Chapter 6
Transition and Adjustment to School

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6.1 Introduction

6.1.1 Transition

Transition and adjustment are closely intertwined. Transition is viewed as the process of moving into a new setting, in this instance the school (Fabian 2007). Rather than being an event occurring over a few days or weeks, current views of transition to school see this as a lengthy process occurring weeks and frequently months prior to, and after, school commencement. Fabian notes that it is not necessarily a linear process but rather a series of complex and diverse interactions. These interactions typically include transition programmes—a series of activities and events designed and implemented prior to and in the early weeks of schooling to support understanding and familiarity of children and families with the new school and the school with the children and families. The activities usually involve visits to schools for children and families, visits between schools and early childhood services for children and educators, and the formal and informal sharing of information (Margetts 2007a). This reflects the contemporary view of children's transition to school being the shared responsibility of families, children, schools and communities (Petriwskyj 2010). It has been suggested that transition is not complete until the child and family have achieved a sense of well-being or comfort and 'oneness' with the new setting (Laevers et al. 1997), and this is recognised by educators (Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group 2011).

This 'oneness' or belonging is a key indicator of a successful transition. The greater the changes that need to be negotiated, the more difficult it can be for children and

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families to manage the increasing demands of the new environment and to make a successful transition and adjustment in the early years of school (Margetts 2007b).

6.1.2 Adjustment

Oneness is associated with a child's sense of identity and belonging—the extent to which they feel valued and supported and connected with others and the new setting—as they encounter the inevitable challenges of a new environment, people, routines, rules and expectations. This capacity to adapt to and contribute to the new school setting is evidence of children's resilience and well-being (Compas 2006; Dunlop and Fabian 2002), characterised by children feeling secure, relaxed and comfortable (rather than anxious, lonely, confused or upset) and having positive attitudes and feelings about school and learning (Astbury 2009; Broström 2003; Chaplin et al. 2009). Feeling competent and capable is closely linked to children's ongoing learning and well-being and their sense of identity or self-concept (Jindal-Snape and Miller 2008; Richards and Steele 2007). Having a strong sense of identity appears to support children's ability to persevere and to protect them from experiencing stress during transitions and other potentially stressful situations (Merry 2002). Identity can also be supported through a shared collective vulnerability: as newcomers, children starting school are not alone. Regardless of different abilities and experiences, they are in the same position as the other children starting school (Garpelin 2004).

There has been strong support for adjustment to be measured in terms of social and emotional/behavioural adjustments in a variety of domains, and including academic competence (Gresham et al. 2010). Gresham and Elliott (1987) suggested that the constructs of adjustment involve social skills and adaptive behaviour in combination. Social skills contribute to adjustment and represent behaviours which, in specific situations, predict important social outcomes for children, including interpersonal behaviour, self-related behaviour, academic-related skills, assertion, peer acceptance and communication skills. Adaptive behaviour is viewed as the effectiveness and degree to which an individual meets social or cultural standards related to personal independence and social responsibility. These behaviours include independence, physical development, self-direction, personal responsibility and functional academic skills.

Measures of adjustment in terms of social skills have included constructs or domains related to peer relationships (Klein and Ballantine 1988; Ladd et al. 1997); the degree of discomfort and avoidance children express relative to peers (Ladd and Price 1987); social competence (Ladd and Price 1987; Moore et al. 1988); the forming of relationships with adults in the school (Klein and Ballantine 1988); dependency (Barth and Parke 1993); independence (Harrison and Ungerer 2000); loneliness and social dissatisfaction, school liking and avoidance (Ladd et al. 1997; Reynolds et al. 1992); and anxiety (Spence 1998).

The social behaviours that contribute to children's adjustment to school include interactional skills, problem-solving skills, self-reliance and determination and knowing about 'not knowing' and what to do about it (Fabian 2000). Cooperative play behaviours, nondisruptive group entry strategies and skilled verbal communication are also important (Maxwell and Eller 1994).

Behavioural domains of adjustment include describing difficulties in terms of internalising and externalising behaviours (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network 1996, 2001), anxiety behaviours in class (Ladd and Price 1987), adaptability (Moore et al. 1988), accepting and conforming to the demands of classroom routine and organisation (Renwick 1984), and restlessness, fidgeting and poor concentration (Rydell 1989). Being responsible for one's own behaviour, responding appropriately to conflict and controlling one's feelings such as not hitting or hurting others or not verbally abusing others are behaviours that contribute to children's adjustment and are closely associated with emotional understanding and regulation (Margetts 2004).

As well as evidence of achievement in mathematics and literacy (Broström 2010; Hansen 2010), academic domains of adjustment include classroom involvement (Ladd et al. 1997), work habits, task orientation, metacognitive skills, intelligent behaviour and independence (Harrison and Ungerer 2000). Other domains of adjustment have included children's attitudes to the first year of schooling (Barth and Parke 1993; Ladd and Price 1987) and children's behaviours at home (Barth and Parke 1993; Margetts 1997).

