

# Preschool children's transition to formal schooling: The importance of collaboration between teachers, parents and children

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**TO OUR KNOWLEDGE, NO PREVIOUS** literature review has focused specifically on the effectiveness of transition programs that target collaboration between primary school and pre-school teachers, parents and children. Hence, in this paper we sought to review the literature on this topic. The findings of published studies to date reveal that, internationally, the value of teacher collaboration across the early years of schooling has been recognised, with research acknowledging the benefits of creating meaningful relationships between the teaching professionals, the children they teach, and their parents. However, further research is needed both globally and within Australia to evaluate the effect that programs promoting collaboration between teachers and families can have on facilitating the transition to primary school for all preschool children.

**THE MOVE FROM PRESCHOOL** to formal primary school is a daunting experience for many children, with challenges presented not only in the changing physical environment but also in their academic, social and emotional experiences (Margetts, 2002). Children entering formal schooling are expected to work independently, form new friendships, and adapt to the expectations of different teachers and routines of primary school (Dail & McGee, 2008; Dunlop, 2003; Loizou, 2011; Margetts, 2002). While some children may navigate the change easily, not every individual child is able to adjust so smoothly. To ensure that every child has the best possible chance of adjusting successfully to formal schooling, a wider support system needs to be put into place, with the teaching professionals, parents, and children working together. In particular, it is proposed that the greatest potential lies in the alliance of primary school and preschool teachers, with the aligning of teaching practices and philosophies across the two institutions ensuring continuity and support for children as they progress through their education (Dockett & Perry, 2003a).

International research recognises the importance of providing support for children when they first enter formal education. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2001) made a number of

recommendations, including 'Attention should be given to transition challenges [with] a greater focus on building bridges and curricula in both systems.' (OECD, 2001, p. 59). Recommendations such as this have influenced policies and strategies across a number of countries, and include *The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009).

The overall aim of this paper was to review previous research/literature that focused specifically on the effectiveness of transition programs targeting collaboration between primary school and preschool teachers, parents and children. In order to address this aim, we highlight the differences between the final preschool year of education and the first year of primary school. These differences, whether in the basic environment of the school or within the teaching practices, may challenge some children (Dail & McGee, 2008). While there might be other forms of difference between the pre- and primary school environments (such as the physical size of the two environments and the hours of education per day), we focus here on the pedagogical differences, given that a knowledgeable and skilful teacher makes the greatest impact on student learning achievements (Skouteris, 2008). We contend, as others have before us, that pre-school teachers (all

teachers working in early childhood services, not just those working in designated preschools) and primary school teachers need to collaborate, adjusting their teaching practices to aid each child. We also argue that further research is needed urgently to determine how such teacher collaboration is achieved to result in the best outcomes for both the students and teachers.

Our paper comprises five sections:

- The first section highlights the pedagogical differences between preschools and the first year of primary school.
- In the second section we reveal the research findings that developing continuity between preschool and primary school pedagogies leads to more effective transitions for children.
- The third section outlines the role of the teacher in easing children's transitions to formal schooling.
- The fourth section acknowledges that, while teachers have a fundamental role in easing the child's transition, the family has the potential to add another level of support for the child and, hence, should work closely with the teachers.
- In the final section, we present examples of transition programs in Victoria, Australia, that include building relationships between teachers across pre- and primary school.

A literature search was conducted between March 2011 and January 2012 to source prior research and government reports that have focused on the effectiveness of transition programs targeting collaboration between primary school teachers and preschool teachers. Articles were sourced from *PsychInfo*, *A+ Education* and *Education Research Complete*, with no restrictions placed on the publication date. Literature searches were conducted with combinations of the following key words: collaboration, kindergarten, preschool, children, primary school/elementary school, teacher, early childhood and transition. Studies were included even if the research was conducted in countries other than Australia; preschool included all teachers working in childhood services.

