they encounter the liminal phase, where they are betwixt and between (Turner 1969), in this case, neither a preschooler nor school student. At this time, it is possible to describe children and their families as entering a borderland (Peters Chap. 8) as they seek to cross the border into school. Writing about individuals as they seek to cross cultural and national borders, Anzaldúa (1987, p. 3) described a borderland as a ‘vague and undetermined place’, full of tensions as boundaries overlap and as contexts intersect. It is possible to consider children who have left one context (preschool) but not yet entered another (school) as traversing borderlands, those spaces that surround borders. Giroux (2005, p. 2) argues that

thinking in terms of borders allows one to critically engage the struggle over those territories, spaces, and contact zones where power operates to either expand or to shrink the distance and connectedness among individuals, groups, and places.

Conceptualising transition to school in terms of border crossing facilitates discussion about the border itself (e.g. When do children start school? Is it at the time of orientation or transition or when they have their official first day of school? Do all agree on when children start school, or when they should start school?) and the borderlands surrounding it (What happens for children between preschool and school? Is there a crossover period where school and preschool intermingle?) Such an approach also opens the space for some critical reflections around the transition to school, asking questions such as the following: Whose territory is involved in the transition to school? Who owns this space? Who is responsible for ensuring safe passage? What level of border patrol is involved? Do borders exist to keep people in or to keep people out? What credentials are required to cross borders? Who decides?

1.4 Tensions Around Transition

Across the chapters of this book, researchers involved in theorising and researching transition refer to a number of tensions. These, in turn, raise questions and provoke critical reflection. In noting the following tensions, we share some of the questions that have accompanied our discussions and invite readers to consider their own responses and theoretical positions.

1.4.1 *Who Is at the Centre of Transitions Research?*

Bioecological theory situates the child at the centre, focusing attention on the contexts in which the child is located and the intersections of these contexts. Yet this is also a criticism of the theory, as we are reminded that not all contexts in which

children exist prioritise their role. What does it mean to locate the child at the centre of research on transition to school? Does that suggest that children's experiences and perspectives are of central importance, more so than the experiences of educators, families or communities? Are the experiences and perspectives of these groups mutually exclusive? Must it be the individual child at the centre? Could we locate social groups at the centre? Rogoff (2003, p. 49) has cautioned that the model of nested systems that characterises many applications of the bioecological model can 'constrain our concepts by separating person and culture into stand-alone entities, with culture influencing the person (or in some models, with the two entities interacting)'. In adopting and applying bioecological theory, how do we emphasise the interrelatedness of person and culture? Is this achieved through the PPCT model?

1.4.2 What Image(s) of Children Underpins Transitions Research?

A range of current theoretical perspectives (including sociology of childhood, post-modern and post-structuralist theory) emphasise the importance of listening to all involved in transition and work to include the perspectives of the marginalised or those whose voices are often silenced. In a range of situations, children, particularly young children, are both marginalised and silenced. The processes of transition involve encounters with the unfamiliar and the unknown. How researchers view children will not only inform the research questions they ask but the ways in which these questions are investigated.

What image(s) of children underpins our transitions research? Are children positioned as competent and capable, able to share their perspectives and with rights to be heard? Is there also recognition that competent children sometimes require appropriate support? Do we focus on children's strengths, acknowledging, but not being limited by, potential problems? Who speaks for children in our research?

1.4.3 How Are Families, Educators and Communities Positioned in Transitions Research?

What are the descriptors we use when referring to families? How do these position families? It is possible to describe families in terms of the challenges they face or the problems they encounter and the contexts in which they live. When these factors are taken into account, do we look for strengths (Munford and Sanders 2003) as well as problems? How do we acknowledge diversity among families, recognising the considerable strengths that many families display in the face of adversity? How do our research methods and approaches respect families and their commitment to promoting positive educational environments and outcomes for children? How do we hear the perspectives of families?

How are educators positioned in transitions research? Who do we consider as educators in our research – those in prior-to-school settings, those in the early years of school or both? Does our research recognise diversity among educators? Do we – or others – position educators as experts? Do we expect educators to speak for other participants, including children and families? Are educators positioned as instigators of innovation and change that might challenge policy and inform research?

How do we acknowledge the role of communities in transitions research? Communities exist at many levels. These include communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) as well as communities based on social, geographic and cultural connections (Fegan and Bowes 2009). How do we recognise children as citizens of diverse communities? How do we describe communities? In what ways do we recognise community capacity, social and/or cultural capital, and how does this impact on our theorising around transition?

