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Transitioning Young Children from Early Childhood Special Education Programs to Kindergarten: A Literature Review

Gerin Martin
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The word transition takes on many meanings: moving from one place, one activity, or even one phase of life to the next. Transitions are part of life and occur without avoidance often resulting in a transformation.

A transition marks the first step of an unknown passage, synonymously, initiating a “good-bye”. Thrill-seekers experience a jolt of excitement from the suspense of the unknown, while others become overwhelmed with fear and unease by the same aura. The journey can either be smooth or one laden with many bumps challenging the travelers’ resilience. The more carefully planned a journey, how prepared with knowledge, tools and expectations the traveler is, directly impacts the outcome of the adventure. The traveler is not alone on this journey. Those who carried the traveler throughout the previous journey stand close, holding their hand, cheering, and packing their luggage with all the necessary items needed for future success. Loved ones vicariously share the same ebb and flow of emotion, trusting that once the traveler has reached their destination, the journey will have been flawless. Their hopes that those intercepting the traveler will seek and find the gifts the traveler brings. Yet, it is time for the traveler to put one foot in front of the other, leaving the comfortable, predicable, reliable and known behind.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the issues that surround transitioning young children with special needs from early childhood special education (ECSE) programs to kindergarten classrooms in the public schools. IDEA 2004 mandates that families and service providers transitioning children from Part C to Part B begin individualized transition planning nine months prior to the transition. However, outside of Head Start regulations, there is no legal premise mandating individualized transition

plans for children transitioning from ECSE programs to kindergarten (Rosenkoetter, Hains, & Dogaru, 2007). Although young children eligible for special education undergo many transitions prior to kindergarten, this paper will solely focus on the transition from ECSE programs to kindergarten. First, this paper will examine what a typical transition from an early childhood education (ECE) setting to kindergarten looks like, including the school readiness skills necessary for young children to experience successful transitions. Second, this paper will look at the implications those skills have on children with developmental disabilities. Third, this paper will review models for best practice transition planning and potential road blocks for successful transition planning. Lastly, this paper will include a discussion of the impacts of transition planning for ECSE service providers and specific recommendations for ECSE educational practice.

Transition Practices and School Readiness

Transition for All Learners

Supporting all children and families through the transition process from early childhood programs to public schools successfully requires systematic, collaborative, and organized planning (Barnes, 1997). Beyond suggested collaborative efforts between schools and families, a child's adaptation to kindergarten also is reflective of their academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive abilities (McIntyre, Blancher & Baker, 2006). As Pianta and Cox (2002) described, the child's skills are not the only predictor of their resiliency throughout the transition process. It is the relationship between all parties and venues in which the child is involved (e.g. neighborhood, family,

peers, teachers). How a child adapts to the transition to kindergarten has lasting effects on their development, wellbeing, and future school success (Margetts, 2007).

According to Pianta and Cox (2002), practices widely used to support transitions include contacting incoming families via the mail just before the beginning of school (possibly including a supply list and upcoming calendar of events), hosting an open house once the year has begun, providing families with a brochure, and very rarely personal contact (e.g. phone call or home visit). In the opinion of Pianta and Cox, efforts employed by schools to assist in a child's transition are "too little, too late" (p. 1).

School Readiness

The execution and methods used to transition children from preschool to kindergarten are not the only determinants for successful school adaptation. The match between the skills and behaviors a child has, and the expected skills and behaviors valued by the kindergarten *teacher* are also components of a successful school transition (Rosenketter et al., 2007). Following directions, classroom rules, participating in group activities, transitioning within classroom activities and self help skills, in other words, skills that require an element of independence, are emphasized by receiving kindergarten teachers as skills that aid in the adaptation to kindergarten (Fowler, Schwartz, & Atwater, 1991; Rosenketter et al., 2007). Academic rigor in kindergarten has dramatically increased as well as an expected level of maturity (e.g., sitting still for long periods of time, self-control and attention) (Pianta & Cox, 2002).

Implications for Children with Developmental Delays

In order for a child to be eligible for special education under the umbrella of developmentally delayed, they must present a twenty five percent or greater deficit in one or more of the following areas; adaptive functioning, social functioning, communication, motor abilities, or cognitive abilities. When comparing deficits in the areas listed previously and the competence level expected from children entering kindergarten, concern for successful transition of children with developmental delays is real (McIntyre, Blancher, & Baker, 2006).

