

Successful transitions from prior-to-school to school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

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A team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers from three NSW universities has spent the last two years investigating what might be done to make transitions to primary school as successful as possible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. Some of the initial work of this project was reported at AARE in 2005.

The project has worked in 15 different sites across NSW assisting local educators and communities to develop their own transition to school programs. These programs have been based in the local communities and have relied on a set of guidelines for effective transition to school programs that have been previously developed by the authors of this paper. In spite of this common base, there is a wide variety of transition practices in the programs. Not all of the practices are transferable to other contexts but many have been duplicated quite successfully.

In this paper, the team reports on its findings over the project and provides examples of practice from a wide range of contexts designed to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience a successful transition to school.

Introduction

In NSW, children are eligible to commence school at the beginning of the year in which they turn five, provided that their birthday falls before the end of July in that same year. The first year of formal schooling is called Kindergarten. Children attend Kindergarten full time from the beginning of the school year. There is only one intake of students each year.

Preschool is not universally available to children in NSW in the year before they commence school. Even when day care services are included with preschools, there is not universal access to prior-to-school settings. Participation rates in prior-to-school services vary dramatically across the state but it is clear that rates for Aboriginal¹ children are often much lower than for non-Aboriginal children. The *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc and NSW Department of Education, 2004, p. 64) notes that:

It is only in the Murray and Sydney districts that the majority of Aboriginal children participated in six to ten half-day sessions per week (59.8 percent and 51.3 percent respectively) in 2003. In all other districts most Aboriginal children participated in five or fewer half-day sessions per week. Only 31.2 percent of all Aboriginal children accessed preschool for more than five sessions per week. So within the small cohort of Aboriginal children who access preschool, there is an even smaller cohort who attend preschool for more than half the week.

The numbers of Aboriginal students accessing mainstream prior-to-school services is low. One suggested consequence of this is that many Aboriginal children are reported to have difficulties as they make the transition to formal schooling.

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.

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).

The ease with which the transition to school is accomplished has long term impacts on children's school success and family involvement with the school (Alexander & Entwisle, 1998; Luster & McAadoo, 1996). Children who experience early school success are reported to exhibit higher levels of social competence and academic achievement than those who experience difficulty starting school (Early et al., 1999; Shepard & Smith, 1989).

Effective transition programs have the potential to help children—as well as their families and communities—feel comfortable, valued and successful in school. Ramey (1999, cited in Viadero, 1999), has summarised the impact of successful transitions as:

- children have good feelings about school, teachers, parents, and peers;
- children show good progress in physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development;
- parents and key adults express positive attitudes toward school and promote children's learning;
- teachers and school personnel provide programs adapted to children's individual development and cultural/linguistic diversity; and
- mutually supportive relationships occur among families, school personnel, service providers, communities.

Starting school is an important time when children establish identities of themselves as learners within the context of school (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000). This can be particularly important for Aboriginal children. Schools in which Aboriginal children are achieving 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 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 *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* (NSW AECG and NSW DET, 2004), indicates 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 following factors are identified as underpinning successful transition programs (p. 64):

- involvement of Aboriginal families and key Aboriginal groups in decision-making
- positive relationships and genuine collaboration between families, schools, early childhood services, key community groups and local service providers
- a learning community that promotes the sharing of information, cultural insights and expertise by all parties concerned with children's transition to school
- a holistic approach to addressing the specific health, development and wellbeing needs of Aboriginal children in the context of strengthening the capacity of families and communities to meet those needs
- a dual focus on providing information and support for parents as well as quality early learning experiences for children.

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).

Methodology

In early 2004, the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) sought expressions of interest from suitably qualified researchers for a project titled *Successful Transition Programs from Prior-To-School to School for Indigenous Australian Students*². 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 but with members from two other NSW universities (Australian Catholic University and Charles Sturt University) submitted an expression of interest and was informed in June, 2004 that this submission had been successful. The project commenced in August, 2004.

Ten case study sites and five trial sites were selected by the project Reference Group. These sites were based on DET schools and were spread geographically across NSW. All of the schools had high proportions of Aboriginal children. In this paper, we consider only findings derived from the 10 case study sites in which it was deemed that successful transition to school programs for Aboriginal children, families and communities were operating.