6.2 Importance of Transition and Adjustment

Adjustment depends partly on past experiences and on children possessing the skills and knowledge to respond to the demands of the new setting (Margetts 2009). Transition and adjustment may impact on '…how children view themselves, how others value them, their sense of wellbeing and their ability to learn' (Dunlop 2000 cited in Margetts 2007b, p. 108).

Children are at risk of not adjusting easily to school when there is a mismatch between the skills, attitudes and knowledge they bring to school and the expectations of the school itself (Lombardi 1992). Children may therefore experience personal incompatibilities and dislocations as they commence the first year of schooling (Bronfenbrenner 1986; Erikson 1963). For example, children who start school neurodevelopmentally and behaviourally immature, with poor self-regulation and attention difficulties, often have lower academic performance than their peers. Difficulties in coping with learning and academic demands can then generate anger, frustration and despair and lead to behaviour problems (Prior 1996). Associations have been reported between high levels of hyperactivity and impulsive behaviour as children commenced school and lower levels of academic performance 3 years later (Merrell and Tymms 2001) and between low levels of cooperation, self-control

and assertion and reading and writing as children commenced school, with these relationships persisting into Grade 2 and Grade 6 (McClelland and Morrison 2003).

How well children adjust to school also has long-term implications. Successful transition and adjustment into formal schooling have been associated with long-term social and educational benefits (Alexander et al. 2001; Wildenger et al. 2008). The ability of children to meet the academic and other demands of school is supported by social and emotional competence (Fabian and Dunlop 2002). However, social, behavioural or academic difficulties in the first year of school predict similar outcomes 6 years (Margetts 2009) and 8 years later (Hamre and Pianta 2001). Risk factors in the early years of schooling are reported to increase children's vulnerability for difficulties in the next 10–12 years and may persist into later life (Cowan et al. 1994; Taylor 1998).

6.2.1 Assessing Adjustment

In practice, adjustment has typically been assessed through the use of rating scales or rankings completed by teachers and/or parents or peers. These instruments have been found to be useful for identifying specific behaviours and for validating and assessing social acceptance or rejection (Gresham et al. 2010). Sattler (1988) suggested that the use of checklists and rating scales based on prolonged contact with the child may capture rare and significant issues that could be missed in the direct observational method. Furthermore, it has been noted that checklists and rating scales are easily administered and time economical and cover a wide range of behaviours (Merrell 1989).

The involvement of teachers and parents in identifying and describing children's behaviour has been strongly supported. While essentially subjective, ratings by teachers and parents provide meaningful judgements of children's behaviour in the naturalist settings of school and home (Gresham et al. 2010). Teachers spend considerable time with children of similar age and different levels of functioning, and this contributes to their ability to identify and describe standards for academic and social behaviour (Teltsch and Breznitz 1988).

More recently the value of multiple perspectives—that of teachers, children and their families—has been advocated in evaluating and providing a comprehensive picture of children's adjustment. These perspectives can provide rich, cross-situational information, and any disparities can present opportunities for interpretative challenges and further investigation. The use of qualitative tools including questionnaires, sociometric measures, naturalistic observations, behaviour logs or journals and interviews with children, family, school and community members helps to construct more explanatory, personalised and culturally relevant perspectives of transition to school and provides a rich addition to quantitative sources.

The quality of parents' relationships with school staff and the level of parent involvement in their child's education may also be a valid indicator of a positive

transition outcome that can serve to sustain and support the child through transition points over time (Bohan-Baker and Little 2004; Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2000).

6.2.2 *Influences on Adjustment*

The outcomes of transition are mediated by a complexity of factors. The variability in children's development and early school success is influenced by a number of interdependent factors including biological and developmental characteristics and social and cultural factors (Bronfenbrenner 1986; Broström 2000; Crnic and Lamberty 1994). The settings or contexts in which children actively participate strongly influence their development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006).

The bioecological model of child development (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998, 2006) views the contexts or environments of development as a series of concentric structures. The innermost structures, or microsystem, include the child's actual experiences within the home, family, childcare and wider community. The next structures, the exosystem, include indirect influences on children's development such as parental employment, socioeconomic status and government policies and practices. More broadly, the components of the macrosystem influence children's development through the subculture or dominant beliefs and ideologies of the society in which the child lives. Furthermore, children's development is strongly influenced by the relationships between the settings or contexts—the mesosystem—in which the child actively participates, such as factors limiting the choice of childcare or opportunities for comprehensive transition to school programmes (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986). Interactions and collaborative relationships between family, school, preschool and community are important and should be acknowledged and strengthened during the transition to school. The fifth structure is the chronosystem—the cumulative history associated with the timing and duration of events and changes in the lives of children and families (Bronfenbrenner 1986). While starting school is a normative event, that is, it is relatively predictable as is the age at which it occurs, transition and adjustment are culturally and contextually determined and can change over time (Wesley and Buysse 2003). For example, Australia, the United States and some other countries have experienced a change in the focus of children's adjustment to school from age and cognitive skills to a focus on characteristics and qualities within the child such as their social and emotional skills, their cultural context and the transition processes that support these (Mashburn and Pianta 2006). Just as the practices around transition can change, the chronosystem also recognises that the context and practices associated with children's transition to school have the potential to support changes in children's ongoing trajectories.

