

Smoothing the way: An evaluation of a transition to school program ®

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***Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education
Annual Conference, Melbourne, 1999.***

Abstract

Children's transition to school represents a major change for all concerned as children, families and schools all need to make adjustments to the changing demands and expectations. This paper reports an evaluation of one transition to school program instituted in an urban school in Sydney in response to the needs of a specific group of children and families. Staff in this school targeted a group of Arabic-speaking children and their families who had had limited experience in formal early childhood settings. With the assistance of local consultants and the authors, the school implemented the transition program in term 4, 1998. This paper describes the program and the theoretical base underpinning it, as well as an evaluation of the program and its outcomes for children, families and school personnel. The evaluation, in the context of ongoing research in the area by the authors, and a review of the transition to school literature provides the basis for the identification of a set of guidelines underpinning effective transition to school programs.

Introduction

The transition to school has been recognised as "one of the major challenges children have to face in their early childhood years" (Victorian Department of School Education, 1992, p. 44). The challenge extends to all concerned, as parents, teachers and children manage changes which can accompany the move to school settings (Margetts, 1997). The expectations of each of these groups in the transition to school influences, and is influenced by, the experiences involved. Successful transitions involve collaboration between all of these groups.

Children starting school bring with them a wide array of experiences and understandings. As a result, they experience the transition to school in different ways (Rimm-Kaufman, Cox & Pianta, 1998). Family support is influential in children's adjustment to school (Johnson, 1997) and in achieving successful learning outcomes (Hargreaves, 1994). Teachers' expectations-some of which are formed during the transition period (Entwisle, 1995)-directly influence children's school experiences. Teachers who facilitate parent participation tend to engender positive attitudes towards school from both parents and children (Onsman, 1996). Of the few studies which have considered children's expectations of school, a sense of disappointment and negativity is reported among children whose expectations do not match the reality (Brostrom, 1995; Christensen, 1998). Children who have experienced the school

context through repeated visits or contact are more likely than others to hold realistic expectations (Brostrom, 1995).

There is a growing awareness that children who experience similar environments and expectations at home and school are likely to find the transition to school, as well as school in general, an easier process (Morrison, Griffith & Alberts, 1997; Nelson, 1995). The converse also holds; that is, children who find school unfamiliar and unrelated to their home contexts tend to experience difficulty, confusion and anxiety during the transition. It is particularly where there are cultural differences between home and school that effective transition programs are vital (Toomey, 1989). Such programs respect the different perspectives and expectations that converge when children start school and aim to develop an effective partnership between parents and teachers.

Background to the program

In 1998, staff in one school located in the western region of Sydney together with their local consultants and support personnel, initiated contact with researchers to design, implement and evaluate a transition to school program for a specific population within the school. The program was for implementation in Term 4, 1998.

Through their knowledge of the school and local community, the three key school staff-the Principal, the nominated Kindergarten teacher for 1999 and the Community Language teacher-had identified a number of potential students from Arabic-speaking families who spoke relatively little English and who were unfamiliar with environments outside the home and family. Most of these children had siblings attending the school, but were themselves unused to extended periods away from their parent-in all cases, their mother. Starting school, with its separation from parents, reliance on English and unfamiliar context was thought to present a major, potentially traumatic experience for these children. The transition program was developed as a means of responding to the perceived needs of this group of children. The acronym CARES (Children Almost Ready to Enter School) was used as the title for the program as a means of indicating that the school community cared about its newest group of students and was committed to making the transition from home to school as comfortable and anxiety-free as possible. This program was designed to signal to children and families that school staff were interested in them and the background they brought to school.

Aims

The program was aimed at both children and parents, and to this end, included a strand of experiences for parents as well as for children. Potential benefits were identified for each of these groups. It was anticipated that parents and children would become more familiar with the school context and their place within it through the program. As well it was expected that members of the school community would become familiar with the children and parents. The benefits of parents and school staff working together to create a positive climate for the transition to school were recognised in the planning. In addition, it was anticipated that interactions between parents and school staff would form the basis for ongoing supportive and cooperative interaction.

In summary, the aims of the program were to:

1. support children and parents upon entry to school;
2. provide children with a brief introduction to school and the school environment;
3. help children develop feelings of confidence and familiarity in the school setting;

4. provide a bilingual transition to school program that addresses the language background of children and parents.

