



Transitions as a Tool for Change: Briefing 1

The Concept of Transitions as a Tool for Change

This first event set the scene for the proposed seminar series. Speakers led on policy, children's participation, family engagement and the long-term implications of transitions over time. The concept of transitions as tools for change highlights that transitions are often seen as potentially problematic, rather than for their potential as opportunities. In this seminar series we set out to think about how transitions might be transforming: for children, for family, for practitioners.

The OECD (2006)¹ noted that transitions for children are 'generally a stimulus to growth and development, but if too abrupt and handled without care, they carry – particularly for young children – the risk of regression and failure' (p.2–3). The time of transition being one of both challenge and potential provides a fascinating site for research into a range of issues and this research can offer important messages for early years practice'. In a Scottish context how should we think about early childhood transitions and how may we harness the potential referred to here? One of the answers is to advocate for continuity. In one of the early Scottish studies in this now growing field of transitions research, Professor Joyce Watt² argued for "continuity without sameness, and stimulation without shock" in the transition to school. Her study stressed the role of parents in providing continuity, being engaged in children's learning and understanding the purposes of preschool and school. Now with universal early learning and childcare for all 3 and 4 year olds whose families wish it, and for a growing number of two year olds it is time to reflect again on family engagement at times of transition.

Thinking about the different types of continuity, Michelle Neuman³, (2002) wrote about Structural Continuity, Pedagogical & Programme Continuity, Professional Continuity and Continuity with the home. Whereas Aline-Wendy Dunlop has always emphasized the importance of children's agency, parental participation and educator collaboration: "By focusing on transitions as tools for change .. an increased focus on children's learning journeys helps to ensure approaches that foster well-being and the agency of children to influence what happens for them, bringing about thoughtful reflection on existing approaches, to change our beliefs and practices in children's favour so supporting the child's journey. Shifts and change in adult practices, relational agency between practitioners with different roles and responsibilities, and from different sectors and engagement of and with parents allows the re-framing of transitions as positive opportunities, which become tools to change the experience of the child". (Dunlop, 2016, forthcoming).⁴

¹ OECD (2006) *Starting Strong 11 Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD.

² Watt, J. & Flett, M. (1984). *Continuity in Early Education: the Role of Parents*. Mimeo: University of Aberdeen.

³ Neumann, M (2002). 'The Wider Context: an international overview of transition issues'. In Hilary Fabian & Aline-Wendy

⁴ Dunlop, A-W (2016) (forthcoming). *Transitions as a Tool for Change*. In Nadine Ballam, Bob Perry & Anders Garpelin. *POET – Pedagogies of Educational Transitions*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Policy: Maggie Tierney ‘Childhood Policy and Childcare Reform’ (Deputy CEO (acting), Children in Scotland, Secretary to the Commission for Childcare Reform). Maggie took the participants through what she called “A whistle stop tour” of Scotland’s major strategies for children and families, highlighting the need to: develop a vision rather than dealing with individual issues in isolation; simplify the tax and benefit system; simplify funding mechanisms for both families and providers, and calling on policy makers and local authority managers to take a holistic view of the needs of families. Relating these points to transitions, Maggie, called for reform of Childhood Policy and Childcare Reform: Too often the child is merely in perpetual transit between poorly integrated childcare services – the “flexible element” - rather than in purposeful transition between activities or settings. Visionary reform opens opportunity for creative transitions planning.

Children’s Participation: Professor Sue Dockett and Professor Bob Perry ‘Children’s Participation and Voice in the Transition to School’ (Charles Sturt University, Australia). Bob and Sue began with the competencies and strengths of children, not just their needs. In supporting communities of practice to develop quality transitions they emphasized children’s perspectives, reminding all that children are experts in their own lives, the information they bring means that we should do transitions with children. Sharing that transition is a social context that influences all who are involved. Methods of accessing children’s views include conversations, drawings and dialogues: their views can be taken seriously and used to effect change. Bob and Sue suggested repositioning children as experts in transition.

The Importance of Family: Vanessa Paki ‘Maōri Whanau: the importance of family at times of transition’ (Te Oranga School of Human Development and Movement, University of Waikato, New Zealand). Vanessa emphasized change in transition and the courage to set out on a new path. She focused on what a successful transition looks like for Maōri children, informed by Maōri values which see transitions as ‘culturally constructed’ lived experiences. She quoted Dr Sally Peters as saying “Almost any child is at risk of a poor transition...if their individual characteristics are incompatible with the environments they encounter”. She stressed the importance of working together around transitions to understand duties, responsibilities and roles. She asked how we ensure as educators that children’s languages and cultures are represented in early education and school: for child and family well-being

Transitions over time: Prof. Anders Garpelin ‘Transitions over Time and Place’ (Director of Research, Vice-Dean of School of Education, Culture and Communication, Mälardalen University, Sweden). Bringing insights from the Swedish system which operates a bridging class between pre-school and school, Anders stated that we must take everyone on the journey because transition is a collective responsibility. Children’s identity is socially defined according to context and so they experience changes and these rites of passage need to be recognised.

Learning and Implications for Practice

- Continuity is important, but so is change
- Children are transitions experts
- Our systems create transitions
- Different people play different but equally valued roles in transitions
- The extent to which current systems benefit a good start in the following setting is a measure of quality
- For child and family well-being we must link home, school and community
- Relationships are a key indicator of early childhood transitions
- Children make shifts in their identity in transition, becoming a daycare child, a preschool child and a school child: each understood differently