1.4.4 How Is Time Conceptualised in Transition Research?

Many approaches to transition and transitions research identify time as a critical factor. Historically, much transition to school research has drawn on maturational theory, referring to the gift of time (Ames 1986). Critiques of this notion have questioned the strategy of keeping children out of school to allow them to have more time to mature (Graue et al. 2003). Other researchers have explored notions of readiness and age. There are many discussions about the right time for children to start school. Transition to school is often described as a process that takes time, with individual children and families requiring different amounts of time in order to adjust to school or to feel a sense of belonging in the school environment. Time is also employed as a marker of development, adjustment and autonomy. Transition to school is situated in an historic time, and there is evidence that this life course event has implications for later life as well as in the ways in which individuals respond to later transitions. Transition experiences also have the potential to impact on trajectories over time. How do we explore notions of time in our transitions research? What assumptions do we make about time? If there is an expectation that transition takes time, what shared responsibilities, across longer timeframes, are possible or required?

1.4.5 What Is Considered to Be an Effective Transition?

How do we conceptualise a positive or effective transition? Is it a seamless transition, or is there some value in children experiencing the excitement and challenge of change as they commence school? Would an effective transition be an invisible transition, where the boundaries of school and prior-to-school were

blurred? What are the strengths and weakness of such a position? Is an effective transition more likely to be one where children, families, educators and communities mark and recognise the changes that occur? How can we promote both continuity and change at times of transition? What evidence should we seek regarding the success or otherwise of particular strategies for transition? Should this evidence differ depending on the cultural context? Who should decide? While there is no suggestion that we should all agree on what makes an effective transition, it is evident that multiple strategies and multiple lenses are needed in the study of transitions in order to promote different readings and perceptions of the same situation.

1.4.6 Is There a Preferred Theoretical Model for Transition and Transitions Research?

While many of the chapter authors in this book utilise bioecological theory, there are many alternative theoretical paradigms that have been used to investigate transition to school. Critical examination of policies, practices and research evidence through alternate theoretical lenses can illuminate the shortcomings as well as the contributions of various approaches (Scott-Little et al. 2006). In adopting any model of transition, it is important to consider what is invisible or assumed within the model. All models have gaps and silences, and all contain, hide and subsume assumptions. In adopting any model, it is important to consider what is masked as well as what is highlighted. Is there value in the more eclectic theoretical positioning outlined by several researchers in this book (such as Peters Chap. 8; Dunlop Chap. 3), provided the underlying perspectives are identified?

1.4.7 Should We Focus on Transition or Readiness?

The process of naming our research and research focus is important. The terms readiness and transition are often used interchangeably, yet can be interpreted to mean quite different things. Readiness, for example, is often used to refer to characteristics of individual children or populations yet can also be used in relation to families, schools and communities. The term transition is often applied to collections of practices or programs but can also be used to refer to processes of relationship building. Are readiness and transition interrelated, and if so, what are the connections (Dockett and Perry 2013, in press)? Are they indeed complementary, as suggested by Graue and Reineke (Chap. 12)? Do their differing theoretical frames mean that should be considered separately? How do they reflect the historical time in which they are located? What is gained, and what is lost, by conceptualising our research as either readiness or transitions research or both?

1.4.8 *One Transition or Many?*

It is possible to focus on the transition experiences of individuals and of collective groups or cohorts. Each brings strengths and challenges. Exploring individual experiences of transition recognises diversity of experiences and acknowledges that each individual experiences their ecology in different ways. However, there are limitations in the extent to which such experiences can be generalised. Investigating collective experiences of transition has the potential to homogenise groups and mask diversity. How do we recognise starting school as a time of transition for individuals as well as an institutionalised transition?

When investigating transition, it is also possible to focus on the experiences of one group – children, families, educators, communities – and to exclude others. Do we recognise that the transition to school is a transition for all of these groups? How does our transitions research recognise both unity and diversity? Does it address one transition, or many?

There is the potential for many tensions around the research base of transition to school. These reflect the many different and varied theoretical frames that are used to study transition as well as the different theoretical lenses that are applied to the analysis and application of research outcomes.

1.5 Theory, Policy and Practice

The shifts and tensions that are evident in transitions research are also reflected in policy and practice. Although there has been an assumption that research informs policy and practice, this assumption is contested (Nutley et al. 2007). New insights in practice or new policy demands to meet changing social circumstances may also prompt research and consideration of theoretical frameworks consistent with the changing environment (Ohi 2008).