### **The pedagogical differences and discontinuities in teaching between preschool and the first year of primary school**

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The need for teacher collaboration across preschool and primary school is particularly necessary when the discontinuities between early childhood centres and primary schools are highlighted (Harrison, Lee, O'Rourke & Yelland, 2009; Margetts, 2002). The need

to create a balance, or connection, between these environments was outlined by Margetts (2002), who proposed that a child's success in the transition to formal schooling is dependent on the learning environment or setting. If a setting is familiar, then children can apply those previously learned skills and knowledge to new experiences (see also Timperley, McNaughton, Howie & Robinson, 2003). However, the more differences between the two environments, the more challenges and stress the child will face in their transition (Margetts, 2002).

While our review focuses on the discontinuities between the two schooling institutions, it is important to consider the view of the child as an independent learner and that time spent at school should be divided into blocks to reflect different subjects or areas that enable the child to recognise some continuity as they transition to primary school (Petriwskyj, 2005). Primary schools prepare for children's transition to formal education, with the first year of formal education structured to deliver developmentally-appropriate learning for the children, again promoting continuity (Petriwskyj, 2005). However, the discontinuities that exist may prove challenging for some young children, making the transition difficult. It is important to note that the origin of these discontinuities does not necessarily lie with the individual teachers (Petriwskyj, 2005) but rather has arisen as a result of inherent differences in the policies and frameworks guiding preschool and primary school curricula in the past. For example, until recently in the State of Victoria early childhood was overseen by the Department of Human Services, whereas primary school education was overseen by the Department of Education, Employment and Training, prior to the current Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) which now oversees early childhood and primary school education.

Internationally, there are many differences in the specific expectations of preschools and the first year of primary school. While these differences mean that children's transitions need to be targeted appropriately, depending on the country, there are fundamental similarities in schooling institutions across the globe that allow us to compare relevant studies. Einarsdottir (2006) examined the differences between Icelandic preschool and primary school programs, building on the general distinction that preschool focuses on play while primary school revolves around lessons (Einarsdottir, Perry & Dockett, 2008). Despite both schooling institutions having the same overall aim of preparing children to function in a democratic society, the key differences in the themes and focuses cannot be ignored (Einarsdottir, 2006). The preschool system practices revolved around caregiving, social relations and play. Life skills were promoted in a

flexible learning environment that offered children diversity in their choice of activities; Yeboah (2002) provided a similar overview of preschool from an international perspective. In contrast to preschools, the primary school system took a more structured approach, focusing on a variety of subjects designed to build the child's knowledge and skill base; this focus on instruction resulted in children losing some of their sense of independence as there was an increase in teacher-directed activities (Einarsdottir, 2006; Yeboah, 2002). Fisher (2009) also reflected this general distinction in her English study, with national guidelines outlining how preschool, or the 'Foundation Stage', reflects a child-centred focus where learning is achieved through play while 'Year 1' primary schooling embraces a more goal-focused learning experience, with children focused on academic success.

Indeed, in England, national guidelines were established to ensure consistency within the teaching at preschool and that in the first year of primary school, with the guidelines not only covering teaching content at the two different levels but also how it should be taught (Fisher, 2009). Given the differences in teaching content, the ways the guidelines proposed teachers deliver this content were also different, with children in control of their learning experience in preschool, compared to the teacher-directed learning in primary school. As a result of these contrasting teacher pedagogies, children were not only required to adjust to the changing environment of the primary school, but were left to adapt to the more goal-focused teaching methods of their primary school teacher. If children find they cannot successfully learn in the classroom, this may have negative consequences for all aspects of their primary school experience, particularly if they do not feel as confident about their learning or worry about their skill level (Fisher, 2011). Fisher (2011) reinforced this idea with a report of the transition to primary school being distressing for children because they were concerned about no longer having the chance to learn through play. In her earlier study, Fisher (2009) found that, when teachers from both Foundation Stage and Year 1 were surveyed, the majority of teachers highlighted two key concerns about their pedagogies: (1) they were feeling 'uncomfortable' about the teaching methodology as they didn't feel the children were receiving what they needed from the teachers (37%); and (2) the differences between the Foundation Stage and Year 1 were very distinct (73%). Importantly, Fisher noted that, while teachers' concerns revolved predominantly around how their teaching practices affected the children's learning experiences across the transition, the children's concerns related mainly to the different physical and social environment of primary school.

