Chapter 16
Starting School: Synthesis and Analysis

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16.1 Introduction

At the 2010 Starting School: Research, Policy and Practice conference, higher degree research students were asked to consolidate the critiques of individual papers into an overview that could inform the ongoing development of the *Transition to School: Position Statement* (Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group 2011). This group of students—some now graduated—has undertaken a similar task in developing this chapter.

16.2 Considering Context in the Research

The preceding chapters offer insights into the importance of context in transitions and transitions to school research. Indeed, the chapters themselves and the research they represent are a lesson in context and demonstrate the impact of physical, social and political contexts on both the ways in which children experience transition and the ways in which transitions research is conducted.

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A provocation raised in these chapters is the varied ways of considering context—both at the theoretical level and in more pragmatic ways. At the theoretical level, the predominant stance across many of the chapters is that of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, with its nested spheres of influence and proximal processes each impacting upon children's transitions in diverse ways. As Murray (Chap. 4) explains, utilisation of an ecological model positions the child at the centre as an active agent in the transition process. Be it Turunen's (Chap. 11) consideration of macrosystem, exosystem and microsystem influences upon individuals' culturally framed biographical narratives of starting school; Murray's (Chap. 4) examination of the chronosystem and changes in perceptions and understandings over time (in this case, the first year of school); or Mackenzie's (Chap. 7) recognition of ecological influences upon emergent writing, the enduring influence of Bronfenbrenner's model of context is clear.

However, an important contribution made in this book is the theorising of transition *beyond Bronfenbrenner*. Petriwskyj (Chap. 15) encourages readers to consider how a critical theory perspective, with its interrogation of power relationships and its questioning of assumptions, may provide a more effective framework for supporting the diverse needs of *all* children during transitions and provide a more inclusive approach to the development of transitions programmes. A critical theory perspective on context shifts the emphasis away from Bronfenbrenner's notion of "child as central" to instead emphasise the centrality of the role of culture and the priorities of families and communities. Petriwskyj argues that this shift in emphasis enables transitions programmes to better support the needs of children and families from diverse backgrounds, including refugee, migrant, Indigenous, rural and remote, and other contexts often constructed as "disadvantaged". A critical theory approach to transitions shifts the focus away from the perceived disadvantage of these contexts to instead consider the resources, priorities and strengths of these communities during transition to school.

Also thinking critically about the theorisation of transitions in context, Graue and Reineke (Chap. 12) outline a critical constructionist perspective on transition, reflecting on how current positions on transitions and "readiness" have developed over time in response to social and cultural forces. This critical perspective on context-driven notions of readiness demonstrates how the perception of a child as "ready" for school is socially constructed in local communities, and how this perception is informed by the communities' different ideas about children, the role of schooling and the nature of development (Graue 1993). Indeed, as Graue and Reineke (Chap. 12) so candidly put it, 'as a result, one child will be ready on one side of town and not ready on the other'.

A counterpoint to Graue and Reineke's thinking is the notion that children and families need not be passive recipients of their contexts; rather, it is possible for them to be "agents" who actively shape transitions. As Dockett (Chap. 14) argues, 'the processes of transition involve both individual and social experiences, actively constructed as individuals participate in social and cultural processes that, by their very nature, are communal events'. Furthermore, children and families bring with them what Dunlop (Chap. 3) has termed "transitions capital". This notion has been

informed for the most part by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model—in tandem with a variety of other perspectives—because from Dunlop's perspective, 'the ecological systems theory works'.

Despite some views to the contrary, it seems the consensus is that the foundational elements of Bronfenbrenner's model—the acknowledgement that a child affects and is affected by the settings in which time is spent, the recognition of the importance of family, settings and community, the immediacy of interaction and interrelation between individuals and contexts—continue to have a core role to play in transitions research. Rather than move away from Bronfenbrenner entirely, Peters suggests researching and understanding transitions using a combination of ecological and sociocultural lenses, in particular, the notions of habitus, social and cultural capital as described by Bourdieu (1997), and Thomson's (2002) notion of "virtual school bags". This complementarity of theoretical perspectives allows examination of multiple factors which impact upon interactions between the individual and the environment and allows researchers to keep the "bigger picture" in mind when focusing on particular points bounded by time, place and culture. Einarsdóttir presents a similar blending of theoretical perspectives in her chapter, explaining how postmodern constructions of culture, time and space and an emphasis on complexity, irregularity, diversity and individual differences (Albon 2011; Dahlberg et al. 1999; Elkind 1997) cannot be separated from the social environment and Bronfenbrenner's notion that children are part of their environment; they are influenced by it, and it by them.