Planning

A series of planning meetings was held during terms 2 and 3, 1998. A wide range of issues was discussed, including ways to reach parents and children, the need for child care for younger children, the target group for the program, the expectations of school staff, release time for the Kindergarten teacher, equity issues, legal issues, and ways of promoting the program. It was decided to identify potential participants from enrolment interviews, with the Community Languages teacher contacting parents of Arabic-speaking children with little formal, out-of-home early childhood experience and inviting them to participate in the program. The program was described as a pilot program, as a means of explaining to all other parents why they had not been invited to participate. Child care was organised for the siblings of children involved in CARES. A bilingual child care worker was employed during the program so that parents could feel comfortable about attending the sessions without the need to focus on the care of younger children. The legal issue of having children on school premises who were not actually enrolled, and the related issue of who then was responsible for them, was resolved by the parent program-as the parents also remained on site, legal responsibility for their children remained with them. The program was promoted through the school newsletter and staff discussions with parents. After discussion of issues and their own research, school staff in conjunction with university staff, planned a program to be implemented in Term 4, 1998.

School staff retained ongoing commitment to the program. They assumed control of what was to happen, when and where. To this end, staff were eager to have wide ranging input from others, but also were committed to developing a program they had confidence in delivering.

Overview of the program

The CARES program operated for the first eight weeks of term 4, 1998. It consisted of two strands: one for the parents, conducted by the Community Languages teacher and other educators, and the other for the children, conducted by the Kindergarten teacher. The strands ran concurrently, with the parents attending a session in the community meeting room at the same time as the children attended their session in the school hall. Both sessions lasted for two hours, commencing at the same time as school started.

The children's sessions were organised around a consistent structure each week, which involved a welcome time as children identified their name tag and chose an activity from those set up, a period of free play, a session designed to help children become oriented to the school, a recess break, a whole group activity and singing and dancing. The range of play experiences and activities varied each week, as did the part of the school visited by the group. The transition group spent their recess break in the school playground. However, this was scheduled at a time prior to the recess break for the remainder of the school, so that the children could experience the playground, without the overwhelming presence of large numbers of other children.

The parent sessions were designed to cover issues relevant to parents' interests and concerns and to address the expectations of the school for children entering Kindergarten. There was also opportunity for parents to discuss their expectations and the ways in which schools had changed since their own experiences.. A number of personnel from outside the school staff was involved in the presentation of these sessions. The Community Languages

teacher was present at each session and interpreted the materials into Arabic and/or English as appropriate.

As part of the usual orientation program for new students, the school held an Orientation Day in week 7 for students and their parents. This Orientation Day was incorporated into the CARES program. As a result, the children and parents involved in CARES met with other children starting school in 1999 and their parents.

Evaluation

The school provides orientation sessions for new students and their parents on a regular basis. The transition to school program was regarded as an extension of this orientation to the school and, as such, something that would be ongoing. Hence, evaluation was regarded as critical in order to identify positive features and effects of the program as well as to pinpoint any problematic or weak areas.

The final week of the CARES program was planned as a debriefing and evaluation session for all involved-children, parents and staff. In addition to this, data had been collected throughout the program by the Kindergarten teacher and the Community Languages teacher. Further data was collected through interviews with children, parents and school staff after the children involved in CARES had started school. The aims of the evaluation were to consider the appropriateness of the structure and content of the program, identify any benefits for those involved in the program and to make recommendations for modifications based on the analysis of this data.

The evaluation process was collaborative, inviting interactions between members of the evaluation team and children, parents and school staff (Principal, Kindergarten teacher, Community Languages teacher). Data were gathered through formal (structured/semi-structured) and informal (conversational) interviews. Interviews conducted during the program aimed to establish peoples' perceptions of the program and of children's transition to school in general. During these interviews, anticipated benefits of the program were canvassed, as were issues related to the structure and implementation of the program. In the first term of the following year, after the children had started school, interviews were conducted with children, parents and school staff with the aim of identifying any ways in which the program had affected children's and parents' transition to school and assisted both parents and teachers in their roles of supporting children beginning school.

Results

Analysis of interview responses identified a number of benefits, as well as limitations and suggested modifications to the program.

Benefits for children

Benefits were identified for children, parents and school staff. Benefits for children included greater knowledge about, and familiarity with, the school, routines, expectations and school personnel. A definite change in disposition was noted for the children over the time of the program. After the initial session, the Kindergarten teacher noted that some children were scared, both by the separation from their parent and by the number of other children in attendance. By the end of the program, the same teacher described these children as confident and happy about the prospect of going to school. Some of the children confirmed this, indicating that they were *very happy* about going to school, and that it *was fun*.

The levels of confidence reported for, and by, children appear to have been retained, with the Kindergarten teacher reporting in February of the new school year, that *the CARES children were more confident [than the others in the class], knew the school, the teacher and the teacher's rules. They appeared happy, playing with each other at recess and lunch... They were more confident and could be sent to the office for messages. There were still a few tears in the morning... [but they] had settled well.*

Other benefits related to the children's social adjustment to school, with separations from parents becoming easier over the eight weeks as the children became familiar with the teacher and the routine, and realised that their parents would return for them. At the start of the school year, parents indicated that some children had settled in better than others. One parent commented that her *son is tired after a day at school, but he talks a little about what he does during the day and says that he has made friends but as yet does not know their names.* Another mother said that her son had *not liked the program initially but now had no complaints about going to school.*

While several children remained very reserved in interviews, some were very enthusiastic about the CARES experience, especially about the Kindergarten teacher. All children were convinced that this teacher would be the one they would have the following year (and this had been decided by school staff as the case), and all were very keen to be in her class. Comments such as *the teacher does everything-reads stories, claps, freezes ... the teacher reads books, she is great because she is nice* reflect the children's comfort with this particular teacher.