In a follow-up study, Fisher (2011) provides an evaluation of one English authority's attempt to build continuity between the early years of schooling in their local area, with the project aiming to create a more 'developmentally appropriate' curriculum which had the capacity to connect learning in preschool with learning in primary school. Fisher highlights the key role played by the Government in dictating teachers' practices, with national guidelines outlining different models of teaching, potentially giving way to the discontinuities in the teachers' pedagogies as they strive to meet these guidelines in their individual institutions. Fisher proposed that, given the national guidelines emphasising performance for primary school children, teachers may be more motivated to opt away from the play focus of preschool in order to deliver material to the children that will aid their academic achievement. Fisher gave three key reasons for their eagerness: (1) wanting to change the formal learning experiences in Year 1; (2) wanting to create more opportunities for children to play in Year 1; and (3) wanting the chance to reflect on their current practices in a supportive environment. While some teachers remained concerned about delivering formal curriculum and reaching national guidelines, others re-evaluated how they delivered their lessons, recognising the value of changing their methods to best fit the children. This diversity in teaching practices—teaching some lessons in a whole group environment and others as one-on-one tasks—allowed each individual child's learning style to be targeted successfully, hence benefiting their learning (Fisher, 2011).

Another discontinuity in the teaching of preschool and primary school children is the vast difference in the language used in the two settings (Dunlop, 2003). Dunlop's (2003) study relied on interviews to gauge teachers', heads of schools' and assistants' beliefs about early education. Dunlop argued that, even if educators collaborated, the different language each professional uses to describe his/her practices may lead to misunderstandings by children and parents. She concluded that early childhood educators need to move on from a shared use of terminology to shared meanings.

From an Australian perspective, Petriwskyj (2005) assessed transition practices in Queensland, Australia, finding that the differences in pedagogies between preschool and primary school lay within the educational philosophies the teachers embraced. Preschool teachers employed progressive and humanistic philosophies, prioritising social cooperation and respect for individuals. While the primary teachers appreciated the value of these humanistic philosophies, they also incorporated behavioural and comprehensive philosophies, emphasising the systematic teaching of skills and teacher-directed learning. As a result, the key areas

of discontinuity in teaching approaches were in: (1) child-free choice of learning experiences; (2) level of structure; (3) amount of whole class work; and (4) the formality of the learning layout. In preschool there was more free choice in learning experiences, a larger focus on small group work, and only some tasks required whole class discussion. These discontinuities may prove challenging for children in that, where they once may have been praised for their individual style of learning, they may now be pressured to conform to the systematic, teacher-directed style of learning in primary schools. Although some children may take this change in their stride, others may struggle to adapt, with this negative experience affecting all areas of their transition and potentially their later school experiences (Margetts, 2002).

On a Victorian state level in Australia, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) has created guidelines for both preschool teachers and primary school teachers, with the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* (VEYLDF 0-8) and the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) respectively. The VEYLDF outlines three different areas of expectations for early childhood professionals, emphasising continuity and integration, engaging in family-centred practices, participating in meaningful collaborations with professionals of other disciplines, and conveying high expectations for all children they deal with (VCAA, 2009). In contrast, VELS have set 'essential' skills and knowledge that need to be successfully taught by teachers. The VELS take their guidelines to another level with the use of National Benchmarks, with clear levels of achievement for children. These guidelines, proposed by the VCAA for both early learning and primary schooling, reflect the differences in teachers' pedagogies within each of the schooling institutions.