Just as theories do not exist in isolation, ‘research does not speak for itself, nor does it have definitive implications for particular problems of practice or policy. Research users must always interpret the meaning of research and its implications’ (Tseng 2012, p. 7). Translating theory and research involves an iterative process of engagement and knowledge exchange between researchers, policymakers and practitioners (Davies et al. 2008). Critical to these processes is recognition that practitioners and policymakers are experts in their fields, with a great deal to contribute to the identification of research questions and their resolution. Knowledge that derives from practice and from policy is key to interrogating and changing practice (Rickinson et al. 2011).

Each research chapter highlights the implications of theoretical frames or particular research evidence to policy and practice. Three chapters in this book (Kirk-Downey Chap. 17; Glass and Cotman Chap. 18; Arnup Chap. 19) explore connections between theory, policy and practice in more depth. Each chapter

reports an innovative approach to the practices associated with transition to school, developed in a specific context and reflective of the characteristics of that context. Each of the approaches reflects a strong theoretical base. Glass and Cotman (Chap. 18) highlight the importance of inclusive approaches to transition and, within this, the importance of developing relationships between and among children and teachers. Their innovative use of Skype to build relationships across the school and preschool contexts and to maintain these over time reflects many elements of bioecological theory. The accompanying critical reflection on the processes and practices involved enables readers to recognise the support that was generated through the project as well as some of the ongoing challenges faced when seeking to build connections across microsystems.

Arnup (Chap. 19) and Kirk-Downey (Chap. 17) both describe the development of networks in two different geographical contexts of Australia. Each network acknowledges a range of stakeholders in the processes of transition and works to establish and maintain connections across various contexts. Both networks developed as part of broader policy imperatives related to state government initiatives which aimed to enhance positive educational outcomes for young children. They also rely on bioecological theory, recognising the importance of using a range of processes and strategies to engage with a range of people, in different contexts, over time. Both networks have been operating for some years and have adopted different guises, and those involved, and the contexts in which they operate, have changed.

All three of Chaps. 17, 18 and 19 demonstrate the ways in which practitioners have built opportunities to exchange knowledge and develop relationships to promote approaches to transition to school that make sense in their communities. While each of the strategies developed draws upon a theoretical base, and engages with researchers and research, they are driven by practitioners with commitment to promoting a positive start to school for all involved in the transition.

These approaches to transition have been influenced by research and have also influenced research. For example, some of the questions and issues raised within the Wollongong Transition to School Network have promoted specific research exploring children's perspectives of transition (Perry and Dockett 2011). At the same time, they have also had an impact on policy and policy development in their local contexts.

The final chapter of this book (Dockett and Perry Chap. 20) describes the development of a policy document, *Transition to School: Position Statement*. This statement was generated from a synthesis of a wide range of transitions research, policy and practice presented and discussed at a conference held in 2010. The collaborative involvement of policymakers, practitioners and researchers in the development of the position statement offered the opportunity to generate a common language around issues related to transition, consider ways in which research could influence policy and practice and create pathways such that issues of transitions policy and practice could generate new approaches to research.

1.6 Future Directions

The chapters in this book are also located in an historical time. They reflect both where we have been in transitions research and where we are now – our past and our present. They help us position current perspectives on transition to school as a shared responsibility between many stakeholders rather than focusing only on notions of individual children’s readiness. Where notions of readiness are invoked, they include reference to ‘ready schools’, ‘ready families’ and ‘ready communities’ as well as ‘ready’ children. Reference to individual children’s readiness also considers issues of adjustment, again focusing not only on children but the contexts in which children engage.

In many instances, investigations of transition to school are situated in strengths-based perspectives rather than in discourses of deficit. Strengths-based perspectives recognise that all involved in transition to school are experts about their own experiences and have a number of strengths, as well as possible challenges, on which to draw as they navigate the transition. Underpinning strengths-based approaches is the expectation that, with appropriate support and assistance, individuals and groups are capable of achieving positive change (Saleeby 1997).

The importance of supportive contexts is highlighted in current research. In addition to recognising the influence of home, prior-to-school, school and community contexts, chapters of this book explore the substantial contribution of networks to the development and implementation of approaches to transition as well as research networks that provoke and support a range of investigations of transition and policy networks that both drive and respond to research and practice.

