

Successful transition programs from prior-to-school to school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children: Methodological considerations

Bob Perry*
Peter Howard#
Jen Skattebol*

Sue Dockett*
Terry Mason*
Diana Whitton*

Shirley Gilbert*
Tracey Simpson^
Chris Woodrow*

* *University of Western Sydney* # *Australian Catholic University*

^ *Charles Sturt University*

The *Successful transition programs from prior-to-school to school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children* project team has undertaken case studies in 10 sites across NSW during 2004/2005. In all of the sites, input has been sought from Indigenous families and community members, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, Aboriginal educators, prior-to-school educators, school teachers and other people who wished to be involved. In this paper, team members consider the methodological issues involved in working with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in both educational and community settings and provide examples from the project.

Introduction

Starting school is an important time in the lives of children, families, educators and communities. It is a time when children, and their families, are expected to manage changes in their physical surroundings (Dockett & Perry, 1999); changes in social interactions and expectations (Hamre & Pianta, 2001); changes in the type and structure of learning environments (Fabian, 2002); and changes in how children feel about themselves as learners (Early, Pianta, & Cox, 1999). A successful start to school is regarded as setting the foundation for future engagement and success (academic, social and emotional) within the context of school (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Luster & McAdoo, 1996; Ramey & Ramey, 1999).

What is transition to school?

Transition to school is understood as a process of relationship building (Dockett & Perry, 2001a; Fabian & Dunlop, 2002; Pianta & Cox, 1999), supported by a range of activities or experiences. In this sense, transition is something that is experienced, rather than something that happens to the child and family. The concept of transition as a process suggests that the timeframe needs to be flexible. Some transition programs operate well before children start school, others start before school and continue on through school until a point is reached where those involved in transition agree that additional support is no longer necessary. In some situations, transition programs may begin when children start school.

All participants and stakeholders in transition influence the process and the experiences, and are influenced by the transition. Stakeholders and participants in transition include children, families, educators, other professionals or agencies and communities.

Transition to school occurs within a specific context. The most effective transition programs are those that acknowledge and are responsive to that context (Pianta & Cox, 1999).

Transition programs and experiences are a major means of establishing continuity between prior-to-school and school environments and expectations, and building upon and extending the supportive relationships and connections that may already exist between families, community and educators. Where these elements do not already exist, transition programs provide an opportunity for these to be established and maintained (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Transition programs and experiences can provide an important basis for a successful start to school.

Aboriginal¹ children starting school

There is much evidence of inequity of educational access, participation and outcomes for Aboriginal children in Australian schools (Adams, 1998; Cronin & Diezmann, 2002; NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc./NSW Department of Education and Training (NSW AECG/NSW DET), 2004). Frigo and Adams (2002, p. 1) suggest that many issues emerge early in school-home connections and are perpetuated throughout school life:

In the early childhood years (0-8 years), Indigenous students are less likely to participate in preschooling than their non-Indigenous peers, they have higher rates of absenteeism beginning in primary school, and the early indications of their educational achievement, as measured by state-wide English literacy assessments, indicate that, as a group, they perform at a lower level compared to their non-Indigenous peers.

Starting school is an important time when children establish identities of themselves as learners within the context of school and community (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000). This can be particularly important for Aboriginal children. Schools in which Aboriginal children are achieving to their potential tend to support Aboriginal culture and actively engage young Aboriginal children in learning. There is often a strong Aboriginal presence at the school—both in terms of students and teaching and administrative staff. As well, strong links between the community and the school are evident, and seen as vital in promoting a smooth transition between home and school.

The recent *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* (NSW AECG/NSW DET, 2004) indicated that “one of the most effective ways to support Aboriginal children into the formal school setting is through transition programs which prepare children for Kindergarten” (p. 64). The review noted the support for transition programs from Aboriginal families and communities, and identified a specific need to “develop strategies to support transition to school for all Aboriginal children, including children attending Aboriginal preschools, DET preschools, other early childhood services and particularly children who do not access any prior-to-school services” (p. 65).

The Current Project

In early 2004, the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) sought expressions of interest for a project which became titled *Successful Transition Programs*

¹ In keeping with the protocol established in the *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* (NSW AECG/NSW DET, 2004, p. 11), the term Aboriginal is used in this report to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

from Prior-To-School to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children. This project was funded by the National Fund for Education Research (NFER).