Despite some differences in how transitions and their contexts are theorised, there are some common themes across the research described in this book. In the next section, we explore these themes more closely.

16.3   Common Themes Across the Research

A key similarity across the chapters in this book is their recognition of theory as a tool for understanding children's experiences in transition. Although the chapters represent a diverse range of theoretical and conceptual bases from which to examine and understand transition, they are unified in their stance that theory is useful in determining what to research, how to research it and how experiences of children can be understood.

Another similarity which is clear from the previous section is the emphasis on context. All of the chapter authors agree that children's experiences must be considered, measured and understood with regard to the context, immediate and wider. Furthermore, there is agreement that transition should be understood "in context", and contextual factors which influence transition need to be identified and investigated. Social contexts are viewed as very important influences on children's transitions, and there is consensus that, as Lam, in particular, discusses in Chap. 10, transition contexts and practices are crucial factors affecting children's responses and adaptation. These include, but are not limited to, the individual, the systemic and the wider political contexts and practices that work in symbiosis to

shape the transition to school. Harrison (Chap. 5) asserts that particular elements of social contexts such as student-teacher relationships in school classrooms 'are likely to have direct or indirect influence on children's experience of school transition' and further offers that these can be examined through statistical analysis in large-scale studies 'to explain children's different outcomes and developmental pathways through school'.

Across the chapters, the importance of relationships in transitions consistently emerges as a core theme. As outlined by Peters (Chap. 8), the underpinnings of successful and effective transitions to school have a central theme that recognises the experiences of the individual and the interactions that occur within the relationships that exist in home and school environments. Positive and respectful relationships form the basis for more positive, effective and successful outcomes in transition to school. Margetts (Chap. 6) argues that relationships form the basis of effective communication and transition programme design and suggests building collaborative partnerships between home, school and community to develop transition programmes which are relevant to the needs of the school community.

Another common thread across several of the chapters, namely, Harrison (Chap. 5), Lam (Chap. 10), Mackenzie (Chap. 7), is the examination of continuity—or indeed, *dis*continuity—of children's experiences from prior-to-school settings to school settings. Mackenzie asserts that transitions may be complicated by a mismatch between what happens in preschools and schools in regard to standards, curricula, assessment processes, teachers' beliefs and different pedagogical approaches. She argues that the shift from preschool to school may disrupt children's learning (Stephenson and Parsons 2007) and that the challenge for children is successfully to make the transition from the preschool environment where they have a great deal of agency to the tighter, more controlled, school environment. Lam suggests that the process of children adapting to the new environment is important to study, while Harrison, in a similar vein to Mackenzie, argues that it is what happens before school as well as at school that is important for transitions.

While there may be some who lament the differences between preschools and schools, Perry (Chap. 13) emphasises that prior-to-school settings, including children's homes, and schools have different purposes and different ways of achieving these purposes (Dockett et al. 2007). As Perry explains, children want school to be different from what they have experienced before and expect to engage in tasks that are different from those in prior-to-school settings. The challenge, though, is in determining how different these settings should be. Lam (Chap. 10) suggests that the gap should be just big enough so that it is suitably challenging for children and promotes ongoing learning, but not so big 'that a child moves from being proud and strong in his own identity to failing' (Perry Chap. 13).

A suggestion for supporting transitions "across the border" from preschool to school is provided by Peters (Chap. 8). She suggests that the key to successful transitions across the border lies in creating shared understandings (the "borderlands") in educational environments which support children's continued learning and enjoyment of school, and build and sustain a sense of belonging. Much like Perry (Chap. 13) and Petriwskyj (Chap. 15), Peters argues that a social justice perspective

can assist in building these shared understandings by acknowledging the social and cultural capital of each child in their transition to school, thus creating the context for building shared meanings across prior-to-school and school contexts.