Knowledge related benefits included the children knowing who their teacher would be when they started Kindergarten, and knowing where the classroom was, where facilities such as toilets and the school office were. One child was positive about starting school as she knew that when she started school she had *to go to the Kindergarten room.* She was very proud of knowing where this room was.

Despite the hesitancy of some children in interviews, there was mention of the importance of knowing the school rules from some of the children. For example, when asked about what they had learned from coming to CARES, some children replied by listing activities such as *cutting, painting, blocks, playdough, shops and reading books*, while others mentioned rules such as *putting my hand up, sitting up or just sitting.*

Benefits for parents

Essentially, parental expectations of the program were twofold: that they would learn more about what happened at school and that their children would settle into school easily. In their interviews, parents indicated that these expectations had been met. There was agreement among parents that they knew much more about what happened at school and could see how school was different from when they had attended. One parent described her child as *happy, more confident and more independent* and another noted that *mine is the only child who does not have siblings in school and is therefore unused to other children. She is still quiet but has improved.* Another parent commented that when her son came home from CARES *he announce[d] that he is going to do his homework.* Other parents noted that their children talked about how they had learned to *sit properly, line up, [and] where the office is.*

Despite the view of their children that the parents *just waited* whilst they were with the Kindergarten teacher in the hall, parents identified a number of benefits from their sessions. These ranged from starting to feel more comfortable about children playing in school, and recognising this as a means of learning, to being able to mix with other parents in situations similar to their own. Several parents commented on the benefits of being able *to find out*

what happens at school and why, how the school operates and how schools had changed since their own school experiences. As well as becoming more aware of experiences their children would have at school, several parents commented that they were now more aware of *how to help their children* and had *more ideas about activities they could plan during the break* before school started. There was a sense of relief among parents that their children had met and *made friends* with other children through the program and as a result, they *felt more at ease* about the children starting school. Mixing with other parents was regarded as positive, as was continued contact with school staff which served to *extend the good relationship between school and families*. All of these comments support a statement from one of the school personnel that *if the parents were relaxed then the children were more likely to be*.

Benefits for school staff

While fewer in number, the benefits listed for school staff are far reaching. These included school personnel getting to know both children and parents. In relation to the children, teachers regarded it as important to have knowledge about children's social and academic capabilities. To this end, individual developmental profiles were constructed for each child over the eight weeks as teachers and children became more familiar with each other. These profiles will be used to guide the Kindergarten program devised for these children.

Limitations

All of the limitations listed related to the program and its implementation. Mostly, these came from staff. However, some parents suggested some limitations from their perspective, or that of their children. It should be noted that the responses to the program were overwhelmingly positive; any limitations mentioned were in the context of improving the program.

School personnel were keen to revise the program to include more gross motor experiences. While some experiences had been included, there was a sense that more of these were needed, possibly in the format of five to ten minute sessions at the start of each day. A greater focus on play, rather than more structured sessions, was also recommended. School staff reported that the time had gone very quickly, both in terms of the time allocated for each session as well as the overall eight week time period. Time was also a factor in terms of preparation for the program, as the setting up of the hall took some time each week.

Parents mentioned time as a limitation in several ways. They acknowledged that a time commitment was required over the eight weeks, in order that they and their children could attend each session. Some parents found this difficult, and questioned the need for them to be there each week. This was reflected in attendance at the parent sessions, which dropped off considerably during the last few weeks of the program. One parent suggested that the children's program could be run on more than one day a week or for a longer period on one day. Others believed that one day a week was sufficient. Staff and parents indicated that a session with parents and children together would be beneficial for parents to view their children's progress.

The issue of working parents was raised, and concerns expressed that they would not have the opportunity to participate in a program such as CARES. A further issue about time related to the timing of this, or any, transition program. One parent asked *What happens after the Christmas break, do they have to start all over again?* While supporting the program, another parent indicated that it did not prepare children for the full day they would be spending at school and the tiredness associated with it.

School staff commented on the positive aspect of the small group, both in terms of enabling them to become familiar with the children, and for the children getting to know each other as well as the teacher. However, the reality of children having to confront a much larger class group the following year was raised, and the change in social dynamics created by such a large group discussed.