The project was designed to:

- identify sites where successful transition to school programs for Indigenous Australian communities are operating;
- identify the reasons for success, and to identify strategies for successful transition to school for Indigenous Australian children;
- trial these strategies in sites that nominate as experiencing difficulties in relation to transition to school for Indigenous Australian children; and
- disseminate strategies for successful transition to school for Indigenous Australian communities, and, in turn, improve learning outcomes for Aboriginal children.

A team of researchers based in the Starting School Research Project at the University of Western Sydney along with members from three NSW universities were successful in their bid for the project. There is a total of 11 researchers (including three Aboriginal people) involved in the project team.

The project is managed by a Reference Group consisting of representatives of the major organisations with an interest in education for Aboriginal children (see Appendix 1 for a listing of the membership). About 50% of the members of the Reference Group are Aboriginal people.

This paper considers methodological issues in the planning and conduct of the first two components of the project:

- identification of case study sites; and
- identification of the components of exemplary practice.

Methodological Considerations

Transition to school occurs within communities. Hence, research on successful practices in transition to school must be undertaken within these communities. In the “case study phase” of the current project, ten sites that were deemed to display exemplary practices in transition to school programs for Aboriginal children were chosen. The methods used to choose these sites and the approaches taken to data collection in these sites forms the basis of the remainder of this paper. The case studies are not complete—it is planned that there will be an “exiting” visit by members of the research team in Term 4, 2005. However, there is much that can be shared from the case study selection and site visits so far.

Researching in Communities

The methodology in the case study phase of the *Successful Transition Programs from Prior-to-school to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children* project has recognised the diversity of the ten communities involved and the people within these communities. It has endeavoured to seek collaborative input from all in these communities who are involved with the transition to school process.

In their review of contemporary research on Indigenous education outcomes, Mellor and Corrigan (2004, p. 46) describe what they see as the limitations of much of this earlier research.

1. Research has generally been either testing without context or small case study.
2. Research has generally focused on a specific set of the population.

3. Research findings have been equivocal, incomplete or unclear.
4. There has been a focus on the uniqueness of the Indigenous experience of education.
5. Indigenous education research has been to an extent isolated from the broader research discourses over teacher quality, ongoing professional development, class sizes and social and emotional readiness for formal education.
6. Indigenous education has not been integrated with discourses in other disciplines, such as developmental, cognitive and social psychology, paediatrics, sociology and public and community health.
7. Research has focused predominantly on 'problems'.
8. The relationship between cause and effect has been asserted, rather than the inferences tested through research.
9. There is a tendency to adopt and promote the significance of single solutions.

The current project attempted to avoid many of these perceived limitations by adopting approaches informed by decolonising methodologies (Smith, 1999). In recent years there has been considerable critique around the production of academic knowledge about Indigenous peoples as on-going colonialism (Gandhi, 1998; Kaomea, 2004; Mutua & Swadener, 2004; Smith, 1999). Central to these critiques are questions about who has the power to name Indigenous experience and how this naming has the potential to reify (or intensify) existing power relations. In response to and as part of these critiques, Swadener, Kabiru, and Njenga (2000) developed a set of guidelines for collaborative work between 'insider' and 'outsider' partners and to ensure that power issues between western academic agendas and community issues are balanced. While Mutua and Swadener (2004) later suggest that these 'rule-governed formulas' cannot be expected to work across every localised power relationship these guidelines have salience as reflexive methodological tools in research with Indigenous communities. Ongoing reference points for the project drawn from these guidelines include:

- collaboration on all phases of the study;
- understanding of languages and cultural nuances;
- compensation;
- making findings available to local share holders;
- participating in the community in an on-going way; and
- interrogating privilege.

The case studies will extend over a total period of more than 12 months and will involve multiple visits to each site, allowing the researchers and communities to get to know each other and to build relationships. Findings have been developed collaboratively with community members through drafting, checking and redrafting of case study reports and through sharing of findings with as many community members as possible. Smith (1999, p. 15) emphasises the importance of research that reports back to community

There are diverse ways of disseminating knowledge and of ensuring that research reaches the people who have helped make it. Two important ways not always addressed by scientific research are to do with 'reporting back' to the people and 'sharing knowledge'. Both ways assume a principle of reciprocity and feedback.

This mechanism for negotiating meaning and developing a shared world view have worked towards avoiding research approaches where:

...ill-formed perceptions and assumptions about the values and ways of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and social organisation have emerged from the comparison of the Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander world to the spiritual, social, political and economic perspectives of European colonisers. Colonists judged the civility and worthiness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and societies by the degree to which they perceived it conforming to European customs and norms. (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003, pp. 1-2)

The project team has recognised that our work in each case study site involves working with difference and celebrating this difference whenever possible and from as many perspectives as possible. Difference is a key component of our team—one that sustains debate and produces discussion and argumentation. It is also a key component of each of our case study sites. We recognise that “working with difference in a research context takes time, care, patience and the building of robust relationships” (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003, p. 3). The methodology planned and implemented in the case study phase of the project has endeavoured to achieve these features.