While social justice perspectives promote the notion of "ready schools"—that is, the schools being positioned as welcoming and accommodating of the unique strengths and needs of children and families—readiness of the child is still a discourse in transition influencing research and is a topic of discussion across several chapters in this book. With a growing awareness by governments of the importance of early years education comes a renewed interest in the "readiness" of children for school. This has been a persistent issue in the United States where, as Graue and Reineke (Chap. 12) describe, there has been strong emphasis on "readiness" since the early twentieth century. Harrison (Chap. 5) also describes the current emphasis on children being "ready to learn", particularly in the United States, which has resulted in research emphasising the identification of predictors of success so that preventative interventions can be employed. Lam (Chap. 10), in describing the Hong Kong context, discusses a similar emphasis on assessing children's "preparedness" and measuring children's adaptations. Einarsdóttir (Chap. 2) examines the Icelandic media's construction of "school readiness", and describes the advice provided by the media to parents to assist their children in preparing them for starting school—advice such as training children to be self-reliant and follow instructions and preparing children for reading and mathematics instruction.

Graue and Reineke (Chap. 12) describe a complementarity of readiness and transition, in that both are social and cultural constructs developed in local communities. However, within the US context, the positioning of "readiness" of some children—resulting from differences between values and social/community practices of middle-class white families and those of colour or economic poverty— meant deficit views and the establishment of interventions. Of some concern is that in looking across the chapters in this book and the international contexts they represent, cultural divides and resulting deficit views are evident in most of the developed world and are a growing phenomenon in Australia. As Perry (Chap. 13) suggests, 'in Australia, as in many other countries, children and families do not live in environments that provide equal opportunities, and are not treated equally by school systems or, even, by individual schools'. Children are judged on the perceptions of their families' previous schooling, their race or their socio-economic class. Such views impact directly on children and their families.

16.4   Implications for Research, Policy and Practice

A strong theme throughout this book is the argument that children's perspectives on transitions are important, but have been under-researched. Murray (Chap. 4) has emphasised the importance of children as active contributors in transition to school research but has also acknowledged that there are challenges inherent in this, namely, the question of how to engage children in transitions research in authentic

and appropriate ways. Dunlop (Chap. 3) has asserted that children need to be at the centre of our thinking in relation to transition, and a challenge arising from this assertion is how to establish the central position of children in transitions research, policy and practice.

The *Transition to School Position Statement* described in Chap. 20 provides a means of achieving this, as it encourages transitions researchers, policymakers and practitioners to consider the opportunities, aspirations, expectations and entitlements of children during the transition to school. This child-focused discourse supports an inclusive approach to transition programme development and provides a moral imperative for all transitions stakeholders to consider the unique strengths and needs of individual children as they make the transition to school. Furthermore, the Position Statement reinforces Dunlop's notion that children are not just products but producers of their experiences—and that transitions are transforming. This is a crucial consideration for transition to school policy and programme design, in the sense that planning should, as Dunlop describes, occur with rather than for children and families. Graue and Reineke (Chap. 12) suggest that there is significant work to be done on incorporating the 'reciprocal funds of knowledge'—that is, the knowledge and practices that all families bring to their children's schooling.

Taking a slightly different (though complementary) perspective on the issue, Lam (Chap. 10) has suggested that future research, policy and practice around starting school needs to focus on what educators do to support children's transitions, that is, examining what teachers do in the new setting, as well as in the previous, that determines children's success (or otherwise) in adapting to the new educational environment. Harrison (Chap. 5), too, suggests that what happens in the school environment, including the teacher's pedagogy and the teacher's relationships with the children, is important and should be a focus of transitions research, policy and practice.

Graue and Reineke (Chap. 12), in considering the nexus between transitions research, policy and practice, have recommended the implementation of research collaborations of prior-to-school and school-based educators working with university personnel to inform starting school policy and practice. This suggestion by Graue and Reineke is in keeping with Peters' notion of constructing shared understandings and developing partnerships between educators in prior-to-school and school settings so as to better understand the borders that are crossed (Mulholland and Wallace 2000) and the borderlands (Britt and Sumsion 2003).