According to Fowler et al. (1991), the transition to kindergarten requires children to have the ability to generalize the skills acquired in preschool to the kindergarten setting. Children in ECSE classrooms spend the majority of their time in small groups within their classroom or receiving individualized instruction. In contrast, the method most commonly used to deliver instruction in the kindergarten classroom is whole group (Fowler et al., 1991; Rosenketter et al., 2007). As a result, children in ECSE programs rarely have opportunities to practice independence, a skill necessary for adaptation to kindergarten (Fowler et al., 1991). ECSE classrooms typically have lower teacher student ratios and smaller class sizes, where public school kindergarten classrooms have higher teacher student ratios and larger class size (Wolery, 1989).

McIntyre et al. (2006) conducted a study examining the effects of kindergarten transition for sixty-seven children with intellectual disabilities. They measured the children's IQ, adaptive functioning, self regulation skills, and social skills against those of their typically developing peers in relationship to transition to

kindergarten. How well the children adapted to kindergarten was measured by the receiving kindergarten teachers and parents. The results of their study show that a child's level of IQ and adaptive functioning are the greatest predictors of successful school transition. Next was the child's ability to self-regulate. Children who were unable to demonstrate latency to touch proved to have a more difficult time transitioning. Kindergarten teachers in this study cited that a child's inability to self-regulate was a common source of behavior problems that impede the successful adaptation to kindergarten as compared to their typically developing peers. The degree of social skills a child holds is also a predictor of successful school transition. McIntyre et al. (2006) conclude

As children transition into more formal academic settings, those who present with dual cognitive and behavioral risk factors likely will have difficulties adjusting to new academic and socio-behavioral demands placed on them at school. Successful adaptation to school for very young children, particularly those with ID, primarily involves appropriate emotional and behavioral control, along with basic social and functional skills. (p. 358).

Planning for Transitions

Best Practices

As discussed earlier, common practice in transitioning children to kindergarten includes contacting families by mail just before the start of school, and organizing an open house (Pianta & Cox, 2002). Common practice implies that transitioning a child to kindergarten is an event that takes place only at the beginning of the new school year. This customary practice is insufficient for preparing children with special needs for

positive school adaptation. Conn-Powers, Ross-Allen, and Holburn (1990) outline best practices, as it relates to transitioning children from ECSE programs to kindergarten (see Table 1) to promote successful transitions. Systematic planning, families as partners, and child and professional preparedness are necessary for a solid foundation for success (Conn-Powers et al., 1990). Atwater, Orth-Lopes, Elliott, Carta, and Schwartz (1994) conclude that “children with disabilities who have been in early childhood programs designed to facilitate transition are more likely to receive regular kindergarten placement and favorable teacher ratings than children from other classrooms” (p.174), universally the ultimate goal.

Systematic Planning

Transitions to kindergarten must be planned collaboratively using a multidisciplinary model (Jewett, Tertell, King-Taylor, Parker, Tertell, & Orr, 1998). This process requires coordinating multiple service providing agencies in which the child is involved (Wolery, 1998). Often, when a child transitions from ECSE programs to kindergarten, there is a complete turnover in service providers (Wolery, 1998). This shift requires careful planning and effective communication to ensure an element of continuity in providing services (Jewett et al., 1998). To secure the smoothness of transition, a transition planning committee/team is recommended (Rous, 1994). This team then creates a timeline including necessary transition activities and who is responsible for fulfilling those duties (see Table 2) (Barnes, 1997).

Families as Partners

Family members play an integral role in effective transition planning (Jewett et al., 1998; Rosenketter et al., 2007; Wolery, 1989). How well prepared a family feels about their child's transition directly impacts the success of the transition to kindergarten (Rous, 1994). Families must be aware of the different placement opportunities for their child as well as how to help prepare their child for such a transition (Rous, 1994). IEP meetings are starting place for families to become involved in the transition process (Rosenketter et al., 2007).