Case Study Site Selection

The process for the selection of the sites in which case studies were to be conducted provided an example of the need for strong relationships and collaboration to be developed between the project team and the Reference Group. This process consisted of numerous interrelated stages.

1. The Reference Group considered possible case study sites in its early meetings and formed a subgroup to provide advice on the selection of these sites.
2. The subgroup, using data from many different sources, including regional personnel, knowledge from previous projects and local information, determined a longlist of possible sites. Not all of the information used at this stage was focused on transition to school programs. In some cases, information about the functioning of communities, relationships between schools and other educational institutions and the local Aboriginal communities and the history of educational programs in the communities were also considered.
3. The Senior Advisor Transition from the NSW Department of Education and Training undertook an exhaustive data collection process through which information about the transition to school programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children was obtained from each of the longlisted sites. The data collection process was based around the *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs* that had been developed earlier by the Starting School Research Project (Dockett & Perry, 2001a; 2001b), supplemented with criteria that specifically considered relationships between Aboriginal communities and education and care settings in each of the sites.
4. Using these data, the subgroup of the Reference Group constructed a prioritised shortlist of preferred case study sites. This shortlist was transmitted to the project team.
5. The project team conducted its own telephone survey of regional personnel, prior-to-school personnel and other contacts to ascertain further data about the transition to school programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in each of the shortlisted sites.
6. From the sites shortlisted by the subgroup of the Reference Group, the project team constructed another shortlist that varied in its prioritisation from that of the subgroup. The major variables that were considered in the choice of sites were:

- evidence of successful transition to school program (criteria linked to the *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs*);
 - involvement of communities in the transition programs;
 - proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the schools and prior-to-school settings in the site; and
 - geographical spread of sites across NSW.
7. This shortlist was presented to the Reference Group. After some discussion, an agreed list of case study sites was determined.
 8. The project team contacted each site to seek the agreement of the schools, prior-to-school services and communities to be involved. All were pleased to be chosen as exemplary programs.
 9. The case study sites are spread across urban and regional New South Wales, with three sites in metropolitan Sydney, one in Newcastle, three in large regional centres and three in smaller country towns.

The project team believes that the selection of these case study sites has provided a reasonable cross-section of successful practice in transition for Aboriginal children. While it is acknowledged that the “very best” transition program—by some criteria—may have been missed using the processes outlined above, the general characteristics of the ten sites chosen provides a very broad overview of what can be achieved in a wide variety of contexts.

Case Study Methodology

Four visits have been planned for each case study site. The last of these—scheduled for Term 4, 2005—has not occurred at the time of writing this paper. Hence, this section of the paper will consider only the first three case study visits.

Each of the case studies has been undertaken by two members of the project team. Aboriginal members of the project team have visited all but two of the sites. In these two sites, the team members conducting the case studies have had long and fruitful experience in other projects conducted in collaboration with Aboriginal communities, and this was accepted by the Aboriginal people in these sites.

Prior to and during the case studies, the Aboriginal members of the project team provided leadership and training in communication protocols and strategies for interaction with Aboriginal communities.

Site visit 1

Initial visits by the project team members were made to the sites in the latter half of Term 3, or the early part of Term 4, 2004. The purpose of this first visit was to “enter” the site and “establish” relationships (Board of Studies NSW, 2001; Howard, 2001). Meetings were held with the school principal and relevant staff, including Indigenous staff such as Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs) and Aboriginal Education Resource Teachers (AERTs), both Indigenous and non-Indigenous community leaders, consultants, staff from prior-to-school settings, children—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous—in Kindergarten and others who have not yet started school, and other stakeholders. At these meetings the project aim of identifying reasons and strategies for successful transition to school for Indigenous Australian children was introduced and appropriate approaches that could be taken in the remainder of the case study were discussed. This visit began the collection of relevant demographic information, the identification of a transition coordinator in each site

and, in some sites, the establishment or confirmation of a transition team (Dockett & Perry, 2003c; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Each site visit was conducted over 2 days.

