

Chapter 4

Commentary on ‘Transitions’

Bob Perry

Introduction

Transition to school is an important process for all involved – children, families, educators and communities. Transition has been described as a process of opportunities, expectations, aspirations and entitlements of all involved (Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group 2011). It is also a process whereby children change their status within the community – from preschool child to school child – and families change from preschool family to school family (Rogoff 2003).

During any transition, there is quite naturally an emphasis on the destination, where one is going, and a consequent de-emphasis on the origin or origins, from where one has come. With the transition to school, this results in the emphasis being on the school and much less on the home or prior-to-school experiences for the child and family. The argument is often put that this emphasis on the destination is entirely appropriate because of the differences that there will inevitably be between the format, structure, values, demands and support of the school compared to the origin settings. However, some aspects of a child’s transition to school do carry over from origin to destination, not the least being the child him/herself, the family and the values and beliefs imbued in the years before the child starts school. In reference to Australian Aboriginal children, but applicable to all children and families, colleagues have referred to the “fire stick”.

We not only use the term ‘transition’ which can imply a one-way journey towards something better, but also the term ‘fire stick’ period (an Aboriginal term for a stick that is kept alight to ensure the availability of fire). This highlights the way in which culture is not something to be left behind, but is an integral part of [children’s] lives. ... [Children] need to adjust to an extra range and layer of experiences, demands and expectations relating to

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cultural, language, and social skills. If these children are to succeed in the school context then they must know that it is safe and acceptable to move backwards and forwards between these cultures. ... the ‘fire stick’ period equates with the time needed for [children and families] to learn how to navigate between their home and school cultures. For young children beginning their school lives, it is critical that this time is framed in a climate of mutual trust and respect. (Clancy et al. 2001, p. 57)

While it is clearly very important to consider what will happen to children and their families in the primary schools to which they make their transitions, and we know that this makes a difference to the success of such transitions, we also need to consider what the children and families bring with them from their earlier experiences and learning. For me, the two chapters in this section prompt a great deal of thinking about continuity with and change from what has come before as children start school. What is the nature of the “fire stick” carried by children in quadrilingual Singapore?

The Chapters

In Transmission and development of literacy values and practices: An ethnographic study of a Malay family in Singapore, Mukhlis Abu Bakar (this volume) raises many important issues that can impact on the success of a child’s transition to school. Even though the chapter is focused on literacy values and practices, it has a much broader remit because of its emphasis on the nature and underlying affective components of family practices and their relationship to expectations of school values and practices. As well, the emphasis on the importance of interactions and relationships among all involved fits well with many of the accepted approaches to the study of school transitions (Dockett and Perry 2007; Pianta and Cox 1999).

In his chapter, Abu Bakar analyses the literacy values and practices of one Singaporean family and considers the impact of these on children’s school experiences. However, he does more than this. In particular, he considers how the school literacy practices might impact those in the family. This ‘two-way’ consideration is most welcome.

The parents of the observed family were critical of their own education, particularly in terms of religious education. Hence, for the parents, “The motivation for continuing to learn was partly religious”. This was also partly the motivation for sending the children to a mosque kindergarten. However, as the children move to primary school, a “painful” decision is made to send the children to a neighbourhood school rather than an Islamic school.

Many of the family literacy practices are based in the parents’ experiences with their own literacy and religious learning. Not only are texts, including television programmes and books, chosen with an eye to their religious value as well as their literary value, the father also recalls that he was not introduced to books early in his life and he “did not want that to happen to his children”. So, while the mother preserved many of the practices that she had experienced as a child, her husband

made substantial changes. This recalls many of the conversations about memories of starting school that have been reported recently by Turunen and Dockett (2013).

Many positive literacy experiences were had by the children – regular reading from and with parents, relating of book reading to real-life experiences and modelling of writing by and with older siblings. Nevertheless, there were anxieties for both parents and children as the literacy experiences in primary school began to impact on the home experiences of the child yet to go to school. The parents felt that they had learned from their older child’s experiences and their own, and, using the considerable cultural and economic capital the family had, they set about ensuring positive transition experiences for all concerned.

Impacts on children’s literacy can be two-way between home and school and the family studied in this chapter was able to mediate these impacts to some extent. However, the perennial issue of how much children’s home experiences are used by schools to help develop their literacy skills and knowledge is still moot. In any transition to school, the school usually supplies most of the change and the family endeavours to supply most of the continuity (Brooker 2008). Excitement, motivation for learning and new identities arise from change, with continuity providing much-needed stability. As Abu Bakar illustrates so clearly, what is needed is an appropriate compound of both.

In *“I believe, therefore I practice”*: Teachers’ beliefs on literacy acquisition and their classroom practices, Norhaida Aman (this volume) considers the impact on children’s early literacy and transition to school of kindergarten teachers’ beliefs and practices from two Singaporean kindergartens. While there is much interesting information in the chapter concerning the development and measurement of the teachers’ literacy beliefs, the major question raised from a transition to school point of view is about the relative importance of continuity and change between beliefs held by teachers in kindergarten and primary school and consequent practices as the children start school.

