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At the end of May 2003, Wales completed a consultation period that looked at a Foundation Phase for children in Wales made up of seven areas of learning. These comprise:

- Personal and Social Development and Well-being
- Language, Literacy and Communication Skills
- Mathematical Development
- Bilingualism and Multi-cultural Understanding
- Knowledge and Understanding of the World
- Creative Development
- Physical Development

This paper questions the assumption within the consultative document, *The Learning Country: Foundation Phase 3-7 years*, that children's style of learning should be expected to alter when they reach a certain chronological age. It also questions why proven good practice of learning through first hand experience and activity-based learning should be diluted by a more formal, traditional, model at the transition to Key Stage 2 (KS2).

The proposed introduction of the Foundation Phase in Wales may be referred to as a 'revolution' in early childhood education. As with any major change, the implications may be extensive and embrace both positive and negative elements. Although it is hoped that its introduction is successful and will enhance the quality of care and education for pre-seven-year-old children, concerns exist about the transition period to KS2, for it is stated that:

'Children should be progressively introduced to more formal ways of working during the last year of the

proposed Foundation Phase or earlier for those who show readiness and have acquired the necessary early skills' (WAG 2003, p.17).

The impression given by this statement is that once the appropriate dispositions to learning have been established, then the style of teaching and learning should alter from involvement in 'well planned practical activities' (WAG 2003, p. 11) to a more formal style of acquiring knowledge and understanding. The use of the term 'formal' implies that the alternative method is 'informal'. If healthy attitudes to personal education are acquired through individual practical involvement in learning, i.e., informal, it would seem unwise to promote a system which may not employ the methodology that continues to nurture 'curiosity and independence' (WAG 2003, p.11) at KS2. Indeed, it is noted that:

'In the Foundation Phase, children will be encouraged to become more autonomous and independent learners. This may have an impact on content and methodology in subsequent year groups and this too will need consideration in the following National Curriculum Review conducted by ACCAC' (WAG 2003. p.30).

This acknowledgement indicates that the changes to practice will extend beyond the 3-7 age group. It is therefore, rather disappointing that some regard it 'as a distinct curricular stage within the overall national curriculum for Wales' (WAG 2003, p.18).

One may suspect that there still exists a consensus of opinion that feels that the

business of learning only becomes serious when it becomes formal. Yet, no definition is offered for the term. Early Childhood practitioners have fought a long battle to raise the profile of this stage of education and, if it is to be acknowledged as a vital element of the educational process, it should be viewed as a part of the 'bigger picture' and not separate. Isolation will only serve to complicate the transitional period for children and staff. Obviously, the curriculum content will differ but proven effective methodology should be incorporated into teaching strategies.

The use of play and active involvement, whether it be child-led or adult-initiated is a recognised way of engaging young children in the educational journey as 'it helps them to acquire knowledge, skills and understanding for themselves' (WAG 2003, p.12). It is suggested that a gradual introduction to more 'formal' ways of working may begin during the last year of the proposed Foundation Phase. There exists a real concern that on entry to some KS2 classes, formality may be the order of the day irrespective of learner readiness and as a result, some pupils may hit a 'self-esteem brick wall'. A teaching approach that appeals more to the passive auditory learner, rather than the visual and kinaesthetic one, may result in some KS2 children becoming disenchanted with education, i.e., positive dispositions being replaced by negative ones. Children will have acquired knowledge in one place but will be expected to use it in another to demonstrate their competence, often applying informal knowledge in a formal setting. The learning that takes place in the Foundation Phase is more likely to be 'authentic' learning that has meaning and occurs in 'real life' whereas the more formal learning of KS2 often requires less 'genuine' learning and is situated in abstract thought. Where children are able to function well in the Foundation Phase, activities are socially and contextually meaningful in 'situated learning' (Broström, 2002). It might be that children are unable to make use of their

basic competencies at KS2 because they have to transfer their learning to a different social context – i.e. a different school with different children. Does this account for the problems that children sometimes face on transfer and what will be the impact of the transition and new way of working have on attainment and progress? Expected continuity in the curriculum is prone to interruption as is evident when pupils transfer from primary to secondary education. Galton *et al* (1999) found that pupils often failed to make the progress expected of them during the first year after transfer. One solution is to explore activities that go across phases. If cross-phase transfer work is to be effective Stephenson (2002), suggests that it should reflect 'a balanced **range** of approaches' that consider five areas when thinking about transfer activities:

1. Administrative
2. Social and Personal
3. Curriculum
4. Pedagogic
5. Managing Learning

Such points merely scratch the surface of key issues that need to be addressed if the introduction of the Foundation Phase is to have a long term and far reaching influence on the quality of each child's approach to life-long learning. There is a need to enquire why a more passive adult-initiated curriculum for children who are still novice scholars should replace a successful participatory approach to education.