Site visit 2

This visit was conducted in Term 4, 2004 and allowed observations of transition activities and approaches in each of the sites. As well, interview data was gathered from as many participant groups as possible about the progress of the transition to school program and its effect on the preparations of children, families, schools, prior-to-school services and the communities. Children who had not yet started school were asked to record what they expected school to be like through drawings, conversations and other relevant approaches to data gathering, many of which have been researched extensively by the Starting School Research Project (Dockett & Perry, 2003a, 2003b; Dockett & Simpson, 2003). Observations and discussions during transition program activities were conducted and the transition teachers and other workers were asked to predict those children in their programs whom they thought were most likely to make successful transitions to school in 2005. The project team members also conducted informal discussions with community members and members of the transition team in each site. The second visits were generally of one day's duration.

Site visit 3

One measure of the success of a transition program is how the children settle into their first term of school. The purpose of this visit—generally conducted in Term 1, 2005—was to gather data on this success or otherwise through interviews with Indigenous students, Kindergarten teachers, the school principal and families. During this visit the transition program was formally evaluated by the project team members and the transition team in each site against the Indicators of Progress developed by the Starting School Research Project. This case study visit was generally of one day's duration.

In each site, the project team members have been welcomed by all concerned with the transition to school program and have been able to work with a large cross-section of the community. In some sites, there has been some “quid pro quo”, with the project team members providing input to other aspects of the settings educational programs or providing some suggestions as to how the current transition to school program for Aboriginal children might be improved. While such acceptance is admirable, it does highlight a danger in case study research where the very presence of the project team members in the site changes the dynamics of the site and the very program that the team members have come to observe. This “reactivity” of the site (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 156) does need to be recognised and controlled to some extent through a variety of data collection methods and triangulation of these collected data. On the other hand, however, it is difficult to argue that researchers should not take the opportunity to improve the educational outcomes for members of communities when they are invited to do so.

One of the strengths of the *Successful Transition Programs from Prior-to-school to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children* project team lies in its large number of members and the variety of experiences and insights such a large number of people can bring to the endeavour. On the other hand, this very variety brings some disadvantages, particularly in terms of how data from one case study site might be compared with or accommodated in data from other sites. Steps have been taken in the current project to alleviate this difficulty as much as possible. These steps centre on the variety of data gathered in each site, the longevity of each case study and the care taken in preparation for each case study visit. These aspects of the project are analysed in the following section of the paper.

Data Collection and Analysis

Coordination of data collection

In a study such as this one, a wide variety of data collection processes is necessary as it allows for contextual, site and project team differences to be accommodated inside an overall methodological scheme. Prior to each visit, case study notebooks were prepared so that all of the project team members were aware of the purpose of the visit and the information that was to be gathered. The notebooks also contained lists of appropriate questions for each participant or group of participants. At team meetings, these notebooks were discussed and teams were prepared for the visits. While difference between the approaches taken by each of the case study teams in the different contexts of each site was encouraged, the case study notebooks provided stability and reliability in terms of the core data to be gathered.

Case study reports

In order to coordinate reporting of findings from each site, a proforma was developed by the project team. This allowed teams to produce individual site reports that contained information under common headings but encouraged diversity reflective of the sites and the team members. These case study reports were developed by the two project team members who visited the site, and were discussed in team meetings. The reports prepared after the second site visit were taken by the project team members to the third site visit and discussed with participants in the site. These discussions sometimes led to changes in the reports. In every case, the reports were appreciated by the site participants because of their clarity and insightfulness and because the researchers had taken the time and effort to share them with the site participants before sharing them with others. Final case study reports will be incorporated into the final report of the overall project.

Interviews

The major data collection tool for the project has been interviews of a variety of types. Interviews have been held individually and/or in groups with case study participants such as prior-to-school educators, parents of Aboriginal children, parents of non-Aboriginal children, Aboriginal children, non-Aboriginal children, community Elders and other community members, Aboriginal school teachers, non-Aboriginal school teachers, school principals, Aboriginal Education Assistants, Aboriginal Education workers, transition program teachers, regional education personnel and anyone else who was willing and able to take part. The grouping of participants in interviews varied from site to site and reflected the relative comfort the different groups felt with each other. In some sites, children were interviewed in groups containing both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, in others, Aboriginal children and non-Aboriginal children were interviewed separately.

Interviews are seen as appropriate for gathering data in this project because they “enable participants—be they interviewers or interviewees—to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view” (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 267). In the particular cross-cultural contexts in which the data collection for this project has occurred it is worth noting that “the interview is a particular medium for enacting and displaying people’s knowledge of cultural forms, as questions, far from being neutral, are couched in the cultural repertoires of all

participants, indicating how people make sense of their social world and of each other” (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 268).