² Early in the project's life, the Reference Group reviewed the title of the project and change it to *Successful Transition Programs from Prior-to-school to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children*. This revised title is used throughout the paper, except where the original title is included for historical reasons.

Each of the case studies was undertaken by two investigators from the project team and involved an average of five visits to each site. For all but two of the sites, one of the two investigators was Aboriginal. 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. (Further details of the methods used in the case study phase of the project are available in Perry et al., 2006)

Data were collected in each of the sites through a variety of approaches, including interviews, research conversations, drawings, photographs, observations and document analysis. As well, the Starting School Research Project's *Indicators of Progress* (Dockett & Perry, 2006) were used by the research team, in conjunction with the transition teams at each of the sites, to construct a profile of each transition program.

Findings

Through careful analysis of the case studies constructed in this project, it was found that programs supporting a successful transition from prior-to-school to school settings for Aboriginal students have the following characteristics:

- a) High quality programs and experiences that:
 - actively involve children and families;
 - utilise a range of strategies for involving and engaging positively with families and communities;
 - focus on the development of positive, respectful relationships among all involved;
 - facilitate the development of children's skills, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy;
 - engage children and families in a meaningful, relevant and challenging curriculum, signalling to children and families the importance of high expectations;
 - are recognised as important to the whole school and involve the whole school;
 - promote a positive sense of Aboriginal identity within the school; and
 - promote the general wellbeing of children and families.

- b) Active involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in the various stages of planning, implementation and evaluation. Stakeholders include children, families, prior-to-school educators, community members as well as school staff. Involvement of stakeholders promotes transition programs as community based and responsive to the community.

- c) Specific focus on relationship building across and between different stakeholders:
- families and school;
 - children and school;
 - communities and school;
 - educators in different settings;
 - children;
 - educators and families; and
 - other stakeholders as appropriate
- d) Recognition of strengths that exist within the community.
- e) Recognition of the complexity of transition and ability to respond in flexible and meaningful ways.

The following examples of successful transition to school practices illustrate some of these findings.

Finding

High quality programs and experiences utilise a range of strategies for involving and engaging positively with families and communities.

Successful practices

In one site, a shopfront was rented in the main shopping centre for a limited period in order to distribute information about schools and transition programs. In another site, a community liaison officer was employed to make contact with and spend time in the local community. This process commenced with door-knocking to meet people and introduce herself.

In a different site, meetings of school staff and families were held at the preschool, or some other site away from the school, where families felt more comfortable. In yet another site, considerable effort went into developing a playgroup on the school site that was regularly visited by school personnel, and where families could start to feel comfortable entering the school.

Finding

High quality programs and experiences engage children and families in a meaningful, relevant and challenging curriculum, signalling to children and families the importance of high expectations.

Successful practices

In one site, parents interviewed away from the school site described what they wanted their children to get out of school. While the parents wanted their children to learn about Aboriginal culture and ways, they were resigned to the view that for their children to succeed at school, they needed to 'learn to be white'. For these parents, this meant learning to interact with people at school in 'white ways': knowing how to ask questions, speak with the teacher, put up their hand and so on. The behaviours themselves were not seen as important – more that they were the means for children to engage with school and people at school in ways that would promote school success. In the transition program, these families wanted their children to learn such skills, but then to move beyond these.

Finding

High quality programs and experiences promote a positive sense of Aboriginal identity within the school

Successful practices

Members of the research team observed a striking example of the importance of a local Aboriginal presence during the transition to school program in one site. At lunch time the three Kindergarten classes were in the quadrangle with their teachers and the Aboriginal Education Worker (AEW) employed through transition funding. In about 20 minutes of observation the Kindergarten teachers all interacted with the children only to stress rules of behaviour. In the same period, the AEW – an Aunty from the community – laughed and talked with the children about their families, their out-of-school activities and their adjustment to school. She ate with the children, while the teachers did not. The Aunty provided cultural identity and support in the playground, a context that is often quite challenging for young Aboriginal children.