The VEYLDF was developed from the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF), an Australian guide for families with young children, educators in the field and other professionals (DEEWR, 2009). The EYLF aims to give all young children in Australia the best chance to enhance their potential and be successful in their future education. This national framework proposes that educators' teaching practices should be based on the fundamental goals of building respectful, nurturing relationships with children and their families, and creating continuity in children's learning experiences by developing collaborative teams to support children as they progress through their schooling (DEEWR, 2009). Consistent with the Foundation Stage reform offered in the UK, the EYLF focuses on play as a means of educating children, with both sets of guidelines recognising the potential for children to engage in new learning experiences while enjoying themselves in a social environment (Fisher, 2011).

## **Findings of research: Does developing continuity between preschool and primary school lead to more effective transitions for children?**

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Ten guidelines for effective transitions to formal schooling programs were proposed by Dockett and Perry (2001). The first is: 'Effective transition programs establish positive relationships between the children, parents and educators' (Dockett & Perry, 2001, p. 6). That is, an effective transition program promotes positive social relationships and interactions between the key players: teachers, children and parents. This was demonstrated by Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufman, Gercke and Higgins (2001) in US-based research. Pianta et al. (2001) targeted preschool programs composed of children for whom the transition period was expected to be challenging, with the children completing an intervention program alongside other students entering the same elementary school. Participants responded to three questionnaires during the transition period, with 110 children and their families completing the study. The questionnaires were designed to gain descriptive results around transition activities implemented by teachers, and how the teachers and families related to each other in their working relationships. Pianta et al.'s findings showed that collaboration was highly valued and allowed for greater communication and mutual respect between teachers, parents and children.

Dail and McGee (2008) focused specifically on developing relationships between preschool and US elementary teachers, by having pairs of teachers across preschool and primary plan and teach a lesson together. The study aimed to improve the transition between preschool and kindergarten for children through the use of a 'Shared Summer School'. Children considered most likely to be challenged by the transition to first grade were invited to participate, with 60 preschool children completing the program. The 'Shared Summer School' program required children to attend five classes per week for six weeks, with activities designed to develop supportive relationships between teachers, parents and children. The summer program also aimed to introduce the children to the typical teaching practices of later education. After the summer camp, children demonstrated adjustment to the new environment of primary school. Through the use of school-home morning messages, parents and teachers communicated more about their child's reading and writing, building more supportive relationships between the school and the home. While this idea may very well have the potential to greatly enhance a child's transition to primary school, the balance between preparing children for the next level of education and keeping their learning at an appropriate level for their age and maturity needs

to be carefully considered (Einarsdottir, 2006). Teaching academic subjects in preschool to children who may not be developmentally ready, can be inappropriate, and not actually benefit the children's transition (O'Kane & Hayes, 2006). Also, it appears that the summer camp program was driven by an understanding that the transition to school involves children adjusting to the school environment, and ignores the broader notion of schools making adjustments for the children.

Using data from Western Australia, New South Wales and Victoria, Harrison et al. (2009) found that, when similar curriculum and pedagogies were implemented in primary school and preschool settings, children were more confident and engaged in learning, and a genuine collaboration was developed between all those involved in the transition. Harrison et al. relied on the preschool and primary school teachers to be co-researchers, with the final data composed of teacher/student conversations, narrative observations and teacher reflections. Furthermore, preschool teachers recognised the learning the child had experienced at home, and the primary school teachers were able to appreciate the existing wealth of knowledge children had when commencing formal school.

Another guideline for effective transition programs is 'Effective programs facilitate each child's development as a capable learner' (Dockett & Perry, 2001). That is, teachers need to recognise the impact of previous environments on the child, and acknowledge the child's previous learning (Cassidy, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2003b; Yeboah, 2002). Timperley et al.'s (2003) study, using a sample of preschool and primary school teachers from New Zealand, emphasised the implications of a lack of understanding about a child's previous learning experiences. Timperley et al. found that primary school teachers demonstrated little understanding of any prior learning. Despite the lack of understanding evident in the results, both preschool and primary school teachers acknowledged that collaboration of any level was needed for a smooth transition. Similarly, Cassidy's (2005) study examined teachers in Scotland's preschool and primary schools, with the primary school teachers highlighting the value of verbal reports about the child's development. Importantly, Cassidy reported that, while the sharing of information between teachers is useful, how this information is shared and how it is utilised in teaching practices needs to be reviewed and improved.