Perhaps there is a need for all key players across the different phases to agree terminology. One questions whether by providing 'opportunities to work as members of large and small groups; to develop research skills and enhance their knowledge and understanding using a broad range of information sources' (WAG 2003,p. 17) could be classed as 'active learning'. Many KS2 teachers do employ meaningful and active teaching and learning strategies but because of the perceived

change in methodology, they are often included under the 'formal approach umbrella'.

Surely in the 21st century, educationalists should look beyond teaching approaches that are rooted in sedentary activities and, irrespective of traditional methodology, incorporate into all subject areas teaching that will excite learning, challenge thinking, inspire creativity and provide experiences that support confidence, as emotion is fundamental to the learning process.

Whilst the Foundation Phase gives the opportunity for children to attend early childhood services for at least three years

and is seen as an equal stage of education, we need to be aware of the consequences of a discontinuous transition in terms of teaching philosophy, learning styles and curriculum structure. This might result in an early childhood phase that is subservient to the concerns of compulsory schooling and reduce the benefits that it seeks to achieve, such as enhanced educational attainment. The proposals for the new Foundation Phase are concerned with 'unlocking achievement'; therefore it is imperative that the transition to KS2 does not close the door on future enthusiasm for acquiring knowledge, understanding and a positive attitude to learning.

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Becoming sociable and co-operative: recognising progression in children's learning through play from aged three to seven years.

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My research into the development of sociability and co-operation through play, in young children, has been ongoing for several years. One outcome from the research is the development of the Social Play Continuum (Broadhead 1997; 2001; 2004). This is an observational schedule designed for focusing on children's interactions with peers in Areas of Provision (e.g. sand/water, large construction, role play etc.). It is not designed for observing individual children (although practitioners do report its use in this way) and it is not designed for observing children's interactions with adults, although the research recognises scaffolding by expert others as integral to support for children's progression by mediating learning.

(A copy of the Continuum can be downloaded from http://www.routledgefalmer.com/companion_0415303397 and is discussed in Broadhead 2004).

Based on extensive observation and analysis of children's play with peers in nursery, reception and year one settings (3-6 year olds), the Social Play Continuum aims to detail the zone of proximal development relating to the incremental growth of social skills. It achieves this in the identification of four contiguous domains – the Associative domain, the Social domain, the Highly Social domain and the Cooperative domain.

Each domain details domain-related language and action. It is these that the observer looks for and records during children's play. It is these that give insights into progression across domains. In the

Associative domain, these relate mainly to the individual child but also signal their interest in other players (e.g. 'watches play') along with tentative overtures (e.g. 'object offered, not accepted'). Progression across the domains is characterised by increasing levels of reciprocity between interacting peers (e.g. Social domain: 'Object offered and received'). Alongside increasing reciprocity is increasing play momentum as increased levels of concentration and absorption by the children become evident. As play builds momentum, the associated play themes become elaborated and integrated to a greater extent. Consequently, the observer is encouraged to recognise and record play themes alongside reciprocity between peers. As play progresses from the Highly Social and on into the Cooperative domain, levels of intellectual engagement increase, made evident through more complex uses of language and action by interacting peers. These are manifest, for example, as children display a shared understanding of goals, as they recognise and solve problems together and as they extend and elaborate their play themes by incorporating new ideas and possibilities. Each of these elements is an interactive characteristic that the observer recognises and records on the observation sheet. The research argues that the substantial intellectual demands of operating in the Cooperative domain are not always recognised as such by uninformed adults (Broadhead, 2004). The research illustrates how children become expert others for their peers and how child-leaders can take the 'Social child' into the more demanding Cooperative domain, through joint play. The research also argues that to become

proficient in the Cooperative domain, with its associated intellectual challenges, children need regular and uninterrupted access to play-based learning opportunities with flexible resourcing. The resources are crucial in allowing the children to connect their prior knowledge and understanding with new intellectual challenges and knowledge – some of which might be drawn from their adult-led learning experiences in the classroom (e.g. literacy/numeracy) as well as from experiences beyond the classroom (e. g. the media, visits, holidays etc.).

