

Chapter 4

Multiple Influences on Children's Transition to School

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4.1 Introduction

When children start school, they are predisposed to being a certain way and interacting with others in a certain way, and this impacts upon their experiences and interactions. It also has important implications for transitions theory and practice, particularly related to understanding the importance of relationships. Relationships play a crucial role in transitions. Relationships with significant others underpin children's feelings about school, personal success in school and the support networks available for children. There is some literature dedicated to seeing shared social spaces as places for academic learning and child development (e.g. Leander et al. 2010). Seeing social spaces as contexts for perspectives and relationships is also important when attempting to understand transition processes. In considering children's perspectives of starting school, we need to acknowledge that these perspectives are part of shared social spaces between children, their peers and their teachers and other adults. Children co-construct their transition experiences (Dunlop 2003) and are not passive participants in relationships; they make an active contribution to relationships and to social spaces, based on their personal characteristics, prior relationship experience and their ways of knowing and doing. It is this dynamic nature of relationships in context which is represented by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

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4.2 Theoretical Perspectives

Adopting an ecological perspective not only illustrates that children are placed at the centre of the transition process but also takes into account the active role they play in their learning and development and the variety of environmental factors which impact on the processes of transitioning and adjusting to school, including school transition or orientation activities, the school and classroom setting and the differences between prior-to-school settings and school settings. An ecological perspective refers to the bidirectional interactions between children and their environment and how those interactions are experienced (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998). This perspective is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original ecological systems work which set out to explain the way development occurs in context and the 'dynamic, interactive relationships' among contexts (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998, p. 994). The environment in which a person lives and interacts is a key feature of the context of development and, again, something that changes over time. The multifaceted layers of context which influence children's learning and development need to be considered over time, with both individuals and contexts (e.g. social policy, opinions, cultural changes) changing over time.

Bowes and Hayes (2000) note the addition of the 'chronosystem' by Bronfenbrenner, which represents the change over time in individuals and the contexts which influence individual developmental outcomes. In 1995, Bronfenbrenner proposed the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model and explained how an individual's developmental life course is 'embedded in and powerfully shaped by conditions and events occurring during the historical period through which the person lives' (1995, p. 641). While the dimension of time is important when thinking about the influence a positive adjustment to school has on children's later outcomes, giving consideration to time also encourages us to think about transition as a process, which begins long before children start school, and continues past the first day, first week or first term. Transitioning is something which requires personal growth in the social, emotional and physical spaces of a new environment and, as with all developmental changes, requires constant theorising and reflection by practitioners, researchers and policy makers.

Placing children at the centre of the process of transition acknowledges the important influence they have on interactions and experiences. However, we need to be cautious that this 'location' does not isolate children. It seems important to ask ourselves: Does this placement allow children's relationships with others to be as important as what the children themselves bring to experiences/events during the transition process? What are the social and emotional spaces in which children interact and participate during transition? What connections do children have to these spaces and what can they contribute to social spaces in particular?

Success in transition is evidenced by positive social, emotional and academic outcomes for children, both in kindergarten and later schooling. Research has shown that the internal processes and characteristics children bring to their transitions play a major role in their success in adjusting to school (Rosier and McDonald 2011).

The proximal processes or 'enduring forms of interaction in the immediate environment' (Bronfenbrenner 1994) include relationships children have with others (such as parents and educators), and the quality of these interactions can make a significant contribution to the success of transitions. The 'internal' characteristics of the child (such as their temperament) can influence the quality of their relationships with others. This is an idea theorised by Bronfenbrenner when exploring infant-mother interactions. Bronfenbrenner (1995) examined how children's characteristics influence the quality of maternal care, with consequential effects on developmental outcomes. He also stated that 'the pattern of these relationships varies systematically as a function of the quality of the environment in which the family lives' (1995, p. 625).