It has been widely accepted that transition from preschool to the first year of primary school is aided by a continuity of learning experiences; however, continuity may also be achieved by providing the child with many transition activities. Margetts (2002) compared preschool children who were provided

with a small number of transition activities to children who were given a large number of such activities. The results indicated that the latter were better adjusted when entering primary school.

Similarly, Smith (2002), in a study of the transition between preschool and primary school playgrounds, found that children who were provided with activities that aided in identifying feelings and promoting friendship developed a greater sense of belonging, formed more friendships and showed greater resilience than children not provided with such activities.

## **Teachers are the key in facilitating transition**

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As teachers are the first point of call for a child while at school, it is logical that they act as the primary support for children as they adapt to formal schooling. However, in the transition to formal schooling, it is the preschool teacher rather than the primary school teacher who possesses the knowledge about the child (Dockett & Perry, 2003b). The teachers from the two schooling institutions should collaborate, an approach that would ultimately benefit the children as they enter formal schooling (Dockett & Perry, 2003b). In Petriwskyj's (2005) study the teachers themselves recognised this need for collaboration across the schooling levels.

Einarsdottir et al. (2008) demonstrated a lack of collaboration in both Icelandic schools and New South Wales schools, with less than 20 per cent of teachers within all the schools meeting to discuss education and continuity for their children's education. Rather than actively cooperating with each other through face-to-face meetings or brainstorming sessions, the primary school teachers and preschool teachers were more inclined to invite the children into the primary school to become more comfortable with the environment and participate in activities. Einarsdottir et al. recognised that, while meetings between primary school teachers and preschool teachers did occur within the Icelandic schools, these meetings were targeted towards children with special needs rather than being a general practice for all students. Internationally, the benefits of teacher collaboration across preschool and primary school has been studied by Kagan and Neuman (1998) and La Paro, Pianta and Cox (2000). Kagan and Neuman provide a direct analysis of teacher collaboration through their administration of surveys under the Administration for Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) National Initiative on Transition. Kagan and Neuman reported a positive adjustment and school preparedness for children whose kindergarten teachers had participated in such transition activities as joint planning and information-sharing. La Paro et al. compared public and private

kindergartens to examine the educators' use of kindergarten practices to aid the transition to primary school. In both the private and public kindergartens, educators meeting to discuss individual children's progress was the most commonly used practice. La Paro et al. suggested that private school teachers had better communication with each other and involved the children a lot more in the transition process.

Harrison et al.'s (2009) Australian study explored the effects of integrating primary school pedagogies into preschools to aid the transition of children to formal schooling. The study also focused on teachers' perceptions of this action, with both primary school teachers and preschool teachers asked to reflect on how the teaching practices across schooling can be more closely aligned. Harrison et al. reported positive reactions from both sets of teachers, with the teachers appreciating the value in discussing the different pedagogies practised and learning about each other's settings.

In the Victorian DEECD final report of 2010 it is proposed that the introduction of 'transition statements' would allow a bridge between preschool and primary school, easing the transition for children (DEECD, 2010). These are reports prepared by the early childhood educators for the primary school educators, so they can learn about individual students and know how to tailor their education. A review of the transition statements compared the views of preschool and primary school teachers, with the preschool teachers consistently ranking the success of the statements as lower than the ranking by the primary school teachers. However, the initiative was seen as beneficial, as it increased awareness about the importance of transition for all key players in the transition process: preschool teachers, primary school teachers and parents (DEECD, 2010).

Mutual respect between preschool and primary school teachers is needed to ensure the collaboration between the two sets of professionals is truly of value (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2003b). In order to create meaningful relationships between the teachers across the early childhood years, and thus successful collaborations, each needs to respect the other's profession (Dockett & Perry, 2003b; Petriwskyj, 2005). Once this occurs, it is more likely that the primary school teachers will be able to take advantage of the knowledge held by the preschool teachers, and gain a higher level of insight into their students (Dockett & Perry, 2001). The preschool teacher can simultaneously learn what skills and values their students need to have before they commence formal schooling.

