Transition to School – the next phase of the child's learning and development

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Abstract

The development of a more positive transition process for children in Early Childhood Education was a journey of discovery that was part of a bigger process for all those concerned with the learning and development of the child. I conducted this action research project at a pre-school in South Auckland, and the findings included strategies for improvement in the transition to school process. Most importantly, with the on-going support and reciprocal relationships between parents and teachers, early childhood teachers and new entrant teachers, the transition process was found to bemore successful. As a consequence, the process may lessen stress and anxiety for both children and families.

Key words: sharing of information, school visits, relationship and continuity and match between contexts, early childhood education.

Introduction

This research project, based on my interpretation of what the importance of a positive transition should be, prompted me to investigate further how the research centre conducted their transition process. By thorough examination of research literature I concluded that a positive transition process for children and families/whānau was important in order to cement a good foundation to the next phase of the child's learning and development. My research question I posed was:-

'How can teachers facilitate a positive transition process from Early Childhood Education to school?'

It was my belief that a positive transition could take place if there was a good relationship between centre, school, teacher and parent/whānau. Parents, through culture or language barriers, were sometimes too shy to ask about transitioning or how important transition to school really was. The practical importance of my research was to highlight the key points for a successful transition school. I discovered that this knowledge could have an immediate impact on the children's stress and anxiety levels, and also the parents who perhaps did not understand how to transition their child.

I conducted my research project at a low socio-economic, privately owned South Auckland pre-school. The centre was both sessional and full day care, with forty five children per session. There were four permanent and one part-time staff members. The centre was made up of diverse cultures, Tongan, Pasifika, Māori, Pakēha, Indian and Asian. The centre was well resourced and ICT was very evident. At the time I conducted this project, I was a student teacher doing sustained practicum hours.

Literature Review

Throughout the research there was overwhelming evidence showing how important transition to school was for children. Denham (2006) spoke about various points from the importance of social and emotional competence to school readiness, future academic performance and success in participation and interaction with peers and adults. Timperley, McNaughton, Howie and Robinson (2003) concurred that the success of transition would have an impact on children's stress and anxiety levels which would have an impact on their grades and retention competencies.Such transitions could influence their life trajectory and if these were not positive they could impact on their learning in a way that may be difficult to modify later (Farrar, Goldfield & Moore, 2007) as cited in Peters (2005). My literature review reports the findings of research which examined the importance of transition to school.

There is a complex interplay of personal and environmental features involved in the transition process. Children's readiness for school was often discussed in the past and seen as essential for school entry. Readiness had now been changed to be seen as a condition of families, schools and community, with thelength of a transition being important(LoCasale-Crounch, Mashburn, Downer &Pianta, 2008). Research has found that children's experiences changed over time. Children who found the initial transition difficult may eventually settle, while for others there may have been no obvious signs of distress but their learning may have been affected (Carr, Smith, Duncan, Jones, Lee & Marshall, 2009; Gallagher, 2005; Peters, 2004).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) directed his attention to the different levels of the environment (micro-meso-exo and macrosystems), both as having influenced and was influenced by a developing person. These factors all had an influence on the transition of the child to school. The microsystems had patterns of activities, roles and relationships which were experienced in a given setting, whereby the meso-system inter-related between the two. Events in one could affect what happened in another. Smith (1998) stated that if there were "warm, reciprocal and balanced relationships between pre-school and school teachers the transition would have been supportive of development" (p.14). A successful transition would be one where children developed a sense of belonging in the new setting (Fabian, 2002; Tamarua, 2006). This sense of belonging had been linked not only to school success, but also to later life success.

Transition is a relationship process formation between the child, parent and teachers. Children's friendship with others has been shown to be central to their experience of school. These relationships were supported by providing opportunities in the early childhood service, for children going to the same school, to develop familiar playmates. Families of children who went to the same school were encouraged to connect with each other (Dockett& Perry, 2006).

Transition could be planned and implemented by a team of people representing all those involved in the change (Dockett& Perry, 2001). Pre-entry visits could be organised for parents/children that involved learning at school as well as familiarisation with the environment (Dockett& Perry, 2003a). Children who had experienced the school through repeated contact were more likely to hold realistic expectations about school (Dockett& Perry, 2004b; Fabian, 2002; Peters, 2004). Mutual respect and acknowledgement of each

other's knowledge did foster an understanding on both sides. Parents appreciated the opportunity to talk to their child's teacher (Peters, 2004).