4.3 Implications for Practice and Research

There are significant theoretical, methodological and practical implications associated with adopting an ecological perspective of children's transition to school. Viewing the child as an active agent (Dunlop 2003) in their transition and situating children at the centre of the transition process means understanding the unique contribution each child brings to the process. It also means understanding that children are individuals who operate within a number of contexts, not independent from external factors. Lam and Pollard (2006) explain that transition is a shift from one identity to another. This idea is promoted by Ecclestone (2009), who explains the change in agency children experience as they progress through the education system. This notion of agency or ownership over emotional, social and behavioural processes is critical in enabling children to feel empowered during this time of immense change. A central tenet of ecological perspectives is that the success of children's transition to school is dependent not only on personal factors but also on interpersonal and institutional factors.

Personal or structural factors are those factors within the child, which are immediate to the child's learning and development and which directly and indirectly influence a successful transition. These include gender, which is known to influence children's learning outcomes in early schooling (Hindman et al. 2010); temperament styles and behaviour, which have been shown to affect the way children react to and cope with new and stressful situations at school (Nelson et al. 1999; Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2005); and experience, including whether or not they have attended preschool or day care or have familiar peers when they enter school, which can affect how children cope socially once they get to kindergarten (Ladd 1990; Ladd and Price 1987; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2005). In addition, child characteristics of race, mental age and language ability are included as these have been found to influence how children adjust to the academic demands of school (Birch and Ladd 1996; Carlton and Winsler 1999). Recent research examining the predictive influence of these personal or structural factors on academic and social-emotional outcomes for children (Murray 2008) has shown that at the end of the first year of

school, children's academic adjustment to school relies heavily on child characteristics of age, gender and language ability, as well as their self-directedness in the classroom. Children's social-emotional adjustment at the end of the year was predicted by their feelings about school and their relationship with the teacher. Other factors of temperament, social support from peers and teachers and the quality of the classroom environment also influenced how well children adjusted socially and formed relationships with teachers over the first year of school.

Interpersonal factors are those which are based on key relationships pertinent to transition. The quality of teacher-child relationships (Baker 2006; Birch and Ladd 1997; Hamre and Pianta 2001; Howes et al. 2000) and peer relationships (Birch and Ladd 1997; Dockett and Perry 2001; Ladd et al. 1999) has significant influence on children's stress levels and ability to cope with new social and academic demands in the formal school environment. Positive relationships between parents and teachers, and between students/children and teachers in prior-to-school settings and first year of school settings, are also integral to the ease of the transition process (Dockett and Perry 2006).

Institutional factors include the physical spaces of the school and classroom as contexts for learning and development. The process of transition requires a shift from one context or 'space' to another. Many aspects of children's transition and adjustment to school occur within the contexts of the school and classroom, and adjustment is influenced by the characteristics of these environments. The classroom context incorporates two main factors: the quality of the learning environment (including the quality of instruction and the classroom management) and the social and emotional climate. The quality of the learning environment refers to how teaching and learning occurs in classrooms, as opposed to what teachers are teaching and what children are learning. Findings from the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002) suggest that the most effective early childhood settings draw on both teacher-directed and child-initiated learning activities and are responsive to children's learning and development. Classroom quality in primary schools has been shown to influence peer relationships and student behaviour (Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2005), as well as teacher-child relationships (Pianta et al. 2002). In addition, Burts et al. (1990) found that children in higher-quality classrooms exhibited less stress-related behaviours or anxiety, which would affect their adjustment to school.

The degree to which the classroom is emotionally supportive, as well as academically and socially supportive, also falls within the context of school. Reiterating the ecological notion of transition and illustrating the connectedness between aspects of interpersonal relationships and institutional factors, peer and teacher relationships are affected by the degree of support within a classroom context (Donohue et al. 2003; Hamre and Pianta 2005). Adjusting to the classroom and school context is a major challenge for many children during the transition to school. The context of the school and classroom is often culturally and socially very different from the home or prior-to-school environment (Pianta and Kraft-Sayre 2003). This is the place where many of children's peer and other social interactions and learning take place, not only in the first year of formal schooling but also for many years to come.

4.4 Challenges and Issues

Including children in research as active contributors to knowledge about their experiences, feelings, relationships and coping strategies is an important methodological and practical implication of placing children at the centre of the transition process. Viewing children as integral participants in research of direct concern to them can enhance rigour and authenticity in the measurement of transition processes and the bidirectional influences on children during this time.