It can be argued that children's transition and adjustment to school are strongly influenced by how children, families, schools and communities interact and support each other. Thus, investigations of social contexts from a bioecological or interactional approach provide understandings of children's development and background

and the opportunity to identify both positive and negative outcomes for children's adjustment to school. The identification of these factors should provoke the development of supportive, preventative or intervention strategies.

Consequently, studies of the effects and outcomes of transition to schooling must consider the shared influences of the child and their prior experiences as well as the influences of family, school and community contexts. These include child, gender, birth order, child's level of functioning, temperament, friendships, attachment relationships, self-awareness, self-esteem, prior-to-school childcare, family demographics and structure, parental attitudes and values, family cohesion, parent–child relationships and teacher-child relationships and classroom and school organisational factors, including transition support.

6.3 Implications for Research

In reflecting this bioecological or interactional approach to school transition and adjustment, my research has investigated interactions among and between a range of child and family characteristics, demographic influences, school practices and experiences. Although not addressed in this paper in detail, qualitative projects have involved the use of interviews and drawing with children, surveys and interviews with teachers to identify and describe key issues for them in children's transition and adjustment to school. For example, in a study that sought the views of children in the first and second years of school about starting school (Margetts 2008), children referred to their own feelings of being worried or nervous and suggested that children starting school needed to know they might feel like this. Analyses revealed a 'strong relationship between what children believed new children needed to know … and (their) suggestions about what schools could do to help new entrant children' (Margetts 2008, p. 15). Thus, schools should build on this ability of young children to provide authentic advice for dealing with issues that affect new entrant children and developing relevant transition to school programmes.

In quantitative research (Margetts 1997, 2000, 2004, 2009), the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) (Elementary Level) (Gresham and Elliott 1990) has been employed to measure children's school adjustment. The SSRS provides norm-referenced behaviour rating scales for the domains of social skills, behavioural responses and academic competence (Gresham and Elliott 1987). The social skills domain (items 1–30) involves the subscales of cooperation (including follows directions, moves easily between activities, uses free time appropriately, ignores distractions), assertion (including initiates interactions, makes friends easily, joins ongoing activities, invites others to join in) and self-control (including controls temper, copes with frustration, compromises in conflict). The problem behaviour domain includes the subscales of externalising behaviour (gets angry easily, fights with others), internalising behaviour (appears lonely, acts sad or depressed, has low self-esteem, shows anxiety about being with a group of children) and hyperactivity (does not listen to what others are saying, disturbs

ongoing activities, fidgets and moves excessively, is easily distracted). Academic competence is one small domain including reading competence, mathematics competence, motivation and parent encouragement to succeed.

Class teachers have completed the SSRS (Elementary Level) for each child during or after the ninth week of schooling. This timing is consistent with the literature and reflects psychometric views about the duration of the transition/adjustment period following school commencement (Ladd and Price 1987; Pianta and Steinberg 1992). Longitudinal studies have involved completion of the SSRS at different year levels of children's schooling (Margetts 2009).

Descriptive analyses have been used to describe demographic characteristics and background variables of children and their families, including participation in different transition to school activities, and correlation analyses and stepwise regression analyses have been employed to determine the relationships and contributions of transition activities and other background factors to children's adjustment (Margetts 2007a).

6.4 Challenges and Issues: Implications for Policy and Practice

Important findings from my research suggest that the participation of children and their families in comprehensive transition programmes is associated with children's early school adjustment, including higher levels of social skills and academic competence (Margetts 1997, 2003). It is important that transition programmes are developed in collaboration with key stakeholders including the children themselves to enable an appropriate degree of continuity between prior-to-school and school experiences, relationships and learning and social expectations (Margetts 1997). However, not all schools make these opportunities available.