The research took, as its starting point the works of Vygotsky (1978; 1986; 1987) and related social constructivists where learning is constructed in social contexts amongst communities of learners. Social-constructivist theories recognise co-construction of learning as a key feature whereby the adult's agenda for learning (usually manifest through the stated curriculum) can co-exist with the child's agenda (usually manifest through prior learning, experience and current pre-occupation) or as Page (2000:5) describes it: 'a curriculum with added meaning for children as it responds to the reality of their life experiences'.

The development of social constructivist theory has paralleled a period of extensive reform in early years education in England. The introduction, from 1998 onwards, of the literacy and numeracy strategies, with associated testing of children at ages seven and 11, has emphasised teacher-directed learning experiences for the youngest children in school and eroded play in reception classrooms (the first year of formal education where children may be four years of age) (Adams *et al*; 2004; Broadhead: 2004; Keating *et al*: 2000). During the last ten years or so, there has been little, if any, emphasis on gaining new insights into progression in play. Consequently, there is a dearth of studies to explore the relationships between progression in learning through play in early

childhood and progression in the curriculum (Wood and Bennett, 1999). The period since Wood and Bennett's publication has seen the introduction of the Foundation Stage Curriculum (FSC) (QCA 2001) to distinguish the curriculum for 3-5 year olds from that of older 5-7 year olds who are subject to Key Stage 1 of the National Curriculum. Although there is some emphasis on play in the FSC, the emphasis on literacy and numeracy skills are still considerable and for some, the FSC seems more a preparation for Key Stage 1 and less, a rationale for forward movement in understanding and applying play-based learning.

More recently, the Primary Strategy for England has extended the remit for government-led learning frameworks to now cover the period from birth to eleven years. There are clear implications in relation to supporting transitions for children from the Foundation Stage (3-5 years) on into Key Stage 1 of the National Curriculum (5-7 years). A question for my own research is how a better understanding of the growth of social and cooperative skills, embedded within a social-constructivist paradigm, might contribute in facilitating this transition? Page (2000:34) urges us to look to the future in devising an appropriate early years curriculum in order to equip individuals. Drawing on several schools of thought, she identifies the necessary skills as:

“imagination and creativity, inventiveness, independent critical thinking, foresight and projection, decision-making, the ability to grasp connections between seemingly disparate phenomena and ability to deal with surprise, conflict and irresolution”.

Informed and carefully structured observations of well-resourced and thoughtfully structured play show the extent to which young children employ and advance these skills. But there are still some important questions to answer. For

example: What do children learn when they are playing in mainstream settings and where does this learning connect with the potential of the given curriculum? A corollary to this question is: How does this differ between three year olds and seven year olds? Answers to these two questions would assist in creating and sustaining learning environments where informed adults and knowledgeable children could each co-construct and scaffold learning, allowing us to progress, at last, beyond the work-play dichotomy (Wood and Attfield; 1996). In addition, spanning these age ranges in a search for answers to these questions would go some way towards ensuring that transitions are smoother for children between Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1. We might move beyond the

formal-informal debates around learning and the curriculum for young children and on into a pedagogy for co-construction (Bennett et al; 1997; Wood & Bennett; 1999) which can reflect the multiple complexities required for the effective provision for early learning (Moyley *et al.*, 2002). Placing practitioners in optimum positions to accommodate these demands and to successfully facilitate transition requires a commitment to understanding learning through well-focussed and open-minded observations. Alongside this, we now need a commitment from policy makers to heed the voices of informed practitioners and early years research findings to seek insights into learning processes and move beyond an almost exclusive engagement with learning outcomes.

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Early childhood education in Iceland can be traced to the beginning of urbanisation in the 1920s when the Women's Alliance in Reykjavík opened a day-care centre for poor children. In 1940, they established a program called playschool (Barnavinafélagið Sumargjöf, 1974). The day-care centres were full time programmes and limited their admission to priority groups, such as single parents and children from poor homes, but the playschools were half-day programmes open to everybody. In 1973, playschools and day-care centres were integrated under the Ministry of Education. This represented an important shift. Early childhood education prior to compulsory school was no longer viewed as social policy geared especially toward poor children but became part of the education policy (Lög um hlutdeild ríkisins í byggingu og rekstri dagvistunarheimila. Nr. 43/1973). The concepts of day-care centres and playschools were used for early childhood education programmes in Iceland until 1991. Since then the term *playschool* has been used for all early education programmes for children up to six years old (Lög um leikskóla. Nr. 48/1991). In 1994, playschool education became by law the first level of schooling in Iceland, although it was neither compulsory nor free of charge (Lög um leikskóla. Nr. 78/1994).