### **A wider collaboration: Teachers, children and families**

The teacher's role in ensuring a smooth transition is an important one; however, an effective transition

incorporates not just the child and teacher, but also the child's home and family. By introducing activities, such as the 'digital suitcase', primary school teachers and pre-school teachers, with the assistance of the parents, were able to communicate information about the child's interests and strengths. Harrison et al.'s study (2009) addresses one of the guidelines emphasised by Dockett and Perry (2001), with the recognition of key members, other than teachers, who can assist the child. In a recent Australian study, Giallo, Treyvaud, Matthews and Kienhuis (2010) explored the effects of a transition program targeted at strengthening parent self-efficacy in dealing with their children's transition to primary schooling. The study was a randomised controlled trial, with half the children and their families participating in the AusParenting in Schools Transition to Primary School Parents Program while the other half participated in the schools' standard transition practices. The AusParenting program provided the parents with four sessions which addressed practical and developmental issues associated with children's transition to primary school. The transition program equipped parents with resources to help their children adjust successfully. Parents were required to complete a number of measures both before and after the intervention, with their child's adjustment to school assessed through the 'Children's Adjustment to School Scale' (Parenting Research Centre, 2005) as well as the 'School Readiness Scale' (Gumpel, 2003). While the findings of the randomised controlled trial revealed that parents exposed to the intervention did report higher self-efficacy in dealing with the transition, it had no effect on the actual child's adjustment experience. Despite the study's lack of connection between parent education and a successful transition for the child, the intervention provided improvements in the parents' experiences which may, with further development, reflect positively on a child's transition to primary school. Giallo et al. argued that, by providing parents with appropriate resources and information, they may be encouraged to become more involved in their child's transition.

### **The current picture in Australia: Examples from Victoria**

Programs designed to build collaborative relationships between teachers do exist across Australia and within the state of Victoria, specifically, such as 'Linking Schools and Early Years' (Royal Children's Hospital, Victoria, Australia, 2011) and 'Best Start' (Cardinia Shire, Victoria, Australia, 2008), which specifically target collaboration between preschool teachers and early primary school teachers. The Royal Children's Hospital (Victoria, Australia, 2011) program, 'Linking Schools and Early Years', aims to create a supportive network around children as they transition to school,

with children, families, schools and wider communities building meaningful relationships to support the child. This initiative fits with both the Victorian and Australian guidelines in its emphasis on building collaborative teams, with both frameworks recognising the value of meaningful, respectful and caring relationships between children, teachers, families, and other education professionals. The 'Best Start Action Plan' program proposed by the Cardinia Shire (2008) has targeted preschool-aged children, particularly those from isolated or disadvantaged backgrounds, with the primary objective of increasing the number of eligible children attending kindergarten (preschool) programs. Long-term, this program aims to develop appropriate kindergarten programs for specific communities and build collaborative relationships between communities, primary schools and kindergartens. Programs such as these should be commended. Unfortunately, we did not find literature that has systematically and rigorously evaluated interventions designed to build collaborative relationships between teachers. While there is a vast amount of literature questioning how children's transition to primary school can be improved, there appears to be a paucity of research that has evaluated these programs; future research is directed toward filling this gap in the literature.

## Conclusion

A child's transition from preschool to primary school is not a single event of change that has only immediate consequences. A child's success or failure in adapting to the changing context of formal schooling has the potential to shape their educational and social-emotional futures. To best aid this transition, it is proposed that a meaningful collaboration be developed between preschool teachers and primary school teachers, with a relationship based upon mutual trust and respect. While this proposal seems ideal, rigorous and systematic research is needed to investigate exactly how successful implementation of teacher collaboration across the early years of schooling can be achieved for the best educational outcomes in children.

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