Clearly, much is known about transition to school. The collaborative development of the *Transition to School: Position Statement* as researchers, practitioners and policymakers shared their perceptions, experiences and expectations has identified some emerging directions for transitions research. These include the following:

- Greater exploration of the role and contribution of policy to the study of transition to school
- Investigation of the ways in which the practices of transition influence, and are influenced by, policy and research
- Understanding the impact of curricula on transition, as children, their families and educators navigate different approaches to curricula and different expectations about curriculum outcomes
- Identification of the intersection of pedagogies in transition to school
- Continued attention to the significance of relationships with transition experiences
- Incorporation of the voices of all stakeholders in transition, particularly the perspectives of children
- Recognition of the role of partnerships at times of educational transition and exploration of effective partnerships
- Exploration of the short- and longer-term impacts of educational transitions
- Positioning of participants in transition as strong and competent

The principles described as the basis for an effective transition to school in the position statement aim to reconceptualise transition in terms of expectations, aspirations, opportunities and entitlements. The authors represented in this book believe that this opens up new spaces with which to engage in research, policy and practice around transition to school.

References

- Albon, D. (2011). Postmodern and post-structuralist perspectives on early childhood education. In L. Miller & L. Pound (Eds.), *Theories and approaches to learning in the early years* (pp. 38–52). Los Angeles/London: Sage.
- Ames, L. B. (1986). Ready or not. *American Educator: The Professional Journal of the American Federation of Teachers*, 10(2), 30–33. 48.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Bourdieu, P. (1992). The logic of practice (trans: Nice, R.). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1997). The forms of capital. In A. H. Halsey, H. Lauder, P. Brown, & A. S. Wells (Eds.), *Education, culture, economy and society* (pp. 46–58). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments in nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (2006). The bioecological model of human development. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology, Vol. 1: Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed., pp. 793–828). New York: Wiley.
- Broström, S., & Wagner, J. T. (Eds.). (2003). *Early childhood education in five Nordic countries: Perspectives on the transition from preschool to school*. Århus: Systime Academic.
- Corsaro, W. A., Molinari, L., & Rosier, K. B. (2002). Zena and Carlotta: Transition narratives and early education in the United States and Italy. *Human Development*, 45(5), 323–349.
- Davies, H., Nutley, S., & Walter, I. (2008). Why ‘knowledge transfer’ is misconceived for applied social research. *Journal of Health Services, Research and Policy*, 13(3), 188–190.
- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2004). What makes a successful transition to school? Views of Australian parents and teachers. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 12(3), 217–230.
- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2007). *Transitions to school: Perceptions, expectations, experiences*. Sydney: University of NSW Press.
- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2013, in press). Trends and tensions: Australian and international research about starting school. *International Journal of Early Years Education*.
- Dunlop, A.-W., & Fabian, H. (2007). *Informing transitions in the early years: Research, policy and practice*. Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill.
- Elder, G. H., Jr. (1974). *Children of the great depression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Elder, G. H., Jr. (1996). Human lives in changing societies: Life course and developmental insights. In R. B. Cairns, G. H. Elder Jr., & E. J. Costello (Eds.), *Developmental science* (pp. 31–62). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fabian, H. (2007). Informing transitions. In A.-W. Dunlop & H. Fabian (Eds.), *Informing transitions in the early years* (pp. 3–17). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Fabian, H., & Dunlop, A.-W. (2007). *Outcomes of good practice in transition processes for children entering primary school*. Working Paper 42. Bernard van Leer Foundation: The Hague.
- Fegan, M., & Bowes, J. (2009). Isolation in rural, remote and urban communities. In J. Bowes & R. Grace (Eds.), *Children, families and communities: Contexts and consequences* (3rd ed., pp. 129–147). Melbourne: Oxford.
- Fthenakis, W. E. (1998). Family transitions and quality in early childhood education. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 6(1), 5–17.
- Giroux, H. A. (2005). *Border crossings* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