Current Policies

Playschool education is considered a national responsibility in Iceland today. The activity of the charitable women who fed and sheltered poor children and kept them off the streets has now evolved into the first level of schooling. The Playschool

Teacher's Union considers the right to attend playschool as a human right of all children, and they believe that the municipalities and other public parties should first and foremost run the playschool in order to ensure that all children can attend (Félag íslenskra leikskólakennara, 2000). Playschools are intended for children under six years old or until they go to primary school in the fall of the year in which they turn six (Lög um leikskóla no. 78/1994). The local authorities supervise the building and running of most playschools and bear the expenses involved. Parents' contributions cover roughly 30% of the costs of the operation.

The laws of Icelandic playschool education state that children should be provided with emotional and physical care so they can enjoy their childhood. Their overall development should be supported as well as their broadmindedness and tolerance. Christian ethics should be inspired and foundations laid for the children to be independent, active, and responsible participants in a democratic society (Lög um leikskóla, no. 78, 1994, article 2). These aims are reflected in the *National Curriculum Guidelines* and in the policy of the Playschool Teacher's Union. The education of playschool teachers also builds on the law of playschool education and the *National Curriculum*.

The current *National Curriculum* was published in 1999 by the Ministry of Education and is a policy-setting guideline for pedagogical work in playschools (Ministry of Education, 1999). It is meant to

form a flexible frame, and based on the guidelines; each playschool develops its own educational plan. According to the *Curriculum*, playschool education should encourage the development of the whole child and an emphasis should be placed on creative activities and play in playschools. Play is seen as the basis for playschool activities, and as the most important way to learn and develop. The *Curriculum* underscores the following themes: movement, the cultivation of the native language, creative arts, music, nature and the environment, and culture and the society. The themes fuse and are integrated with other basic activities such as play, daily care, and life learning skills. The importance of life skills is also stressed, which means that the playschool teaches children democratic skills. They take part in forming plans, making decisions and evaluating situations. Life skills also include social competence, which encompasses being able to respect rules, solve problems and disputes in a peaceful manner and respect the rights of the others. The *Curriculum* also emphasises the learning that takes place during routine activities, such as meal times.

Teaching and Care-giving

As in the other Nordic countries, the first Icelandic playschools were established for children with evident social needs and funded by charitable organisations. Social constructs and terms like *knowledge*, *teaching* and *learning* were not used in the playschool context; instead, innate creativity involving the whole child was emphasised. Emotional, social, cognitive and motor development was stressed and it was believed that children would develop from within, given the right surroundings. These surroundings included first and foremost a homelike atmosphere where children were provided with warmth, wholesome nutrition and hygiene and the opportunity to play (Barnavinafélagið Sumargjöf, 1974; Lenz Taguchi, and Munkammar, 2003).

Thus, care-giving was an important feature in Icelandic playschools, and it still is. Research in Icelandic playschools reveals that nutrition and outdoor play is still seen as an important part of the playschool life. Icelandic playschool teachers also emphasise the importance of the happiness of the children. Happiness means that children could choose with whom they play, are enthusiastic to participate, they eat well, that they are allowed to laugh and cry and enjoy the friendship of the educational personnel. Social skills and good interpersonal relationships are also emphasised, meaning that children should learn to live in harmony, show respect and consideration for each other, learn to recognise the feelings of others, feel empathy for others, and learn to get along with each other (Einarsdóttir, 2002). This is consistent with the emphasis in the laws and the national curriculum. Icelandic parents also see interaction and relationship building with other children as the main reason for having their children attend playschool (Forskot, 1998).

In contrast to *care-giving*, the term *teaching* is relatively new in the Icelandic playschool context. The playschool has in the last decade evolved into an educational institution and playschool teachers that before were nannies (*fóstrur*) are now teachers with university degrees. The repercussion of these changes is re-definitions of concepts and roles; the terms *teaching* and *care-giving* have, for instance, been discussed and debated (e.g. Dýrfjörð, 2001). According to research, Icelandic playschool teachers are split in their stance toward the term *teaching* in playschools. Some playschool teachers are not comfortable with the term and connect it to direct teaching of a whole group, when other do not hesitate using it and say that they feel that they are teaching the children indirectly all day. Still others feel that playschool teachers have to get used to the teaching concept, but they need to re-define it and look at its meaning more broadly than just as direct teaching (Einarsdóttir, 2002, 2003).