Some of the individual interviews undertaken used a semi-structured approach with set question starters taken from the case study notebooks, while others were much more informal conversational interviews. All of the group interviews commenced as semi-structured but almost all of them developed into conversations among the participants. Most of the interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed for later analysis. Where permission was not obtained from all participants in an interview, notes were taken by one member of the project team and these notes were later used in analysis.

While conversational and semi-structured interviews do have many advantages in terms of being able to gather relevant, contextual data, opinions and perceptions from participants, they do have the disadvantage of being less systematic than more formal interviews and some other data gathering techniques. However, as suggested by Cohen et al. (2000, p. 271), the use of the case study notebooks and the prepared lists of questions “increase[d] the comprehensiveness of the data and [made] data collection somewhat systematic for each respondent. Logical gaps in data [could] be anticipated and closed.”

Drawings

In many of the case studies, children—and, in some cases, adults—were asked to respond to questions about what was important as children started school through the medium of drawings. The Starting School Research Project has used drawings in several different ways (Dockett & Perry, 2004). In this project, we were not concerned about the aesthetics of the drawings. Rather we used drawing as a

means to encourage children to communicate effectively, without heavy reliance on verbal and literacy skills (Young & Barrett, 2001), and as a means of helping children to “make their thinking visible to others” (Robertson, 2000, p. 161).

One of the advantages of drawing is that children can exert high levels of control over their participation in the activity. Children can express as little or as much as they wish, in ways of their choosing, through drawing. Drawing is a task that can be added to, or changed as the process continues. It does not require a rapid response: it can be thought about and drawings can develop as the drawer chooses. The activity of drawing is usually one that is familiar to children. (Dockett & Perry, 2004, p. 2)

The drawings were sometimes requested directly from the children by members of the project team and sometimes requested by teachers at the behest of the project team members. In every case, a comment was sought from the child when the drawing had been completed.

We rely on the comments from children as well as the drawing, considering them as a unit, rather than focusing just on the drawing or just on the comment. This is because drawings are very open to interpretation—an adult, researcher interpretation would probably be quite different from the artist’s interpretation. The focus on what children say, as well as what they draw, emphasises the importance of the process of drawing as well as the product. (Dockett & Perry, in press)

Observations

In each case study site, the project team members were encouraged to observe transition to school program and Kindergarten classes, as well as children, teachers and

community members in the playground. While these observations were relatively unstructured, they did serve to provide backing for many of the comments that had been made in interviews with both children and adults. The value of observations such as those undertaken in this project is explained by Cohen et al. (2000, p. 305) as follows.

Observational data are attractive as they afford the researcher the opportunity to gather 'live' data from 'live' situations. The researcher is given the opportunity to look at what is taking place *in situ* rather than at second hand (Patton, 1990: 203-5). This enables researchers to understand the context of programmes, to be open-ended and inductive, to see things that might otherwise be unconsciously missed, to discover things that participants might not freely talk about in interview situations, to move beyond perception-based data (e.g., opinions in interviews), and to access personal knowledge.

Document analysis

In some case study sites, members of the project team were given access to and encouraged to consider documentation about transition to school. Such documents included school reports, packages given to parents and children during transition to school programs, information sheets for parents, prior-to-school information about starting school, teacher planning for transition to school programs and evaluations of previous transition to school programs. The value of these documents to the project team was that they provided a snapshot of the written communication made between the educational institutions, the families of children starting school, those children and the broader community as well as providing some important—and often assumed—philosophical statements about the purposes of the transition programs and the educational beliefs of school teachers and prior-to-school educators.

Indicators of Progress

Based on the *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs*, the *Indicators of Progress* are a tool to assist in the planning, evaluation and reporting of transition programs. While they are currently in draft form, they have provided an opportunity in all of the case study sites to profile the transition to school programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The *Indicators of Progress* are designed as a management tool to identify goals and track progress towards these goals and suggest incremental steps towards achieving collaborative, meaningful and effective transition programs for all involved. The *Indicators of Progress* do not stipulate ways to achieve specific goals—it is expected that there are many different ways to attain the same ends, and transition teams will be instrumental in deciding which goals and strategies are appropriate in their context. They are based on collaboration between all involved in transition, vary across different contexts.