One of the strengths of the program was also mentioned as a limitation. The strong involvement of the Kindergarten teacher was regarded by children, parents and staff as one of the key elements to the success of the program. However, this success could be undermined if that teacher was no longer a teacher in the school, or the Kindergarten teacher for these children. The need to involve more staff in the program was highlighted, both to overcome this great reliance on one teacher and also as a means of informing the rest of the school community of what was happening and of the importance of such programs for all concerned.

Suggested modifications to the program

There was overwhelming support for the program to be repeated in future years. Suggested changes to the program included:

- planning sessions for parents and children together;
- involving the whole school so that other staff and children were aware of what was happening and provided support for the same;
- planning fewer sessions for parents;
- consideration of holding sessions for more than one day a week, or longer periods in one day in order to help children become familiar with a long school day.

Discussion

Analysis of the program and interviews revealed a strong acceptance of the CARES program from those directly involved in it. Others outside the program, such as teachers in the school who were not involved and families who were not invited to join the program could be expected to be less supportive. If CARES is to continue to be a success and to provide positive transition experiences for children, ways of involving more people will need to be addressed. Much of the success of the program has been related to the involvement of a small group of parents, children and staff. The small numbers have facilitated close interactions and the development of supportive relationships. How this translates to larger and more diverse groups will be at the core of the continued success of the program.

All of the parents attending sessions were mothers who were able to be at the school during the day. As such, this was an 'easy' target group to work with. More difficult to target are the groups of working parents, fathers who wish to be involved in their child's transition to school and others with family or other commitments that mean day time attendance is difficult. These families may have the same needs as those involved in the program, and ways in which to reach these groups presents a major challenge to any transition program.

All but one of the families involved in CARES had another child already in the school. In this way these families already had a relationship with the school. The program, then reached only one family that had not already had contact with the school in some way. Some of the questions to pose in the light of this are whether or not the targeted population was actually reached, in terms of families, and whether there remained families who had had no previous contact with the school who could have been included in the program. Whether or not the targeted family population was reached, it seems clear that the targeted child population was reached. Each of the children involved in CARES was described as shy, hesitant and unsure

of themselves in a school context at the commencement of the program. These same children were later described as confident and happy in the same context.

One of the problems in developing programs to help groups who are perceived to have a particular need is the resulting prioritisation of that need. For example, it is reasonable to argue that all children starting school have a need to experience high quality transition to school experiences. Given limited time and resources, programs are often forced to prioritise within this, for example, to say that some groups have a greater need than others. One of the challenges faced by CARES and other programs like it, is to consider the inclusivity or exclusivity of the program and to communicate the rationale for this.

Resource issues impinge on programs such as CARES. School staff commented on the importance of the venue, which consisted of a large space for the children as well as a separate space for the parent meetings. A program such as CARES may be difficult to operate in a school without similar facilities. Other resource issues include being able to release a Kindergarten teacher over the period of the program, as well as for pre-planning, setting up, reflection and evaluation sessions, the provision of child care, and having sufficient resources to enable the children in transition programs to access appropriate materials, such as blocks, paint and craft materials.

One of the strengths of the program was the way in which school staff worked together, particularly the Kindergarten teacher and the Community Languages teacher. Other support came from the school executive and consultants who participated in the parent sessions. The involvement of a range of key personnel is an important element of a successful program.

A further element identified as underpinning the success of the program was the amount of planning that was involved. Ongoing access to university staff and relevant support staff were mentioned as important aspects of the program.

Those involved in the program identified a number of implementation strategies that contributed to the success of the program. While the strategies are specific to the context of the CARES program, the underlying elements provide a set of guidelines for practice that are applicable across a range of situations.

Guidelines for Practice

The CARES program was successful because:

- some funds and other resources were committed to the program. This included not only seeding money, but also time for teacher release, the availability of materials, equipment and meeting space;
- the program was planned, with this planning occurring well before the program was implemented;
- there was a clear focus to the program, with expectations for staff, parents and children outlined. The focus encompassed social and emotional areas as well as academic competence;
- the program allowed for these expectations to change as the program progressed, for example as parents indicated areas of concern they wished to explore and as children and staff became more familiar with each other;
- the program involved a number of staff in the school as well as people from outside the school in the planning, implementation and evaluation phases. Each of these personnel had a high level of commitment to the success of the program. In

- particular, the personal and professional commitment of the Kindergarten teacher and the Community Languages teacher were crucial to the success of the program;
- there were ongoing opportunities for reflection and evaluation;
 - there were opportunities for staff, particularly the Kindergarten teacher, to get to know the children;
 - the children and the parents felt valued in the school community.

Conclusion

The CARES program reflects a high level of planning, confident implementation and commitment to evaluation as a means of refining and improving practice. As such, it resulted in an effective program for parents and children. The success of the program raises questions about the ways in which similar programs may be made available to larger groups of children about to start school.

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