- Graue, M. E., Kroeger, J., & Brown, C. (2003). The gift of time: Enactments of developmental thought in early childhood practice. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 5(1). <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v5n1/graue.html>. Accessed 14 Dec 2012.
- Griebel, W., & Niesel, R. (2009). A developmental psychology perspective in Germany: Co-construction of transitions between family and education systems by the child, parents and pedagogues. *Early Years*, 29(1), 59–68.
- Habermas, J. (1972). *Knowledge and human interests* (2nd ed.), (trans: Shapiro J. J.). London: Heinemann.
- Hirst, M., Jervis, N., Visagie, K., Sojo, V., & Cavanagh, S. (2011). *Transition to primary school: A review of the literature*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MacNaughton, G. (2005). *Doing Foucault in early childhood studies*. Milton Park: Routledge.
- Mullis, I. V. S., Martin, M. O., Foy, P., & Aurora, A. (2012). *TIMSS 2011 International results in mathematics*. Chestnut Hill: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, Boston College. <http://timss.bc.edu/timss2011/international-results-mathematics.html>. Accessed 13 Jan 2013.
- Munford, R., & Sanders, J. (Eds.). (2003). *Making a difference in families: Research that creates change*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Nutley, S., Walter, I., & Davies, H. (2007). *Using evidence: How research can inform public services*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Ohi, S. (2008). The teacher's role in the research-praxis nexus. *Australian Journal of Education*, 52(1), 95–108.
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2001). *Starting strong: Early childhood education and care*. Paris: OECD.
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2006). *Starting strong II: Early childhood education and care*. Paris: OECD.
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2010). *PISA 2009 Results: Learning trends: Changes in student performance since 2000* (Vol. V). PISA. OECD Publishing. <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/48852742.pdf> Accessed 8 Dec 2012.
- Page, J. M. (2000). *Reframing the early childhood curriculum: Educational imperatives for the future*. London: Routledge/Falmer.
- Perry, B., & Dockett, S. (2011). 'How 'bout we have a celebration?' Advice from children on starting school. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 19(3), 375–388.
- Peters, S. (2010). *Literature review: Transition from early childhood education to school*. Ministry of Education, New Zealand. www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications. Accessed 24 July 2012.
- Petriwskyj, A., Thorpe, K., & Tayler, C. (2005). Trends in construction of transition to school in three western regions, 1990–2004. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 13(1), 55–69.
- Pianta, R. C. (2010). Going to school in the United States: The shifting ecology of transition. In S. L. Kagan & K. Tarrant (Eds.), *Transitions for young children* (pp. 33–44). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Ramey, C. T., & Ramey, S. L. (1999). Beginning school for children at risk. In R. C. Pianta & M. J. Cox (Eds.), *The transition to Kindergarten* (pp. 217–251). Baltimore: Paul Brookes.
- Rickinson, M., Sebba, J., & Edwards, A. (2011). *Improving research through user engagement*. London: Routledge.
- Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., & Pianta, R. C. (2000). An ecological perspective on children's transition to kindergarten: A theoretical framework to guide empirical research. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 21(5), 491–511.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Saleebey, D. (Ed.). (1997). *Common purpose: Strengthening families and neighbourhoods to rebuild America*. New York: Anchor.
- Sameroff, A. J. (Ed.). (2009). *The transactional model of development: How children and contexts shape each other*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

- Scott-Little, C., Kagan, S., & Frelow, V. (2006). Conceptualisation of readiness and the content of early learning standards: The intersection of policy and research? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 21, 153–173.
- Smart, D., Sanson, A., Baxter, B., Edwards, B., & Hayes, A. (2008). *Home-to-school transitions for financially disadvantaged children: Summary report*. Sydney: The Smith Family and Australian Institute of Family Studies. <http://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/site/page.cfm?u=105>. Accessed 13 Mar 2010.
- Tseng, V. (2012). The uses of research in policy and practice. *Social Policy Report*, 26(2), 1–16.
- Turner, V. W. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). (2012). *School readiness: A conceptual framework*. http://www.unicef.org/education/files/Chil2Child_ConceptualFramework_FINAL%281%29.pdf. Accessed 23 Jan 2013.
- van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage*. (trans: Minika, B. V. & G. L. Caffee). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Vogler, P., Crivello, G., & Woodhead, M. (2008). *Early childhood transitions research: A review of concepts, theory and practice*. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.
- Vrinioti, K., Einarsdóttir, J., & Broström, S. (2010). Transitions from preschool to primary school (pp. 16–20). In H. Müller (Ed.) *Transition from pre-school to school: Emphasising literacy. Comments and reflection by researchers from eight European countries*. Cologne: EU-Agency, Regional Government of Cologne/Germany.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wertsch, J. V. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Yeboah, D. A. (2002). Enhancing transition from early childhood phase to primary education: Evidence from the research literature. *Early Years*, 11(1), 51–68.