Pianta (2004) suggested that communication between those concerned should start in the year before the child started school and continue through the first year. Fabian& Dunlop (2006) also noted that if too much information was given very rapidly, or the terminology was unfamiliar, parents may be alienated. At the same time too little information might lead to anxiety. Information that was accessible in both quality and quantity was more likely to help.The sharing of reciprocal information allowed teachers to gain insight from families and the children that would have helped them support individual children. Having the child's early childhood portfolios helped teachers find out about children's earlier learning and interests. Broström (2005) and Jones (2006) also described the benefits of the ECE portfolio for school, saying that it allowed the child's routines, knowledge, skills and previous learning experiences to be shared with the new entrant teacher.

In my research it was important to understand transitions from the child's perspective. Research with children had shown that they were able to articulate their concerns(Belcher, 2006; Docket & Perry, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004c; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Fabian& Dunlop, 2006; Margetts, 2006; O'Kane, 2007; Potter & Briggs, 2003). Various strategies had been used to support children sharing their views, which included children taking photographs.

The early childhood centre and school teachers could implement strategies to support children's transition to school. However strategies alone would not effect change unless teachers were willing to be proactive in exploring barriers to successful transitions. Teachers were likely to be successful in supporting transitions if they adapted their practices in response to difficulties that children experienced, instead of locating problems, when they occurred, in the child (Stephen & Cope, 2003).

Teachers in both sectors needed to have knowledge of the curriculum and pedagogy of both ECE and school (Broström, 2002; Einarsdóttir, 2006; Hartley et al., 2009; Ministry of Education, 2002; Peters, 2005). Sharing practices and discussing issues helped to clarify the language used in each sector and developed shared understandings. Visiting each other's setting would have been helpful as this helps both sectors to value what learning and development occurred.

In conclusion, it came down to the fact that transitions are dynamic, multifaceted and complex. The notion of a 'successful transition' should be constantly revisited and evaluated within local contexts.

Methodology

Research methodology

My research project had been conducted using Action Research (Cardno, 2003). Action Research fitted in well with my project because transitioning to school at my centre was not as good as it should have been. The research question I had developed was:

> How can teachers facilitate a positive transition process from ECE to school?

Ethical considerations

It was important that I acted ethically to protect the researched, the researcher and the credibility of the research. The families and teachers were fully aware that the data gathered would be used solely for research purposes. The participants were aware of what the nature of my research was. Consideration needed to be given to the approaching of participants in both the practical and ethical sense.

Research methods

I used the qualitative research approach that looked in depth at the subject matter through the rich description of thoughts, feelings and words. The research tool used to gather data was by way of a questionnaire to the teachers and parents. The questionnaires were handed out to the participants and collected at a later stage. The participants were selected on the basis of those involved with the child on a daily basis. I managed my data through a field note book and filing system on my computer. The data was sorted out into question numbers and collated as to similar, same or different. If there was not data supplied I marked it as neutral/non-response. As part of the ethics requirements for this project, I made sure that the participants understood that they were not forced to answer or partake in the questionnaire. I used selected examples to highlight what the answers to my questions would be. I supported my findings by using theory from literature and linked it to my data.