Challenges Ahead

The Icelandic playschool today is administrative an educational institution, and by law, the first level of schooling. In the wake of that change, the Icelandic playschool is facing some frictions. On one hand is the emphasis on playschool as the golden age of free play and development, providing care, and emotional and social support, and on the other hand is the emphasis on education and teaching.

In a recent OECD report (2001), the concepts “care” and “education” are seen as inseparable and equally important and that quality services for young children necessarily provide both. Several scholars have presented ideas where attempt is made to merge the terms *teaching*, *education* and *care*. Broström (2003) built on Nygren’s (1991) ideas and presented a frame that unites care, education and teaching. He

talks about three care dimensions: *Need-care* refers to the basic needs for security, safety and attachment that the preschool teacher meets through a warm and empathic relationship. *Upbringing-care* means supporting the child concerning the acquisition (adoption) of norms and values. *Teaching-care* refers to supporting the child in constructing knowledge and skills. This last dimension of care is in accordance with Lisa Goldstein’s (1999) ideas on the resemblance between Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development and Nel Noddings’ description of caring. She argues that Noddings’ work and Vygotsky’s work share an essential understanding of the contours of the relationship between teacher and learner. These conceptions of that relationship could be useful in the struggle to combine the ideas of care, education and teaching as the Icelandic playschool evolves from a social institution to an educational institution.

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Building relationships is like a spider weaving its web.

The spider faces the greatest difficulty in establishing the first strand between two branches,

It has to make a most hazardous leap across the branches so it can firmly establish the first strand;

But even after the first strand is established, Even after the web has been woven,

It is still fragile and can easily be broken

So, the spider must constantly repair the broken strands in its web.

Tabara Tribe, PNG

Starting school is a period of transition and adjustment as the child makes the leap from preschool, child care services or home, to the school environment. As with the spider weaving its web, this leap has been perceived as one of the major challenges children face in their early childhood years (Love, Logue, Trudeau & Thayer, 1992; Reynolds, Weissberg & Kaspro, 1992). Children are faced with personal challenges associated with the shift in identity from a preschool to school child, and the challenges of taking on the behaviours and demands of the new role (Griebel & Niesel, 2000). They must also cope with a range of physical, social and academic challenges associated with the new school environment. When children experience social and behavioural adjustment difficulties in the early years of school, they are more likely to continue experiencing these problems throughout their schooling (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994), and into later life (Cowan, Cowan, Schultz & Henning, 1994).

Links in the web: Factors influencing children's adjustment to schooling

Starting school is not a standardised process, considering the range of children's individual experiences and developmental differences. This variability in children's development and early school success is influenced by a number of interdependent factors including biological characteristics of the child, and family, social and cultural factors (Broström, 2000). For example, boys tend to have more difficulty adjusting to school than girls. In particular they have less well-developed social skills and more problem behaviours (Margetts, 2003; Weissberg, Cowen, Lotyczewski, Boike, Orara, Stalonas, Sterling & Gesten, 1987). Early school adjustment is predicted significantly by socio-demographic factors including race and/or ethnicity, and socio-economic status (Reynolds et al., 1992). Lower socio-economic status has been linked to lower social and cognitive outcomes (Hagekull & Bohlin, 1995). There is a relationship between children's language at home and adjustment to school. Language supports the child's capacity to bring meaning to new situations, to interact with others and to learn (Dunlop, 2003). For example, children who speak languages other than English at home have more difficulty adjusting to school, socially, behaviourally and academically where the language of instruction is English, than children who speak English at home (Margetts, 2003).

Research also suggests that children's prior to school experiences impact on their adjustment to schooling. For example, in a Melbourne study of 212 children, those who received regular father care in the year after

birth were more likely to have higher levels of cooperation and social skills and lower levels of hyperactivity and problem behaviours. Children who experienced regular care by their fathers and more days of father care per week in the years prior to schooling showed higher levels of cooperative behaviour. In this study, children with histories of extensive group care were at risk of more social, behavioural and academic difficulties than children with less extensive group care. By contrast, children who attended 3 year old or 4 year old preschool with qualified teachers were more likely to have higher levels of adjustment to school (Margetts, 2002). Having a familiar playmate in the same class has a significant effect on children's adjustment to school (Fabian, 2002). In the study by Margetts (2003), children who commenced school with a familiar playmate in the same class had higher levels of social skills and academic competence, and lower levels of problem behaviours. Having a familiar playmate in the same class also compensated for factors that placed a child at risk of not adjusting well to the first year of school, such as being young in age, being a boy, preschool experiences, and not speaking English at home.