Results have shown that children's adjustment to school was stronger for girls, children from homes where English was spoken or children whose fathers were in full-time employment. Girls were more cooperative than boys, and girls and children from higher socioeconomic families (represented by father employed full-time) had higher levels of self-control and summed social skills and lower levels of externalising and hyperactive behaviours. Higher socioeconomic status/father in full-time employment contributed significantly to higher academic competence. Children who spoke English at home had higher levels of cooperation and academic competence than those who did not speak English at home in the first year of school although this effect dissipated by the end of Grade 1. It may be that the background experiences of children afford some protection against the stresses and challenges of starting school. Children also had significantly higher levels of social skills and academic competence and less problem behaviours when they commenced school with a familiar playmate in the same class. Significantly studies have also reported that children had higher levels of social skills and academic competence and lower levels of problem behaviours if they attended preschool for

1 or 2 years prior to commencing schools. However, deficits in these domains were noted for children who attended childcare for 30 or more hours per week (Margetts 1997, 2000, 2004, 2009).

Benefits in terms of self-control and summed social skills and academic competence were also related to the participation of children and their families in high numbers of transition activities. Many opportunities to become familiar with the new school may act to ameliorate the negative effects of being a boy, not speaking English at home, and low socioeconomic status/father unemployment on children's adjustment to school, but not for children with problem behaviours.

The importance of adopting a bioecological perspective of transition is particularly pertinent when determining whether or not a child has made a successful transition to school. Since the conceptualisation of transition is in itself contextually and historically bound and experienced in different ways, it must be acknowledged that while teachers and parents may share some expectations relating to children's transition to school, they also have some very different ideas and expectations about what makes for a successful transition and adjustment to school. Teachers need to confront their own expectations and judgements and the extent to which they marginalise or stereotype children and families particularly in relation to socioeconomic status, ethnicity and culture (Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2000). Thus, when evaluating what constitutes a successful transition, it makes sense to obtain information in this regard from multiple perspectives—those of teachers, children and their families. The quality of the parent's relationship with the school staff and parental involvement in their child's education may also be a valid indicator of a positive transition outcome that can serve to sustain and support the child through transition points over time (Bohan-Baker and Little 2004).

In supporting children's adjustment to school, it is important that schools review the extent to which they provide flexible and relevant transition experiences with many opportunities for children and families to become familiar with the new school prior to commencement, and the extent to which they identify and support children "at risk" of poor transition and adjustment. Strategies that are inclusive of parents and carers who may have different backgrounds to the majority of the community or have fewer resources to be able to participate are essential.

Questions need to be asked about why particular cohorts are, or are not, participating in different activities and what activities are most effective for different groups. It is important to avoid deficit-focused normative comparisons of children, and rather than viewing differences as deficits, a strength-based approach should be adopted. In this way more equitable relationships can be developed that respect all people involved, build on the personal and cultural resources with children and families and promote shared decision-making (Davis et al. 2007; Petriwskyj 2010). This can be facilitated when there is collaboration between school, children, parents and community members in developing transition programmes relevant to the needs of particular groups of the school community (Margetts 2003). For example, given that fewer children/families with parents in full-time employment participated in visits to schools, including orientation visits, questions are raised about the timing of these visits and reasons for non-attendance by this group—evening or weekend visits may facilitate

higher participation. Further questions should consider the extent to which single parent families and families of children with a disability are included.

Schools should be encouraged to provide additional or targeted opportunities for children who are at risk of adjustment difficulties: boys, those from low socioeconomic backgrounds or those who speak only languages other than English at home. This may mean that schools focus on the importance of relationships (Dockett and Perry 2001) and become more culturally sensitive (Clancy et al. 2001). Pairing children with familiar playmates or with children from similar cultural backgrounds or providing opportunities for friendships to develop before school commences may support a smooth adjustment to school. Teacher interactions are also important. As noted by Skinner et al. (1998), children from poor or ethnic minority groups benefit when teachers are compassionate and build on children's strengths, have high expectations of all students and support individual behaviour, learning and development. The acquisition and development of skills and behaviours related to self-regulation and behavioural control seem to have significant benefit for children's progress through school, and it is important that educators are aware of these and support their development.

Further research is needed to identify factors that influence the participation of children and families in transition programmes, as well as strategies, both prior to and following the commencement of school, that best support children's adjustment.

The challenge is to build on the research in practice to maximise the advantages and prevent or minimise the potentially detrimental risks for children starting school. In particular, there is a need to support the acquisition and development of skills and behaviours related to resilience, self-regulation and behavioural control, for it seems that these have the greatest power to benefit children's progress through school, even for those children deemed most at risk.

The research on children's transition to schooling suggests that the entire context of the child's ability to adjust to the demands of this new situation must be considered. A broad range of factors including the child's personal characteristics, family influences and the broader social mechanisms supporting the family and child should be considered to provide insight into factors that support children at this time or predispose them to risk of poor adjustment. This information will then permit parents, teachers and policymakers to be more informed about the type of support needed by different children prior to, and during, the transition to schooling. In so doing, let us not focus on mindless conformity but rather on creating the conditions that empower all children to have a sense of belonging and to be "in control".

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