There is a growing consensus in the early childhood field that research needs to include children's perspectives on their experiences of starting and adjusting to school (Dockett and Perry 2003; Einarsdóttir 2003; Griebel and Niesel 2000). To this end, an increasing number of studies have included children's perspectives or feelings about school and the teacher and their perceptions of peer acceptance and self-competence (Dockett and Perry 2003, 2005; Ladd and Coleman 1997; Lapp-Payne 2005; Valeski and Stipek 2001).

To date, two broad types of measures have been used to assess children's constructs relating to school transition and adjustment. The first group tends to measure 'global' constructs such as general school and teacher liking (Birch and Ladd 1997). School liking and school avoidance have been studied by researchers both in Australia (Harrison 2004) and internationally (Ladd and Price 1987). Some researchers have referred to school liking as school sentiment (Ladd et al. 2000), and others have referred to children's feelings about school as dispositions (Dockett and Perry 2001). Australian researchers (Dockett and Perry 2001; Harrison 2004; Harrison et al. 2007) have also found that asking young children about their experiences at school and the degree to which they like school and like their teacher elicits reliable information. Ladd et al. (2000, p. 255) have reported that the degree to which children like school 'may be an important determinant of their classroom participation, which in turn may impact their achievement'; therefore, measuring school sentiment in a global sense can be beneficial for research and practice.

The second group of 'measurements' addresses specific aspects of children's perceptions of particular elements of school during the transition process (Dockett and Perry 2003; Harrison et al. 2007; Valeski and Stipek 2001). It also examines ways in which these may be evident in different social and cultural contexts and the implications these have for these children. While Dockett and Perry (2005, p. 4) acknowledge that 'children have long been "objects of inquiry"' and recognise the importance of obtaining direct reports from children regarding their experiences of starting school, the challenge for researchers is to develop methodologies for undertaking authentic research, conducted over time, which contextualises children's perspectives and which truly allows children to have a voice.

The *Pictorial Measure of School Stress and Wellbeing* (PMSSW) (Harrison and Murray *under review*; Murray 2008; Murray and Harrison 2005) was designed to add to the small number of existing approaches that involve young children as primary participants in reporting on issues that are directly related to them. The aim was to measure school-related stress and well-being associated with

children's initial transition to school and subsequent process of adjustment by assessing children's perceptions of personal, interpersonal and institutional school situations across the first year of school. The instrument contextualises children's perspectives and uses qualitative methods to encourage children to express how they feel about typical situations at school, say whether or not they would share their feelings with their teacher and describe the strategies they would draw on to cope in these situations. Children's responses to the PMSSW are interpreted qualitatively using an inductive approach and coded quantitatively, which provides rich data as well as the opportunity to use quantitative methods of analysis to explore intercorrelation patterns, predictive relationships and changes in children's feelings and responses over time.

The PMSSW was used in a study of 105 children, their parents and 16 teachers, with data collection at the beginning and end of the children's first year of schooling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with children and the PMSSW was administered (along with other measures of academic ability and school liking). The PMSSW presents nine illustrations of everyday school situations, which relate to personal, interpersonal and institutional aspects of school and that are familiar to children, but which may provoke feelings of stress and challenge (such as waving goodbye to their parent in the morning, lining up outside the classroom and speaking in front of the class). Children were asked five questions for each of the nine scenarios: (1) How does the child in the picture feel? (2) Why do they feel (the child's word)? (3) Do you think they would want the teacher to know they are feeling (the child's word)? (4) Why/why not? (5) What do you think will happen next? Coding categories were developed for children's responses to the five questions, which illustrated the personal, interpersonal and institutional reasons for children's feelings, reasons for sharing their feelings with the teacher and coping strategies for these nine scenarios.