16.5 Recommendations for Development and Sustainability

Work presented in this book highlights that following children through the journey of transition to identify patterns which make children successful at adapting to the new environment is important for developing transitions research. Longitudinal studies present opportunities for sustained research on transitions—over time—as well as reflecting on both past, present and future transitions practices. Indeed, significant longitudinal studies such as the *Longitudinal Study of Australian*

Children (LSAC) (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), 2012) present many opportunities for comprehensive, large-scale explorations of transitions, and the work carried out by Harrison, in particular, is testament to the possibilities these sorts of studies provide for transitions researchers. As Harrison (Chap. 5) describes, large-scale, longitudinal research studies have so far provided important information about children's transitions to school, and there is a need to continue this type of research to understand the complexities of the interactions between child, family, educator and school/early childhood setting variables that impact upon children's success at school. There are unanswered questions that longitudinal studies can address, particularly as they look at outcomes over time. Furthermore, the examination of existing data sets such as those generated from studies like LSAC promotes sustained research in this area with the accessibility to large amounts of data. This sort of meta-analysis enables researchers to explore contextual and temporal elements of transitions without some of the constraints of initiating new data gathering on these issues. Indeed, data mining is a sustainable approach to research which provides many opportunities for new modelling and theory building in this field.

Peters (Chap. 8) introduces the notion of "borderlands", and this provides an interesting area of development for transitions to school researchers. Considering perspectives on both sides of the preschool-school border in order to create shared understandings has the potential to better support children's transitions to school. Sustaining the key ideas presented in Peters' chapter will involve further exploration and understanding of the borderlands that exist between early childhood settings and school, with a focus on developing partnerships to assist families and children as they cross the border and negotiate the borderlands between these educational contexts. With Margetts (Chap. 6), Dockett (Chap. 14) and Perry (Chap. 13), Peters suggests that a social justice perspective on acknowledging and gaining the perspectives of those whose voices may not be sought or heard is important in researching experiences of transition to school to build social and cultural capital and develop shared understandings for all transition to school stakeholders.

Another area for development proposed by authors in this book is the use of historical perspectives on transition. The work of both Dunlop (Chap. 3) and Turunen (Chap. 11) illustrates how we can learn about the impact of transitions by "looking back". The historical implications of transitions are significant, and the experience of starting school may have a lifelong impact. Turunen's chapter, in particular, highlights how the examination of recalled transition demonstrates that starting school is a part of an individual's "life course" (Elder 1998). Starting school is, as Turunen describes, one of the key life events an individual experiences and might contribute to a person's identity and life trajectory. Turunen (Chap. 11) explains how recollections of starting school are event-specific knowledge that can become part of a person's self-defining memories; and 'the content of self-defining memories is associated with success in relationships or achievement, personal adjustment and levels of distress, and they arouse positive or negative feelings at the time of recall'. The message of Turunen's research is that there may be a lifelong impact of the transition experience, and further exploration of recalled and historical

perspectives on starting school will make an important contribution to the transitions field of research.

Looking back on transitions also raises questions about the nature of the transition experience. Garpelin (Chap. 9) poses a question as to whether transition should be viewed as an individual practice or a social practice. Indeed, is transition a social practice that is individually experienced or is it an individual experience that is socially constructed and practiced? Further examination of Garpelin's provocation seems warranted.

16.6   Future Directions

The chapters in this book demonstrate that a considerable amount of significant research on transitions to school has been undertaken internationally, and this work should be celebrated. However, the chapters collectively also represent a call for further research in this area. Drawing on the preceding chapters in this book, the following would seem to be the key areas for consideration for future programmes of transitions research:

- Use of a variety of theoretical and conceptual frameworks to help understand children's experiences from a range of perspectives
- Examination of the features of home, early childhood service and school contexts that support children's transitions
- Amplification of children's and parents' voices in transitions research
- Development of a philosophy of transition
- Consideration of historical implications of transitions
- Continued exploration of large data sets to examine factors which impact on transitions
- Investigation of the influence of temperament characteristics and child-teacher relationships on outcomes for children's transitions
- Interrogation of transition policy and practice through the lens of inclusion
- Further reflection on how to define and assess a successful and effective transition to school for families and children

In addition to pondering future avenues for transitions research, we must also consider the policy and practice initiatives which might result from such research. Indeed, some examples of research-informed practice and policy are presented in the chapters which follow. In essence, the synthesis presented in this chapter provides the "bridge" between the *research* presented in Chaps. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15 and the *policy* and *practice* in Chaps. 17, 18, 19, and 20

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