The practicality of this research was that it was centre based and all the participants were located at the centre. I had access to literature which could be reviewed and I considered ethical procedure and cultural practices.
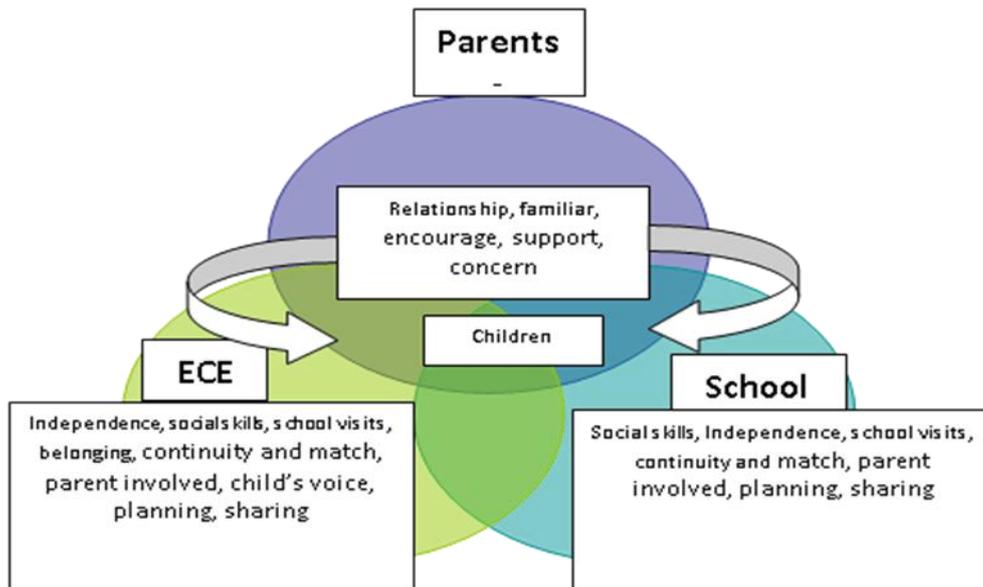
Figure 1 *Venn diagram - Linking ECE, parents and school*

Findings

I used thematic analysis as an approach to understand the data. I looked for emerging themes, recurring ideas or language and patterns that could link participants and settings together. By following the thematic approach there was constant comparative analysis through perceiving, comparing, contrasting, aggregating, ordering, establishing linkages and relationships and speculating data. The text was examined for the use of key points, such as repeated words, strong emotions, metaphors, images, emphasised items, key phrases or significant concepts (Mutch, 2005).

Theme One: children need to be supported in their transitioning to school.

T1 Response: "Make them aware of "school life", is like, ask their opinions on going to school. Make sure they have the communication skills needed to voice their opinions and needs".

T4 Response: "Get them ready for school through telling them information regarding big school what they need to do at school independently"

Theme Two: Parents and teachers felt that pre-school visits were important.

P1 Response: "For me frequent visits to Primary before they start would help my son to adapt 'early' and to have a feel of things; thus making it easier for me to know that his doing fine and I would be able to leave him"

P2 Response: "When the pre-school is involved in the transition to school a child and the family become more familiar with the school and child could adjust to school environment easier"

Theme Three: sharing and discussing information regarding the child's development, interests and needs.

T2 Response: "School and ECE services should work together for the transition process. Orientation program should be designed for the children, so that they become familiar with the school setting. Secondly, through ECE teachers, school teachers should gain all necessary information about the child which make easy to adjust to the new environment, e.g. needs, behaviour, etc"

Theme Four: planning a process rather than having a radical change.

T2 Response: "By planning a process rather than radical change. This can be done by preparing a child beforehand only, as such as, school visits with ECE teachers"

Theme Five: both ECE and school teachers should work together.

T2 Response: "I believe that these should be of course continuity and match between both as their partnership in the process will only bring positive outcome for the children those who are starting school and run the transition process smoothly. Transition become easier if there is high degree of involvement, linkage between both settings"

Theme Six: ECE teachers and school teachers should have good relationships with the parents/whānau; continuity and match should be carried through and that continuous support and encouragement given to both the child and the parents/whānau.

P2 Response: "When the pre-school is involved in the transition to school a child and the family become more familiar with the school and child could adjust to school environment easier"

P2 Response: "I expect a good relationship between these groups"

T1 Response: "Work closely together by communicating what our role as ECE teachers are and what their role as school teachers are. Knowing expectations of each other and helping make the transition easier"

T2 Response: "I believe that these should be of course continuity and match between both as their partnership in the process will only bring positive outcome for the children those who are starting school and run the transition process smoothly. Transition become easier if there is high degree of involvement, linkage between both settings"

T3 Response: "Well yes I think so that is why it is important to go on these school visits. I would be happy to share some information towards the children's teachers at primary about the children's interest, strengths etc, sharing their Learning Journey book and then get some information on what the school kids learn at school e.g. songs/games so that we are able to bring back to our centre with children & are familiar with this which will help settle or feel comfortable"

Implementing change

The strategies put in place to further enhance transition to school were:-

• Pre-school visits and encouraging parents to go along with the child.