The project team members responsible for each site, in conjunction with relevant participants in the site constructed a profile of the transition program under consideration. These profiles will be used as baseline data when the project team returns to each site in Term 4, 2005 and will be incorporated in the final report of the project. They provide a useful quantitative measurement of each transition to school program as well as an excellent planning tool that is being used in many of the case study sites to help plan the transition to school programs for children starting school in 2006. The profiles have enabled the project team to share knowledge and information with communities and have empowered those in educational communities to both describe and reflect on their

practices within Aboriginal communities and education. The process has been undertaken as a 'both ways' learning opportunity.

In addition to communication and dialogue within sites, the project team has evolved into a collaborative network of researchers with its own research team dialogue—a 'many ways learning partnership' (Swadener, et al., 2000), which provides guidance to both the research project and the researchers within the project team.

Discussion

The claim was made earlier in this paper that the *Successful transition programs from prior-to-school to school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children* project had attempted to avoid many of the limitations in methodology that had been reported by Mellor and Corrigan (2004) in research on Indigenous education outcomes. In this section of the paper, each of these limitations is tested against the approaches used in the current project.

Research has generally been either testing without context or small case study.

In the current project, ten case study sites will have been studied over a period of about 18 months. In each site, a large number of participants have had the opportunity, on a number of occasions, to interact with the project team members and provide information on their part in each of the transition to school programs being studied. One constant in all of these discussions has been the variation in contexts from one site to another and between participants in each site. The significant diversity of Aboriginal communities in the rural, coastal and urban case study sites has highlighted similarities and differences across the different contexts. The ways in which these contexts affect participants' involvement in, and response to, the various transition to school programs has enriched the case studies. In some case study sites, upwards of thirty participants have been involved in discussions, interviews, observations, drawings, and other data collection processes. The case studies that have been conducted are extensive, comprehensive and certainly not small.

Research has generally focused on a specific set of the population.

While the current project is clearly aimed at successful transition to school programs for Aboriginal children, the diversity of contexts represented by the case study sites is such that there is a wide variety of Aboriginal communities and contexts being considered. While it cannot be claimed that the combined findings of the case studies will provide generalisable findings for all transition to school programs for Aboriginal children, the diversity of the sites, their schools, their communities, their prior-to-school settings and their children certainly provide reason to believe that the project has covered a multitude of circumstances.

Research findings have been equivocal, incomplete or unclear.

Research findings from the current project are not discussed in this paper. To date, they have been substantial and quite clear in their determination of what makes a successful transition to school program for Aboriginal children. However, before their release to a general audience, they need to be verified in each context and this will be done during the planned fourth case study site visits in Term 4, 2005. This process adheres to Mutua and

Swadener's (2004) principle of making findings available to local stakeholders while also facilitating completeness and clarity.

There has been a focus on the uniqueness of the Indigenous experience of education.

In many of the case study sites, project team members did analyse transition to school programs that had been specifically designed for Aboriginal children. However, in other sites, the analysis was on transition to school programs that were designed for all children starting school in 2005 and how successful these programs were for the Aboriginal children starting school in the particular site. In every case, the Aboriginal children starting school in 2005 were moving to public primary schools that catered for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. While team members were obviously interested in the "Indigenous experience of education", the contexts in which they worked meant that this could not be done without consideration of that experience as part of the broader, more general experience of transition to school in the site.

Indigenous education research has been to an extent isolated from the broader research discourses over teacher quality, ongoing professional development, class sizes and social and emotional readiness for formal education.

The current study is firmly based in the earlier work of the Starting School Research Project and, in particular, its *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs* (Dockett & Perry, 2001a; 2001b). Hence, it is very much part of broader research discourses, particularly around "social and emotional readiness for formal education".

Indigenous education has not been integrated with discourses in other disciplines, such as developmental, cognitive and social psychology, paediatrics, sociology and public and community health.

The work of the Starting School Research Project and, hence, the current project has as its theoretical basis the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Thus there is a clear integration with the discourses of developmental and social psychology. Further, any attempt to measure the success of transition programs for Aboriginal children must consider the general public and community health issues such as poverty and malnutrition as well as specific issues such as otitis media (NSW AECG/NSW DET, 2004).

Research has focused predominantly on 'problems'.

The title of the current project is *Successful transition programs from prior-to-school to school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children*. The aim of the project is to identify successful practices. While the project recognises that Aboriginal people have been described as the most educationally disadvantaged group of people within Australia (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, 1995; Kemp, 2001), it emphasises the successes that have been made in the development of transition to school programs and does not focus solely on problems.

The relationship between cause and effect has been asserted, rather than the inferences tested through research.

