

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Parents', Teachers', and Administrators' Views on Children's Transitions to Kindergarten: A Research to Practice Summary

Virginia E. Vitiello

University of Virginia

This study documented perspectives from parents, teachers and administrators involved in children's transitions from public pre-K into kindergarten within a large, diverse county. The purpose was to better understand how these stakeholders experience transitions and how they view their roles in the transition process. Qualitative results indicated a wide range of transition practices were in use, although use of specific practices varied from program to program. Thematic analysis indicated areas of agreement and points of divergence in how stakeholders viewed transitions. Results are discussed in relation to considerations for teachers and administrators interested in streamlining the transition from pre-K to kindergarten.

Keywords: preschool, Kindergarten transition

BACKGROUND

The transition to kindergarten encompasses the months leading up to a children's first day of school and the weeks or months after school starts while the child and family adjust to the new setting. The start of kindergarten often represents an exciting transition in young children's lives, but it can also be very challenging. It is particularly challenging for young children facing adversity due to racial minoritization or unstable family economic conditions, as well as for children learning English as a second language (Yelverton & Mashburn, 2018). Public pre-K programs, including Head Start and state-funded pre-K, seek to reduce the extent to which these challenges affect children and give them the best possible start in school. A common goal across these programs is to work with families and schools to ease children's transitions into kindergarten (Pears et al., 2018).

Many counties and school divisions make deliberate plans to address children's transitions and facilitate entry into school. Common transition practices include things like hosting orientation events, taking children on classroom visits, and holding parent-teacher meetings prior to the start of school (Ahtola et al., 2011). There is some evidence that transition practices like these matter for children. For example, the use of more transition practices is associated with better child

outcomes upon school entry (Ahtola et al., 2011; Benner et al., 2017; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Shulting et al., 2005).

However, just counting the number of transition practices in use presents a very limited perspective on how at-risk children and families experience the start of school. To present a more comprehensive perspective on this issue, it is important to hear from multiple stakeholder groups – parents, pre-K teachers, kindergarten teachers, and administrators – to understand how transitions happen within a system and how each group views their roles.

CURRENT STUDY

The current study used qualitative data collection and analysis to describe transition experiences from the perspectives of parents, teachers, and administrators involved in children's transitions from public pre-K into kindergarten. We also sought to identify areas of agreement and disagreement in the views of these stakeholders. Our research questions were:

1. What transition practices were in use in this county?
2. Were transition practices from program to program and school to school fairly uniform, or did they vary?
3. What themes emerged across parents', teachers', and administrators' descriptions, and to what extent did these stakeholders agree or disagree in how they discuss these themes?

This study was conducted in a large county that serves children from diverse racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and language backgrounds. The county has a central office that oversees all early childhood programming, but it provides most of its pre-K in school-based classrooms in partnership with the local school district. In addition to these classrooms, some children are placed in private centers and others attend standalone Head Start centers.

Participants included 9 administrators (three district-level administrators, three center directors, and three principals), 10 preschool teachers, 13 kindergarten teachers, and 10 parents. Participants spoke to us during face-to-face interviews or focus groups lasting 60-90 minutes. These meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were coded by the research team to identify transition practices and themes related to transitions.

FINDINGS

Transition Practices

Parents, teachers, and administrators described a wide range of transition activities. These activities fell into four broad categories:

- *Connecting with Families.* This included hosting panel discussions, sending information home with children, using apps to communicate with families, and hosting orientations or open houses for families to attend.

- *Coordination between Pre-K and Elementary School Staff.* This included meetings between administrators, joint planning by pre-K and kindergarten teachers, and sharing information on individual children.
- *Professional Development.* This included workshops and trainings on transitions, state standards, and suggested transition activities for pre-K teachers to implement throughout the school year.
- *Activities Involving Children.* This included visits to kindergarten classrooms, kindergarten orientations, learning about kindergarten from pre-K teachers. Some pre-K teachers made adjustments to classroom routines to get closer to a kindergarten schedule. Some kindergarten teachers conducted observations of individual children in their pre-K classrooms and did child assessments. Some children were also invited to participate in a school-readiness summer program provided by the school system.

This broad range of transition practices underscores the creative and diverse approaches to supporting children and families entering school that were apparent in this school district.

Variability in Transition Practices

Participants told us that transition practices varied from school to school. District administrators told us that they provide schools with guidance about transitions, but implementation of specific practices is up to individual schools and child care programs. Specific types of variability that were noted by one or more participants included the following:

- Different schools approached transition programming differently, with some implementing multiple, comprehensive transition practices across the year and others doing only a single orientation event.
- Pre-K teachers noted that it was easier to coordinate with kindergarten teachers for children who would be staying in the same school for kindergarten.
- Pre-K teachers differed in the level of individualized support they provided to families, with some taking the initiative to provide higher levels of support than others.
- Families differed in whether or not they actively engaged with the opportunities available to them.