One of the purposes in using the PMSSW was to assess change in children's perceptions across the first year of school transition period. Comparisons between children's responses to the PMSSW scenarios at the beginning and end of the first year of school showed that individual children's feelings about school scenarios did not change significantly over time. If children felt positive when they started school, they were likely to report positive feelings at the end of the first year. However, changes were apparent in the reasons children gave for feeling happy or sad about school. Personal reasons (those which indicated children liked school and enjoyed the things they did at school) decreased significantly over time, while interpersonal reasons (indicating a close connection with their teacher, parent or peer) and institutional reasons (indicating an early awareness of the school rules and routines) increased significantly over time. This illustrates the impact institutional aspects of school have on children's reasoning and decision-making processes and reflects research by Dockett and Perry (2001) which also identified kindergarten children's awareness of the school rules and the need to learn the rules to function at school. Children were more focused on themselves at the beginning of the year and reported intrinsic motivators for feelings and their

relationship with the teacher. In contrast, at the end of the year, children were more focused on how they should follow the school rules and whether or not they were meeting the teacher's expectations. However, the opposite was found for children's coping strategies. Although children's coping strategies changed over the school year, compared to responses at the beginning of the year, children used significantly more personal and interpersonal coping strategies and significantly fewer institutional strategies at the end of the year. At the beginning of the year, children's strategies for coping with challenging school situations indicated a reliance on the rules and routines of the formal school environment, whereas at the end of the year, children seemed to rely more on themselves and explained using more intrinsically motivated strategies.

The degree of change varied to some extent by the particular challenge presented in the PMSSW. Scenarios relating to perceived peer relationships (e.g. watching/joining in with other children play in the sandpit) and personal confidence and independence (e.g. going to the bathroom by yourself) elicited the most negative responses from children both at the beginning and at end of the year. Other scenarios, which related to becoming familiar with school rules and routines, elicited more positive responses over time, for example, lining up outside the classroom and sitting on the floor listening to the teacher. Children's reasons for their feelings suggested that as they became more confident with the institutional processes of the school environment, they felt more positive about these types of situations. However, the same could not be said for interpersonal scenarios, with results indicating that as children became more familiar with peers and peer interaction over the school year, they also became more dependent on peer acceptance and less confident approaching peers.

Overall children's social and emotional adjustment to the personal, interpersonal and institutional demands of the first year of school, as measured by the PMSSW, showed a number of differences between the beginning and end of the year indicating the change in children's perspectives on school and ways of coping over the year. These differences may be attributed to growth in children's confidence, self-awareness, social awareness, peer and teacher relationships and an understanding of the routines and expectations of the teacher and school context.

4.5 Future Directions and Policy Implications

Future directions for transitions research should draw on an ecological approach to understand the process of transition. They should enable children to be situated at the centre of the process and acknowledge the multiple and bidirectional influences for children during this time. It is important to continue to include children as active contributors to research and active agents for change. A number of specific directions for future research are discussed below.

4.5.1 Authentic, Longitudinal Research Which Involves Children as Active Participants and Active Agents for Change

Authentic research is that which ‘gives power and voice to child research participants and which provides insights into their subjective world’ (Grover 2004). Exploring the transition experiences for children in large-scale, authentic, longitudinal research projects, which include children as active and reliable contributors of knowledge (Dockett and Perry 2007a), is a necessary ‘next step’ in transition research. Examining the process of transition and adjustment to school across the first year (not just at one point in the year) and continuing to follow children’s progress throughout schooling means that researchers and practitioners can understand what works at the start of school for children’s longer-term social, emotional and academic outcomes. While national, longitudinal studies such as the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (Harrison et al. 2009) have included information about children’s first year of school, in-depth analyses of the transition process have not been undertaken on a large scale, and this has implications for the precedence we can give to findings about children’s adjustment to school and long-term school trajectories. While there are methodological challenges surrounding children’s inclusion in research (Einarsdóttir 2007), the benefits far outweigh these challenges. It will be important for future research to examine not only children’s initial transition to school but also the factors inherent in a positive transition and children’s subsequent adjustment to school over the first few years.