Finding

Active involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in the various stages of planning, implementation and evaluation

Successful practices

In sites where many Aboriginal families did not access formal prior-to-school services, the Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs) had an important role in identifying children starting school, connecting with families and promoting their participation in the transition program. In these instances, families participated in the programs largely based on their sense of trust in the AEA.

In one site, the Schools as Community Centres (SaCC) co-ordinator brings together all the players in the learning community, including families not accessing formal prior-to-school services, early childhood services, schools, support groups and networks for young parents. Connections between and among these groups, as well as with local businesses and services such as health are promoted. For example, the SaCC supports a combined schools open day in a shop front in the main shopping area, operating on pension days.

Finding

Specific focus on relationship building across and between different stakeholders

Successful practices

One site has a DET preschool attached to the school and is centrally located to many Aboriginal families. However, few Aboriginal children attended the preschool. Two strategies were enacted to increase the numbers. Firstly, under the auspices of Families First, a playgroup supported by one of the teachers and the AEA was established. While slow to start, the playgroup numbers gradually increased, with many Aboriginal children and their families attending regularly. Secondly, specific arrangements were made to change the approach to waiving the lunch fee (the preschool supplied a hot meal to the children) for Aboriginal children attending the preschool. Two Aboriginal children enrolled in the preschool in 2005.

Discussion

There is no one correct format for transition programs and associated practices. However, while the specifics of programs may not be transferable, many of the general focus areas are. In other words, the same principles underpin successful programs, even if the specifics of the programs differ. The programs in this project that are successful are specifically related to the contexts in which they operate. This suggests that a program deemed to be successful in location is not necessarily going to be successful in another location. There are many reasons for this, including different personnel, different community issues and different understandings about what is important in transition to school. Rather than replicating what happens in other transition to school programs, transition teams need to be encouraged to consider the underlying principle for particular actions and experiences and to work through how that principle can be enacted in their own location. Many of the sites used the *Guidelines for Effective Transition to School Programs* published by the *Starting School Research Project* (Dockett & Perry, 2001) to do this.

Of particular importance was the guideline that “effective transition programs establish positive relationships between children, parents, and educators” (Dockett & Perry, 2001, p. v). In all of the case study sites, successful practice was predicated on the establishment of sound and mutually respectful relationships between people. Often these were initiated by Aboriginal professionals in the schools and preschools. In one site, prior-to-school staff focused on building relationships between the Aboriginal children in their care and Aboriginal children and staff at school. Rather than visit the Kindergarten class when they went on school visits, they visited the Year 1 class, which had an Aboriginal teacher and a substantial number of Aboriginal students. In another site, the Aboriginal preschool director accompanied Aboriginal parents and children on their transition visits to school to support those who felt vulnerable and uncertain in the school environment. The relationships that had been established between families and prior-to-school staff helped provide a bridge for children and families connecting to school.

Aboriginal staff in preschools and schools and Aboriginal community members were significant people in the transition programs for Aboriginal children in most of the project sites. However, their roles and responsibilities varied considerably. In one case study site, the school’s AEA played a key role in the organisation of the transition to school program through identifying families who would benefit from participation and encouraging families to participate. In another site, the AEA liaised with the prior-to-school staff and other agencies within the community, contributed significantly to funding applications and coordinated formal and informal interactions between the community, the school and the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group.

Conclusion

Successful transition to school programs for Aboriginal children, their families and their communities depend on the development of sound and respectful relationships among all of the stakeholders involved. In general, this is not any different from the basis for success in transition programs for any child or group of children. What is different in communities consisting of substantial numbers of Aboriginal people are the practices that might lead to such relationships being built. For example, the protocols that may need to be undertaken and the people that will need to be consulted

in some Aboriginal communities are quite different that those in non-Aboriginal communities (Board of Studies NSW, 2001). In the project *Successful Transition Programs from Prior-to-school to School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children*, the research team, with the necessary and very able assistance of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, school and prior-to-school professionals, including Aboriginal teachers and other Aboriginal educators and Aboriginal community members, have been able to highlight practices that work in specific communities and to suggest ways in which these practices might be adapted for and adopted in different contexts. In this way, we hope that more young Aboriginal children will experience successful transition to school within their community contexts. Such success will then be seen in the ongoing success of these children in their school careers.

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