As with any case study research, the validity of generalisation of the findings needs to be established. In the current project, generalisability of findings is not claimed beyond principles which have been found to be effective in a number of the case studies. These principles do contain some evidence of cause and effect but recognise that cause and effect are constituted within the individual contexts of each case study site. As Cohen et al. (2000. p. 181) suggest, “case studies can establish cause and effect, indeed one of their strengths is that they observe effects in real contexts, recognizing that context is a powerful determinant of both causes and effects”.

There is a tendency to adopt and promote the significance of single solutions.

Transition to school is a complex process for each individual in each context. There is no “one size fits all” solution to what makes a successful transition to school program for Aboriginal children. This is reflected in the project through the number of case study sites and the different approaches to transition to school programs that have been implemented in these sites. While general principles may be able to be developed, the complexity of transition as a process and the complexity of each context ensure that there are no single or simple solutions to the provision of transition to school programs for all Aboriginal children.

Conclusion

The *Successful transition programs from prior-to-school to school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children* project has developed a methodology that responds to each of the criticisms raised by Mellor and Corrigan (2004). Through this methodology, the project has attempted to develop genuine collaboration with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants in each case study and to treat all participants equally while recognising the power differentials that are inherent in any research project. The ways in which the project team members have entered and worked in each of the sites, and the ways in which they have engaged in interviews, observations and other data collection approaches have adhered strongly to principles of equity and social justice. Project team members have benefited from their knowledge and use of relevant protocols when working with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and adults. The result has been a set of ten case studies that clearly address the project aims and provide relevant data not only for Phase 2 of the project but also for the success of transition to school for Aboriginal children beyond these sites.

In spite of this success, there are still some significant challenges to be addressed in Phase 2 of the project. These include ongoing and meaningful collaboration with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants; the participation of community members who may otherwise have had limited contact with school or transition to school; the notions of privilege and reciprocity within both educational and Aboriginal communities for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal project team members; and the importance of sufficient time in each context to allow all participants to share their transition to school stories.

Of particular interest is the notion of interrogating privilege and ways in which this can be used to influence the future work of the project team. Members of the project team have already noted that ‘privilege’ has different levels and layers of meaning for Aboriginal and

non-Aboriginal researchers and these influence the nature of interactions within educational communities, as well as access to information. Part of the challenge in the ongoing work of the project team is to pursue the meanings and implications of privilege, and the related notion of reciprocity, in the context of transition to school. There are many opportunities for project team members to learn from each other as well as from those within each of the project sites. In each of these contexts, there is great potential for the recognition of Aboriginal knowledge and through this, recognition of the “transformative power inherent in Indigenous knowledges” (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999, p. 15).