4.5.2 Personal Aspects of Transition

Further examination is needed to identify the personal qualities within the child which act as protective factors against negative transition experiences. Research has shown that factors within the child such as gender, age, level of vocabulary and temperament (Harrison et al. 2009; Hindman et al. 2010) are the most significant predictors of children’s academic, social and emotional adjustment to school. Therefore, it will be important to examine further the impact that interpersonal and institutional factors have on these personal factors and the relationship between the personal, interpersonal and institutional predictors of a positive transition. The use of innovative methods to gather children’s views, which combine qualitative and quantitative methods and which provide a rich picture of the transition process, is an important step forward for transition research. Engaging children, educators and families in ways which are mutually beneficial and which offer holistic insights into children’s experiences will allow researchers to make important connections between microsystem, mesosystem and macrosystem influences and in turn allow educators and policy makers to better plan for transition. Examples of methodologies which have engaged children effectively include the PMSSW (Harrison and

Murray [under review](#); Murray 2008; Murray and Harrison 2005), the Feelings About School scale (Valeski and Stipek 2001) and Dockett and Perry's (2003) research which collected children's drawings, photographs and journals.

The findings from Murray and Harrison's research that show children's feelings about school did not change significantly over the school year but their reasons for positive or negative feelings did are important to note. First impressions seem to matter for children. This is not necessarily surprising, but it certainly has implications for what educators do to orient children to the formal school environment prior to the start of school, to encourage the development of strong, positive and supportive relationships between children and significant others and to enable strong context familiarity. It seems that as children become more experienced in the school and classroom context, their connections with people and understanding of events become more astute and so do their coping strategies.

4.5.3 Interpersonal Aspects of Transition

Further investigation of the quality of the interpersonal aspects of school and the dyadic relations inherent throughout transition is also required by researchers, to better understand what parents and educators can do to promote successful transition experiences. The importance of positive and supportive teacher-child, child-peer, teacher-teacher and teacher-parent interactions during the transition to school and children's subsequent adjustment to school is widely acknowledged (Baker 2006; Hamre and Pianta 2001). Future transitions research needs to examine the interpersonal aspects of the transition process, from different stakeholder perspectives at the same time (Dockett and Perry 2003) and longitudinally, to gather a holistic picture of the experiences of children, teachers and parents during this time and determine the type of "united front" required to support children. While it is necessary to understand the quality of interpersonal aspects of transition, it is equally crucial for this understanding to bring about change and influence everyday interactions in the classroom and wider school environment.

4.5.4 Institutional Aspects of Transition

Institutional aspects of the transition process often present major discontinuities for young children (Dockett and Perry 2007b). Therefore, investigating the quality of the classroom environment and the supportiveness of teaching approaches, will provide important insights into the most effective teaching and learning environments and strategies in the first year of school. Ensuring research provides teachers with useful guidance about what does and does not make a difference to children's positive feelings about school, and positive learning outcomes is another important step in making research meaningful for all stakeholders.

Examining the proximal processes of transition experiences for children should address how children engage in different contexts at different times and in different ways. Research tells us that “good” or better still “excellent” teaching environments and teachers make a difference to children’s educational engagement and outcomes (NSW Department of Education and Training 2003; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002), but unpacking the notions of good teaching remains a challenge in the early years of school.

4.6 Concluding Remarks

The challenge for both research and practice is to adopt a past, present and future approach to understanding and evaluating transition. In order to make a significant contribution to practice, ways of knowing and ways of doing, research needs to address three main questions:

1. What do children bring with them to school and what previous experiences help or hinder the transition process and children’s subsequent adjustment to school?
2. What are the current processes in place to support children’s transition?
3. How will the past and present influence children’s social, emotional and academic abilities in their future schooling?

The first question draws on the past and aims to provide guidance about the significance of children’s background knowledge and prior experiences to their current circumstances. It encourages us to address the personal aspects of transition and think about children’s emotional adaptation to the formal school environment. The second question examines what is happening at the present time, what are the current external processes which are enacted to help children transition to school and how do children interact with these processes and feel about and cope with these processes. The third question aims to provide some direction for longitudinal research and to support the notion of longitudinal research which is not only authentic and collaborative but which uses mixed-design approaches to methodology. We must continue to question the ways we include children in research, so that we are not only accessing their perspectives in authentic and ethical ways to inform future theory and practice but also empowering their voice, their identity and their sense of agency while navigating the transition.

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