Haines, Fowler and Chandler (1988) as cited by Wolery (1989) recommend that the child and families needs be assessed prior to transition. Importantly, those findings must be attended to during the transition process in order to take on a family centered approach to transition. It is imperative that the transition team maintain open communication between families as well as sending and receiving schools and that decisions made, are that of a collaborative nature. Fowler et al. (1991) recommend that families facilitate transition by communicating information about their child to the receiving placement, supporting efforts of the current classroom by reinforcing the teaching of skills needed for successful transitioning, and being active participants in the decision making process.

Child and Professional Preparedness

In order for a child to be prepared to transition from ECSE programs to kindergarten, the professionals involved must also be prepared. It is recommended that ECSE teachers visit kindergarten classrooms, and kindergarten teachers visit ECSE

classrooms so that there is an understanding of what the two different academic experiences (Jewett et al., 1998). The unwritten rules implied within an academic setting, which are so difficult for children with developmental delays to decode, need to be identified and those skills taught to children in ECSE programs in order to prepare them for the transition (Fowler et al., 1991). Atwater et al. (1994) reviewed various research studies and concluded that it is not the pre-academic skills that prepare a child for kindergarten, but their adaptive qualities and qualities that increase independence that predict how well a child functions in an academically rigorous setting. Further, how to play and interact with typically developing peers in academic and social situations greatly impact a child's adaptation to kindergarten. In short identifying and teaching the unwritten survival skills to children in ECSE programs and at home equate to a predictor of successful school transition.

Barriers to Successful Transition Planning

Throughout research, barriers to successful transition planning have been identified. The social economic status and parental employment impacts the scheduling and attendance of collaborative transition planning (Jewett, 1998; Margetts, 2007). In addition, coordinating multiple sending agencies poses a potential barrier to the transition planning process (Jewett et al., 1998; Wolery, 1998). Barriers identified by Rous (1994) were insufficient communication between sending and receiving agencies, methods encouraging family involvement, "turf issues between agencies" (p. 378), and time necessary for collaboration.

As the suggested timeline in Table 2 outlines (Barnes, 1997), transition planning is a year-long task. The complexity of the tasks can prove to be overwhelming to professionals (Jewett et al., (1998). When considering the individual differences between ECSE programs and kindergartens, with a lack of universal expectations, rules, routine, and curriculum for children entering kindergarten can cause (Rosenketter et al., 2007). Conn-Powers et al. (1990) conclude that many of the barriers listed above can be reduced, avoided, or eliminated by using a systematic collaborative plan from transitioning children from ECES programs to kindergarten.

Discussion

There are many opinions of what school readiness looks like. Is it simply when the child turns five years old, or is it when the child can count to ten, write their name, or tie their shoe? "School readiness is not the property of a child but is a product of interactions among key settings in which the child participates." (Pinata & Cox, 2002, p. 4). As we expect children to transition, it is necessary as professionals to do our part. This notion insists that the transition process be a planned systematic, collaborative venture involving all individuals concerned in the child's life to create a flawless experience. In a perfect world, children, families, and sending and receiving agencies would combine their expertise ensuring successful school adaptation. However, as discussed earlier there are potential barriers that impede the transition process such as time, finances and the complexity of the transition process.

In the literature reviewed in this paper, recommended school readiness skills were identified that act as predictors of a successful transition to kindergarten. These

skills not only act as predictors of successful school transition, but skills that lay the foundation for future school success. These school survival skills encompassed independence. How independent a child was increased the potential of a successful school adaptation.

Jewett et al. (1998) discussed the idea of a “continuous classroom” (p. 337). What would that look like? Could it be possible for ECSE programs and kindergarten classrooms to provide a sense of continuity among rules, expectations, and curriculum while maintaining the integrity of developmentally appropriate practices? Pre-kindergarten programs are beginning to mirror the academic rigor of kindergarten in an effort to get children ready for school. Yet, as discussed earlier, it is not primarily pre-academic skills that get children ready for school, but it is their adaptive functioning that is a predictor of school success.

Future research is needed in the area of curriculum as it relates to creating a “continuous classroom” between ECSE programs and kindergarten. For example, Lynchburg City School’s ECSE program implements the High/Scope Curriculum using a plan-do-review process. Recently, the Superintendant of Lynchburg City Schools has instituted the use and training of Skillful Teacher as the expected instructional method. Skillful Teacher has a similar approach where students plan, execute, and reflect using active learning. How will children fare transitioning from LCS ECSE program to kindergarten classrooms that exercise the Skillful Teacher approach in the future?