Recent studies suggest that children's adjustment to the first year of schooling is strongly influenced by their familiarity with the school setting and the degree to which they feel comfortable in the new environment (Griebel & Niesel, 2002; Keinig, 2002). When children and parents have many opportunities to visit and receive information about the new school prior to commencement, children adjust significantly better to the first year of schooling and have less problem-behaviours and higher levels of social skills and academic competence than children who have more limited opportunities to familiarise themselves with the new school (Keinig, 2002; Margetts, 1997).

While these factors influence children's adjustment to school, the smoothness of the

transition is also influenced by the degree of continuity between school and previous situations. Discontinuities or differences between settings can interfere with children's transition to school (Broström, 2000). If the setting is familiar, children are more likely to adjust to new demands and expectations. When children are prepared for making the transition to school, they gain self-confidence and are more likely to succeed (Fabian, 2002). Therefore, when planning transition programs it is important to identify differences or discontinuities that may exist between home, preschool settings, and the new school that have the potential to disrupt children's adjustment to school. When these discontinuities have been identified, strategies can be planned and implemented to promote continuity and prepare children and parents for the school situation.

Strengthening the web: Building relationships

Transition programs should include many formal and informal opportunities for children and their families to visit the school before commencement. First hand experiences of the new situation prior to commencement, allow children time to assimilate and accommodate the old with the new, and to talk about their feelings with sensitive adults, in preparing them for the challenges they face. A series of visits provides children with opportunities to know what teachers expect of them, to become familiar with the new environment including toilets, buildings and play areas, to identify differences between preschool and school and the adaptations required, to participate in classroom activities, to practice skills necessary for school, and to meet new friends and develop support systems.

Continuity of expectations/curricula

Transition adjustment and consequential problems for children starting school can be reduced if continuity of intent and learning is promoted through the provision of developmentally appropriate and familiar

experiences. A link with prior learning experiences can be supported by messy play, art and dramatic play areas in the classroom. The provision of outdoor play materials involving water play or sand play, and same-age play spaces supervised by adults may also assist children's adjustment. Continuity is supported when schools adopt an integrated curriculum that recognises that learning occurs in different ways and within and across developmental and curriculum areas, and provides children with time for consolidating new skills and behaviours

In promoting continuity, staff from both sectors benefit when they have information about, and understand something of, each child's background and prior experiences. The sharing of information and collaborative planning for children's transition to school can occur formally and informally. In Australia, formal methods include the transfer of records with information including children's levels of social, physical and intellectual development and an estimate of their needs; staff visiting each other's programs to discuss children; collaborative planning of transition programs; and membership of early childhood or transition networks. Some schools invite preschool and childcare staff to visit children in their classes within the first month of commencing school. This provides opportunities for staff to share valuable information particularly in regard to behavioural or learning concerns.

Parent Involvement

The relationship between parents and teachers is important across all levels of the school but even more so at the commencement of schooling. The continuity of parent involvement in their child's education benefits the children and a joint effort between school and home helps effect a smooth transition (Griebel & Niesel, 2003). It is important that parents are informed about school procedures and expectations, and teachers listen to parents' concerns and goals for their children. Informed parents are less likely to be

stressed about their child's transition to school and more able to support their child in overcoming their confusion and frustration and in adapting to the new environment.

Parent involvement in the transition process can include orientation visits for parents and children, providing parents with verbal and written information about the school, opportunities for parents to become familiar with the staff and parent organisations within the school, informing parents about their rights and responsibilities, time to talk to teachers, helping parents understand the transition process from the child's perspective, identifying skills and behaviours related to successful school adjustment, suggesting activities that may assist in preparing children for school, talks at local preschools and childcare centres with both preschool and school staff as speakers, and social events before and after the commencement of school. It is important that parents are given information about the procedures of the first day at school and what is expected of them and their child.