The chapter gives a detailed picture of teachers’ beliefs at the two kindergartens, showing that there were quite strong differences between the two groups of teachers. At one kindergarten, the norm seemed to be child-centred, activity-based learning with no homework, while at the other there was “a more conventional teaching model” which placed much emphasis on basic skills, repetitive tasks, workbooks and homework. (As an aside, such an approach would be deemed by many Australian prior-to-school educators as a ‘school model’ rather than a conventional early childhood.) Observations of classes reinforced these differences, suggesting that there is much more than individual teacher beliefs influencing practice in these settings (or, perhaps, only teachers who effectively hold the ‘beliefs of the setting’ are employed there). As might be expected and has been reported widely (Lara-Cinisomo et al. 2009; Stipek and Byler 1997), there was some slippage between individual teachers’ beliefs and their practices but the differences in beliefs were reflected in practice to a large extent.

In the section titled “The transition from kindergarten to primary school”, Aman raises the challenge of whether the nature of kindergarten teachers’ literacy beliefs and practices need to align with the practices undertaken in primary schools. There

are three major questions that need to be asked about this challenge. Firstly, one needs to ask, ‘What might make the primary school practices the benchmark for successful literacy learning by children at both the primary and kindergarten levels?’ Secondly, while one kindergarten specifically mentioned children’s school readiness as one of their aims and the other did not, they both seemed to be keen to ensure a smooth transition from kindergarten to school. They just seemed to have different ways of aiming to achieve this. So, is it even reasonable to be looking for one way of ensuring a smooth transition? Thirdly, while literacy is undoubtedly an important aspect of children’s transition to school, it is certainly not all that is involved and, maybe, not even the most important component. So, why should approaches to literacy learning and teaching be privileged above other components of successful transitions such as the building of sound relationships and identities?

Conclusion

At the beginning of this piece, I introduced the notion of transition to school being about opportunities, expectations, aspirations and entitlements for all involved. In the two chapters in this section, these constructs have been emphasised, sometimes implicitly, by both authors. While the topic of both chapters is young children’s literacy development and the roles of the children’s educators – both parents and teachers in kindergartens and school – in this development, there is much that can be analysed through the four constructs.

The driving force behind the actions of the parents in Abu Bakar’s chapter (this volume) seems to be the provision of opportunities for learning for their children (and themselves) as they move from home/kindergarten to primary school. Sometimes they remember these as missed opportunities in their own lives and a determination has built to ensure that their children do not miss them. It would seem clear that the provision of high-quality learning opportunities is the major impetus for the kindergarten teachers in Aman’s chapter (this volume), even though their ways of thinking and going about their provision might be different.

In every transition to school, all the stakeholders have expectations about their roles and the opportunities that might be available to them. These expectations arise from knowledge and experiences that have often been derived from literacy experiences. Older children, family members and teachers talk with children about what school will be like. There are very many children’s books about starting school (Dockett et al. 2006) and lots of people have memories about school (Turunen 2012) that they are happy (or, perhaps, not so happy) to share. Children listen to what teachers tell them about school, and, sometimes, they get the opportunity to draw how they feel about becoming a school child. Expectations can act differentially on children as both accelerants for their learning and as retardants. All people involved in a child’s transition to school need to be aware of these potentials.

Clearly, from both chapters, the role of aspirations can be seen clearly. Children have aspirations to be as ‘good’ a school child as they can be, not only but including

academic achievement. Parents have high aspirations for their children and, sometimes, try to ensure that these aspirations are reached through unnaturally filling their children with school knowledge before they start school. While there is some evidence to show that children may be better placed initially for school transition if they have more knowledge, it seems as though schools have a levelling effect, which means that these apparent advantages do not necessarily last, even through primary school (Martin 2009). Teachers, individual schools and education systems all have aspirations for children starting school. For example, the [Ministry of Education, Singapore \(n.d.\)](#), suggests that the mission for the Education Service is

to mould the future of the nation, by moulding the people who will determine the future of the nation. The Service will provide our children with a balanced and well-rounded education, develop them to their full potential, and nurture them into good citizens, conscious of their responsibilities to family, society and country. (para 4)

Under the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations 1989), all children have a right to primary education and to an education which develops their potential to the full. Singapore clearly values its citizen’s (including its children’s) education highly and it is in this context of entitlement that transition to school occurs. Parents, families, teachers, preschools and schools all have entitlements as children start school. Both chapters in this section recognise these rights as they explore various aspects of school transition.

All participants in children’s transition to school carry a “fire stick”. They are not only going somewhere or “becoming”; they are also coming from somewhere. They are, they have been and they belong (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Children’s literacy experiences do not begin as they enter primary school, and, as has been confirmed strongly by both papers in this section, they are entitled to have their previous learning and approaches to learning recognised and extended as they make the transition to a school child.

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