When preparing for a trip we invest a lot time and energy into planning our journey. Making travel arrangements, obtaining a passport, and securing accommodations are all important aspects of preparedness. We also prepare by

learning the exchange rate, getting acquainted with time differences, and learning the language and culture in order to survive, if you will, prior to arrival. Without both pieces of careful planning, the trip would not be successful. One does not compensate for the other. The same is true for transitions. Time and energy are invested to ensure flawless passage from culture to culture. However, if time is an identified barrier in transition planning, where do we focus our energy? Is it lining up all involved parties to attend transition planning meetings? Is it becoming knowledgeable of the receiving party environment, rules, expectations, and curriculum and teaching children how to survive in the new culture? According to the literature reviewed, the answer is: both.

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Table 1

Best Practices in Planning Transitions form Early Childhood Special Education

Programs to Kindergarten

1. Planning the child's transition from an early childhood program into an elementary school setting occurs in a systematic, individualized, timely, and collaborative fashion.
2. Family members receive the necessary information, support, and opportunities for enabling them to participate as equal partners in planning their child's transition.
3. The early childhood program prepares the child for successful and independent participation in the kindergarten and elementary school mainstream.
4. The elementary school prepares to successfully integrate and educate the entering child in the kindergarten and elementary school mainstream.
5. The elementary school staff provide the necessary services to promote and support the child's placement, integration, and education in the kindergarten classroom and elementary school mainstream.

Conn-Powers, M.C., Ross-Allen, J., & Holburn, S. (1990). Transition of young children into the elementary education mainstream. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 9(4), p. 9

Table 2

Transition to Kindergarten: A Timeline for Planning

	Preschool Staff	Parents	CSE/School Staff
Fall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk with parents regarding transition • Call direct Committee on Special Education (CSE); mention child and identify transition liaison • Observe kindergarten programs • Obtain copy of district kindergarten curriculum • Create a log to document school contacts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk with preschool staff about kindergarten options • Observe existing kindergartens in your district • Get to know district personnel by attending meetings, parent groups • Network with other parents • Create system to document school planning and contacts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make contact with parents of incoming children (letter or call) describing transition process • Invite preschool parents to parent meetings, school events • Allow parent tours of kindergarten programs
Winter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite district staff to observe transitioning children in preschool setting • Arrange with the district staff for evaluation for CSE (who will do it and when) • Meet with parents to talk about child's program needs and transition process • Hold parent group meeting on transition to kindergarten; include panel of parents who have previously moved on to kindergarten 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate self about legal rights, evaluation, and CSE process • Attend planning meeting with district staff to discuss fall options for your child • Respond to district staff request for information for evaluation • Attend parent meetings regarding transition • Implement alliance building with district staff (e.g., thank you note for visit or meeting; offer to be parent on CPSE or site-based planning team, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiate contact with incoming parents regarding evaluation and transition timeline • Hold planning meetings with each family and current preschool staff about fall possibilities • Welcome parents into the school • Begin testing for CSE • Plan as a district for the group of children entering next fall
Spring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete all updates of goals and any testing necessary • Arrange annual review and CSE dates • Meet with parents regarding testing reports, planning meetings, CSE presentations by parents • Prepare CSE oral presentation • Complete transition portfolio and hand deliver to new teacher • Invite kindergarten teacher to visit preschool • Prepare child for transition by visiting new school, talking about changes, creating memory books 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review testing reports and staff recommendations for child • Prepare for CSE meeting by planning your statement about what you want for your child <p>Review results of CSE and request additional meeting if not satisfied</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss with preschool staff ways to prepare your child for the transition • Continue to build relationships with staff and parents in the district 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete testing and planning for CSE meeting • Hold CSE and finalize classification and placement • Invite parents to visit and meet teacher once placement is made • Send teacher to observe child in preschool and meet parents • Reach out to parents and child by arranging visit to school over spring or summer; invite to kindergarten orientation and make necessary accommodations

Barnes, E. (1997). *Paving the way to kindergarten: Timelines and guidelines for preschool staff working with young children with special needs and their families*. Washington, DC: US Department of Education, p. 36