Weaving threads together

Children's adjustment to school is influenced by a multiplicity of factors. In responding to the personal and school factors that have the potential to disrupt children's adjustment to school it is imperative that transition programs are evaluated regularly to ensure that they enhance children's independence and successful participation, support and empower the family and foster collaboration and the exchange of information between home, kindergarten and childcare services, schools, and local community values and needs. This occurs when the transition processes include the gradual preparation of children, continuity of peers, continuity of expectations between settings, continuity of programming and ongoing communication between staff. In this way the unfamiliar will become familiar, the child and their family will feel more secure in the new

environment, schools will have valuable knowledge of children's prior experiences, and the speedy adjustment of children and families into the new setting will be facilitated.

Our spiders will make the leap to school in such a way that the first strand of their web is firmly supported and they will continue to weave threads for life.

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**‘School is like preschool but you can’t make noise’:
Young children’s views of continuity from preschool ¹
(nursery) to school.**

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Across the world there are calls to promote continuity between preschool services and school as a means of enhancing the educational provision and the educational outcomes for young children. In this paper, the definition of continuity draws upon that noted by Wood and Bennett (1999) and highlights a match between curriculum and approaches across contexts, with the aim of promoting progression in children’s learning

Researchers investigating children’s transition to school have focused on continuity as a means of facilitating positive transition experiences for all involved (Clarke & Sharp, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2002; Dunlop & Fabian, 2002; Einarisdóttir, 2003; Peters, 2000), while at the same time recognising that continuity has many dimensions, not all of which are positive for all children.

Continuity is often discussed in terms of curricula—for example is there a match between the curriculum frameworks of preschool setting and school? –or in terms of information from preschool settings being ‘passed on’ to schools, with the aim that individualised curriculum at school builds on what has already occurred before school. These views of continuity reflect adult perspectives and understandings. How do children perceive continuity from preschool to school settings?

Background

Over several years, the Starting School Research Project has investigated the perceptions, experiences and expectations of children, families and educators as children

start school. As part of this project, we have spoken with several hundred children who have recently started school, or who are about to start school.² During these conversations, we have asked children to comment on similarities and differences for them from preschool to school. The comments reported in this paper are drawn from conversations with 85 children who had just started school and 85 children who were about to start school. The children attended preschool services and schools across the state of New South Wales, Australia and represented a diversity of cultural and language backgrounds.

Continuity and discontinuity in curriculum

Children’s comments indicate some sense of continuity between preschool and school. There is an expectation that school will be much like preschool and that some aspects of learning will continue.

Jason: At school you learn numbers.

Did you know numbers before you came to school?

Jason: Yes. You come to school to learn bigger numbers.

Many of the preschool children expected school to provide playtime and spaces, but also recognised that school had added curriculum requirements.

Is school going to be the same as preschool?

No. Because you learn how to read in big school and you don't in little school.

Any other differences?

Yeah, you learn how to maybe do numbers.

things at preschool and you learn a lot at school.

David: And you play more at preschool.

Deanna: Because there is different things outside to play with.

There was a strong focus on doing 'work' at school, often 'hard work'. Typically, this hard work involved reading, writing and, sometimes, numbers.

Is school different from preschool?

Mark: Yes, because you have to work.

What kind of work?

Mark: Hard work. What's 100 + 100 – I know, it's 200!

Cassie: We have to do homework, but we have to read in class.

Mark: You have to do hard plusses.

Jamie: You have to do homework.

Regardless of their experiences at preschool, children indicated that they learned, or learned more, at school.

You learn much more at big school, learn to read. At preschool they read to you, at school you learn to read.

Do you think school will be different from preschool?

It's going to be different.

Because you read and you write and you do different things.

Do you read here?

No, we only look at the pictures.

For these children, there was an expectation of discontinuity from preschool to school. This change was anticipated positively by many children, such as Tamika, who commented "actually it [school] is going to

Any maybe you learn how to play instruments. Like violins and things.

Is school different from preschool?

Jessie: You get to learn things at school and you learn a bit of be better because you have to do a lot of work there". There is an expectation from the children that they will do more work at school and learn more 'stuff'. This 'stuff' is associated with growing up and getting bigger, in a sense leaving behind the 'babyish' world of preschool to enter the big world of school.

Continuity and discontinuity in social context

Discussions about differences between school and preschool highlighted needing to be 'big' to go to school.

Preschool is really boring with the little kids.

It's little kids in preschool and it's all big kids in school.

Why did you stop going to preschool?

Now I'm older. Too big for preschool. When you get big, you learn more. If you are still little you won't learn.

Would you like to go back to preschool?

No, I think I'm too big for preschool now.