References

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (1995). *Social justice for Indigenous Australians*. Canberra: Author.
- Adams, I. (1998). The educational plight of Indigenous Australian students in the early years of schooling. *Unicorn*, 24, 5-15.
- Alexander, K., & Entwisle, D. (1998). Facilitating the transition to first grade: The nature of transition and research on factors affecting it. *Elementary School Journal*, 98(4), 351-364.
- Board of Studies NSW (2001). *Working with Aboriginal communities*. Sydney: Author.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (1998). The ecology of developmental processes. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Theoretical models of human development* (5th ed., Vol. 1, pp. 993-1029). New York: Wiley.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2000). *Research methods in education* (5th ed.). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Cronin, R. P., & Diezmann, C. M. (2002). Jane and Gemma go to school: Supporting young gifted Aboriginal students. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 27(4), 12-17.
- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (1999). *Starting School: What matters for children, parents and educators?* Australian Early Childhood Association Research in Practice, 6(3).
- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (Eds.) (2001a). *Beginning school together: Sharing strengths*. Canberra: Australian Early Childhood Association.
- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2001b). Starting school: Effective transitions. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 3(2). Available on-line: <http://ecrp/uiuc.edu/v3n2/dockett.html>
- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2003a). Children's views and children's voices in starting school. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 28(1), 12-17.
- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2003b). The transition to school: What's important? *Educational Leadership*, 60(7), 30-33.
- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2003c). *Transition to school: Development and evaluation of guidelines and programs for best practice*. Unpublished SPIRT Project Report.
- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2004). “As I got to learn it got fun”: Children's reflections on their first year at school. Paper presented to the Annual Conference of the *Australian Association for Research in Education / New Zealand Educational Research Association*, Auckland. Available on-line: <http://www.aare.edu.au>
- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (in press). Researching with children: Insights from the Starting School Research Project. *Early Child Development and Care*.
- Dockett, S., & Simpson, S. (2003). ‘This is school ... where people come to learn for school’: What children need to know when they start school. *Early Childhood Folio*, 7, 14-17.
- Early, D., Pianta, R., & Cox, M. (1999). Kindergarten teachers and classrooms: A transition context. *Early Education and Development*, 10(1), 25-46.
- Fabian, H. (2002). *Children starting school*. London: Fulton.
- Fabian, H. & Dunlop, A.-W. (Eds.) (2002). *Transitions in the early years: Debating continuity and progression for young children*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Frigo, T., & Adams, I. (2002). Diversity and learning in the early years of school. Paper presented at the *Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education*, Brisbane, December.
- Gandhi, L. (1998). *Postcolonial theory: A Critical introduction*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2001). Early teacher-child relationships and the trajectory of children's school outcomes through eighth grade. *Child Development*, 72(2), 625-638.
- Howard, P. (2001). *Beliefs about the nature and learning of mathematics in Years 5 and 6: The voices of Aboriginal children, parents, Aboriginal educators and teachers*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Western Sydney, Sydney.
- Kaomea, J. (2004). Dilemmas of an Indigenous academic: A native Hawaiian story. In K. Mutua & B. B. Swadener (Eds.), *Decolonising research in cross-cultural contexts: Critical personal narratives*. (pp. 27-45). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kemp, D. (2001). Educational equality for Indigenous Australians: Unfinished business not special treatment. *Unicorn*, 27(1), 11-15.
- Luster, T., & McAdoo, H. (1996). Family and child influences on educational attainment: A secondary analysis of the High Scope/Perry Preschool data. *Developmental Psychology*, 32, 26-39.
- Mellor, S., & Corrigan, M. (2004). *The case for change: A review of contemporary research on Indigenous education outcomes*. Melbourne: Australian Council of Education Research.
- Mutua, K., & Swadener, B. B. (2004). Introduction. In K. Mutua & B. B. Swadener (Eds.), *Decolonising research in cross-cultural contexts: Critical personal narratives*. (pp. 1-27). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- National Health and Medical Research Council (2003). *Values and ethics: Guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc./NSW Department of Education and Training, (2004). *The report of the review of Aboriginal education*. Sydney: Author.
- Pianta, R. C., & Kraft-Sayre, M. (2003). *Successful kindergarten transition: Your guide to connecting children, families, and schools*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H Brookes.
- Pianta, R., & Cox, M. (Eds.) (1999). *The transition to kindergarten*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- Ramey, C. T., & Ramey, S. L. (1999). Beginning school for children at risk. In R. C. Pianta & M. J. Cox (Eds.). *The transition to kindergarten* (217-251). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.
- Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., & Pianta, R. C. (2000) An ecological perspective on the transition to Kindergarten: A theoretical framework to guide empirical research. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 21(5), 491-511.
- Semali, L. M., & Kincheloe, J. L. (1999). *What is Indigenous knowledge? Voices from the academy*. London: Palmer Press.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Clarke, P. (2000). *Supporting identity, diversity, and language in the early years*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonising methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. London: Zed Books.
- Swadener, B. B., Kabiru, M., & Njenga, A. (2000). *Does the village still raise the child? A collaborative study of changing child rearing in Kenya*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Appendix 1 – Reference Group

Membership of the Project Reference Group

The membership includes:

- Early Childhood DET (Senior Manager - Chair)
- Aboriginal Programs Unit, DET
- Planning and Innovation DET
- External Relations DET
- Australian Education Systems Officials Committee (AESOC)
- New South Wales Primary Principals Association (NSWPPA)
- Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG)
- Aboriginal Early Childhood Services Support Unit
- New South Wales Teachers Federation
- Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations
- Office of Childcare (DoCS)
- Early Childhood Council
- Department of Education Science and Training
- Children's Services Forum

Terms of Reference

The *Successful Transition Programs from Prior-to-school to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Children Reference Group* functions primarily to guide, monitor and report on the successful implementation of the National Fund for Education Research (NFER) project. The Reference Group provides advice on strategic issues to the General Manager Access and Equity and the Senior Manager Early Childhood. The matters for advice relate to:

- identifying key issues impacting on this research project;
- overseeing and monitoring of this research project;
- implementing methodology;
- tendering and successful tender process;
- selecting sites demonstrating best practice;
- selecting sites for trialling;
- administering NFER research project;
- consulting with Aboriginal communities;
- providing processes for ongoing feedback;
- reporting to the Minister for Education and Training, the DET Board of Management and to AESOC; and
- other matters.