THEMES RELATED TO TRANSITIONS

Three main themes emerged from our qualitative coding. Within each theme, different participant groups often expressed different opinions and perspectives.

Theme #1: Pre-K Investment in Successful Transitions

We heard the most enthusiastic and detailed plans for children's transitions from pre-K administrators and teachers. Several spoke of transitions as a year-round process involving multiple touch-points with families. Elementary school administrators and teachers provided more limited explanations of transitions, and several mentioned that they relied on the local child care office to manage transitions.

Theme #2: School Readiness Centered on the “Mechanics” of School

Multiple participants spoke of getting children and families ready for school by focusing on things like filling out paperwork, tracking important dates, and teaching children about school routines (e.g., getting lunch in a cafeteria, packing their backpacks, putting on their coats). Parents, in particular, also spoke about their children’s academic and social-emotional readiness for school, including writing their names and sounding out words.

Theme #3: Concern about Alignment between Pre-K and Kindergarten

Many participants, especially parents, discussed their concerns that pre-K and kindergarten experiences were not adequately aligned. Pre-K teachers were concerned that data reports they completed on each transitioning child often did not make it to the child’s kindergarten teacher. Parents were particularly concerned that their children were over-prepared for kindergarten compared with other children, and worried that their children might feel bored or disengaged.

DISCUSSION

Summary

The results of this study reveal diverse and varied transition practices in use across this school district, with some evidence of uneven implementation from school to school. Pre-K programs seemed to take on a high level of responsibility for families’ experiences around the transition to kindergarten. Parents, teachers, and administrators had different perspectives on transitions, with parents expressing the most concern over children’s academic readiness and whether children coming from pre-k programs were over-prepared for kindergarten.

Limitations

This research was conducted in one county with a limited number of parents, teachers, and administrators. This county differs from many other counties in the United States because it is very large; very racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse; and has a central office coordinating preschool services. The findings from this work may not be generalizable to counties and school districts that are substantially different from this one. In addition, descriptive studies like this one cannot help us understand causation (for example, whether more support for families causes children to have better transitions).

Implications

Despite the limitations, there are several implications of this work that practitioners may consider as they try to streamline transitions and support children at the start of kindergarten.

Think about how school readiness is defined and whether that definition is shared across parents, teachers, and administrators. It may be helpful to have pre-K and kindergarten teachers work toward a common understanding of the skills children need in order to be successful in kindergarten. Try to ensure that parents and teachers can easily find and access the school readiness guidelines, once developed.

Develop a framework outlining what a successful transition involves and that is aligned to your community's definition of school readiness. Think about what supports parents need in order to get their child enrolled in kindergarten; what skills and experiences children should have leading up to the start of school; and what schools and teachers need to know about each child entering kindergarten.

Consider who is responsible for different aspects of children's transitions, and whether there is broad agreement about how these responsibilities should be distributed. Coordinating across multiple systems, schools, and child care programs is complicated and these complications are not easy to resolve, but it may be possible to identify a few things to address initially, like whether pre-K programs have access to information they can share with parents, or how information is transferred from pre-K to kindergarten teachers.

Conclusions

This research study highlights how complex it is to support children and families through the pre-K to kindergarten transition. It also shows the creativity and diverse ideas that pre-K and kindergarten programs are putting into practice to reach children and families. Much more work is needed to understand how transitions affect children and whether comprehensive transition plans can buffer children against negative effects. Further research is needed that seeks inputs from multiple stakeholder groups, that considers family and program contexts, and that examines transitions as a developmental process unfolding over time.

REFERENCES

- Ahtola, A., Silinskas, G., Poikonen, P., Kontoniemi, M., Niemi, P., & Nurmi, J. (2011). Transition to formal schooling: Do transition practices matter for academic performance? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 26(3), 295-302.
- Benner, A. D., Thornton, A., & Crosnoe, R. (2017). Children's exposure to sustainability practices during the transition from preschool into school and their learning and socioemotional development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 21(2), 121-134.
- LoCasale-Crouch, J., Mashburn, A. J., Downer, J. T., & Pianta, R. C. (2008). Pre-kindergarten teachers' use of transition practices and children's adjustment to kindergarten. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 23, 124-139.
- Pears, K. C., Carpenter, L., Kim, H. K., Peterson, E., & Fisher, P. A. (2018). The kids in transition to school program. In A. J. Mashburn, J. LoCasale-Crouch, and K. C. Pears (Eds.), *Kindergarten Transition and Readiness* (pp. 283-302). New York, NY: Springer.
- Schulting, A. B., Malone, P. S., & Dodge, K. A. (2005). The effect of school-based Kindergarten transition policies and practices on child academic outcomes. *Developmental Psychology*, 41(6), 860-871.
- Yelverton, R., & Mashburn, A. J. (2018). A conceptual framework for understanding and supporting children's development during the kindergarten transition. In A. J. Mashburn, J. LoCasale-Crouch, and K. C. Pears (Eds.), *Kindergarten Transition and Readiness* (pp. 3-29). New York, NY: Springer.