Children recognise that schools are busier and more crowded. For some, this is seen as positive:

There is more people at school. That's better. Because you make more friends.

while others miss the connections they had in preschool:

At preschool I used to meet all my friends but I really miss my old friends.

For some children, the sense of growing up that accompanies the move to school is made difficult by changing expectations:

At school, you can't bring your favourite toy. But you can take your favourite toy to preschool. And if you bring your favourite toy, then you're not scared.

Children recognise that they need to be 'big' to go to big school, but also that school is a place for bigger kids as well. For some children, having to cope with big kids is problematic:

What do you think will happen at big school?

A boy might push me over on the cement... when you are at big school they might push you over because you are little and they hurt you.

Continuity and discontinuity in environment

Just as children identify the physical changes associated with being big enough to go to school, they realise that the physical environment of school is bigger than preschool.

Big school has lots of big things.

There will be a bigger playground. You could do more stuff on it.

Because it's a bigger school and even it has a bigger fence and you can walk to it.

Not only is the physical environment different, but also what occurs within that environment differs. Children report discontinuity in areas such as where they eat and play:

[school is] a bit like preschool. At preschool you eat inside, eat outside at school.

But you play outside and inside at school and preschool.

It's like preschool but you can't make noise.

But you can't play all day, but we did at preschool.

Other differences relate to what is expected in the classroom environment:

You have to put your hand up all the time and it hurts my arm. Because if you want to talk to the teacher you have to put your hand up like that.

[At preschool] you just can talk.

One aspect of the school environment that was regarded positively by most children was the removal of sleep time.

I was really busting to go, I like it, cause I wouldn't have to sleep.

School has no beds. I like it.

You don't sleep at school. That's great. Because I'm not tired at school.

Were you tired at preschool?

No. but you had to have a sleep or a rest anyway.

For some children, the school day was longer than their preschool session (which usually covers three hours). Longer hours at school left them feeling tired:

[at school] you get picked up later. Because the hours you are going to big school and it goes for the whole day and our Mums pick us up at the end of the day.

For other children, the school day was shorter than the hours spent in childcare:

Childcare is longer than school. It's a longer time there.

It's good [at school] because I like my Mum and Dad with me after school.

Overall

These children recognised some continuity between preschool and school. However, their main focus was on the discontinuities and what these signified for them as growing, maturing individuals and the challenges they would meet as a result of these. The children were convinced that school was a place with less play and more work than preschool, and many looked forward to this. There was a common expectation that school was about learning, especially reading and writing and that preschool was about playing and not necessarily learning.

Children eagerly anticipated some of the discontinuities in social contexts and environments. They looked forward to meeting and making new friends, and to being recognised as one of the 'big kids' who go to school. They were pleased to be escaping the 'little kids' in preschool and the routines associated with little kids, such as sleeping.

If children are so focused on discontinuities, how can we promote continuity? Some possibilities include:

- talking with children, and their families in preschool about the learning experiences they are engaged in. High quality early childhood programs provide many learning experiences. Discussions with children about what they are learning, how they are learning and how that might connect with what they will learn later can help promote preschool as an educational context.

- recognising the physical differences in preschool and school environments. Discuss these with children, make opportunities for children to visit schools and become oriented to these environments.
- building social contexts that span the different settings. This could involve connecting children who will attend the same school, helping families whose children will attend the same school get together, and educators from the different settings making frequent liaison visits.

While much of the adult focus on continuity relates to curriculum, children's perspectives suggest that they fully expect the curriculum of school and preschool to be different. Children also expect to experience discontinuity in the social and physical environments of school. Many of the children looked forward to this as a symbol of their growing maturity. This does not mean that we should promote discontinuity. Rather, it means that in helping children adjust to the many differences they encounter from preschool to school, we need to consider ways in which we can promote some common ground. This will involve discussions about beliefs about children, expectations of competence and the importance of supportive adults. Part of the challenge for educators is to focus not only on the curriculum across settings, but also the philosophical underpinnings that guide these. Where philosophical bases are shared, the discontinuities reported by children can be part of a positive start to school.

¹ Families in New South Wales access many different types of early childhood service, including child care, pre-school, family day care, occasional care and playgroups. The term preschool is used in this paper as a generic term covering this range.

² In New South Wales, children are eligible to start school at the beginning of the school year (January) provided they are five by the end of July that same year. This means that children may start school at age four-and-a-half years. The compulsory age for starting school is six years. The first year of compulsory school is called Kindergarten.

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