• Focussing on numeracy and literacy

• To recognise their names.

• To follow on what both parents and teachers have mentioned in the data that meeting with the primary school teachers would be beneficial as this gave the child and parent a sense of belonging and eased the transition process.

• It was suggested that resources be continuously updated and kept within reach of the children.

• Children to become independent, self-sufficient, good communicators, social skills and familiar with routine assists with a successful transition.

• A Questionnaire was sent out to all parents to get feedback of their perspective regarding transition to school.

Discussion

The overall goal for this research project was to develop a positive transition process for children in ECE to school. The outcome I wanted from this project was to implement my ideas to the transition policy to help improve the management of transition to school at my centre.

Through doing this project I had increased my knowledge regarding just how important the transition process from ECE to school really was. The thematic analysis had brought forth

continuous themes of support, communication, relationships, parent/teacher child/teacher parent/child and ECE/school partnerships. I had also ascertained that pre-school visits and continuity and match played an important part in a successful transition, together with creating a sense of belonging for both the parent and the child. A few of the teacher participants spoke about sharing of information and resources, so that both the centre and school were familiarising the children with songs or stories that they would hear at both pre-school and school.

Research had proven that transition to school was a huge step for all those involved with the learning and development of the child. Cox (2008), stated that every child is unique and adapts to school in different ways. There was very little thought given to what the foundation skills for formal learning wereand whether or not the child had developed these or not. A child who struggled in their early years of school was at risk of developing negative feelings about their ability to learn so if the differences and ability between early achievers and now achievers were not addressed early, then these differences would grow over time. What Robyn Cox was saying was that, if we did not get the foundation for formal learning in place, the transition experience could have a long-term impact on the child's school achievement and retention (Cox, 2008; Timperley, McNaughton, Howie & Robinson, 2003).

This project had highlighted to me that teachers were the tool "to develop forces and capacities and above all an attitude of the mind as a teacher, strong enough to 'sow seeds of the soul' in the young children which will only blossom later in life, perhaps even in old age" (Steiner, 1986, p23, as cited in Gibbs, 2006, p15). As teachers we should value, know and motivate children to exercise autonomy, recognising that all children are capable of achieving.

I had come to know that transition was a process of change that was experienced when children moved from one setting to the next. These changes placed a burden of responsibility on early childhood services to ensure that they benefited rather than damaged children's potential. This meant paying serious attention to ensuring the quality of experience for the child as they transferred across to school (Fabian& Dunlop, 2006).

It was important to develop a systematic and integrated approach to early childhood policy development including strong and equal partnership with the education system, whichpromoted coherence and smooth transitions for children and their families/whānau (Fabian& Dunlop, 2006).

Conclusion

Research at this centre was a time of growth, challenge, change and adjustment for children and their families. Quality education practice can provide effective transitions between settings, namely ECE and the school. There would be continuity and match between the two settings and the development of partnerships between educators in each setting.

The successful transition could also be summarised in relation to the support given by the early childhood teachers and parents to the children. Responsive, reciprocal, relationships between all concerned was a key feature of a successful transition. Successful transition would include teachers who affirmed the child's identity and culture and connected with and

built on children's funds of knowledge from early childhood education and home (Peters, 2004).

It was evident from research that a successful transition to school for children and their families was of utmost importance. As teachers we need to develop social competence to gain knowledge, values, positive attitudes and skills. When these skills have been developed children are better equipped to respect themselves and others and interacted in co-operative ways. If they do not have a sense of their own personal power, they havedifficulty interacting in a constructive way with others who exhibit power (Gonzalez-Mena, 2008).

Doing this research paper, not only has my knowledge been broadened for future practice, but it has also given me the opportunity to advocate for children through encouragement for a successful transition.

Final Comment
"Smooth seas do not make skilful sailors" (African proverb)

Leaving children to 'sink or swim' on entry to school potentially left many children at risk of failure. In literature there was clear recognition that an early childhood curriculum "should not be predetermined by a school curriculum because the school curriculum is not intended to be appropriate for the learning needs of infants, toddlers and young children" (Brewerton, 1996, pp. 14-15) and that early childhood was a phase with its own value and purpose. The recognition was that transitions were a normal part of life and an opportunity for new learning (Beach, 2003).

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