

A framework for successful transitions

The continuum from home to school

“Successful transitions: the continuum from home to school” is one of the Bernard van Leer Foundation’s three new programme areas, through which we are now organising and positioning our work. This article is an abridged version of a document that sets out the framework of the Foundation’s current thinking on the issue of transitions in the early years.

In early childhood, children make transitions into new environments. This is usually a progression from private space in the home to public or collective spaces, such as community play groups, childcare centres, pre-schools and schools.

As with any transition in life, these events are social and sometimes biological turning points. Transitions in life are usually marked by special events, ceremonies or rites of passage and denote social expectations, responsibilities and status. The individual is expected to grow into her new role, supported by the surrounding community.

More than any other life phase, early childhood entails a succession of transitions as young children rapidly develop. Young children eagerly seek new challenges that test and apply their evolving physical, social, cognitive and emotional capacities. All members of society, whether young or old, take pleasure in gaining valued, new competencies.

The right to play and recreation (art. 31(1) of the UNCRC)¹; to participate freely in cultural life and the arts (art. 31(2)); to engage in one’s own culture, religion and language (art. 30) and to exercise rights according to a child’s evolving capacities (art. 5) are particularly significant, as young children learn through engagement with the world around them. Successful transitions are challenging and therefore rewarding. However, they should not present young children with obstacles they cannot reasonably overcome. Every child has a different starting point which needs to be respected.

For young children’s transitions to be successful, we must recognise that early childhood is a life phase carrying the same rights and importance as any other. It is not merely a training ground for becoming older, but a time for societies to help children cross new thresholds. Peers, families and communities play a critical role in priming children for their next steps in life.

The foundation’s transition programme is concerned with two angles. First, the structural and systemic factors in childcare, pre-school or school environments that may act to exclude children. Second, the strengths and weaknesses children bring to these new situations. Working to build children’s strengths can contribute to offsetting limitations in those environments, while well-designed childcare establishments, pre-schools and schools can help to overcome the multiple effects of disadvantaged circumstances that undermine young children’s development and coping mechanisms. This interplay among different environments is crucial.

This article starts by placing transitions in a child rights framework and explaining its importance. It goes on to outline our assessment of problems that exist with transitions, the three topics we are addressing in our work – access, language and creating rights-based cultures in educational settings – and the crosscutting strategies we will pursue.

Child rights

Every child has rights, including the rights to education, participation, play and recreation. Child rights are central to our approach because

adopting the language of rights helps to point out the responsibility of duty-bearers to support children's development; and thinking in terms of rights promotes respect for children's agency in influencing their environments. We view the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and associated General Comments² (particularly numbers 1 and 7) as providing a powerful reference point and source of legitimacy for the transition issue.

Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC talk of the right to compulsory primary education, which promotes the development of language, personality, mental and physical abilities, and social, cultural and environmental values. General Comment 7 (GC7) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child interprets this right to education during early childhood as "beginning at birth and being closely linked to young children's right to maximum development". It emphasises that education takes place in many settings other than school, and stresses the important roles of parents, caregivers, grandparents, peers and communities.

In GC7, the Committee "recommends that States parties pay greater attention to, and actively support, a rights-based approach to early childhood programmes, including initiatives surrounding transition to primary school that ensure continuity and progression, in order to build children's confidence, communication skills and enthusiasm for learning through their active involvement in, among others, planning activities." GC7 recognises the role of parents as children's first educators, and the importance of working with communities to provide culturally relevant early childhood programmes, rather than imposing a standardised approach.

The problem

Starting school is often a difficult experience for a child. Imagine a 6-year-old girl's first day at a state school in a resource-poor environment. She has no uniform, paper, pencil or books: children whose families have money bring their own materials, while the rest go without or find someone with whom to share. There may be over 50 children in the class, or over 100 in some places, of mixed ages. Some are younger than 6, but many are older because of class repetition and late entry. It will often be the case that most are boys.

The teacher is overwhelmed by trying to maintain order verbally and through corporal punishment. The child cannot count on protection or attention from the teacher, who is an intimidating figure, and teacher absenteeism rates mean there may often be no teacher at all. If the girl is lucky, she will have older siblings to guide her, or will make friends who provide social reinforcement.

The language of instruction is foreign. The latrines do not offer privacy. There is no water for washing. Her parents are far away, working. They do not interact with the school because they do not speak the language. They themselves dropped out early or did not attend school. The distance to school is far for a 6-year-old but if she is lucky she can go with others, gaining social interaction and protection on the way. The journey may have physical and social hazards, especially in violent urban contexts, conflict areas, or rough rural terrain.

Clearly, not every entry to school will pose these problems, but most involve difficulties for the child. There is generally less autonomy, choice and explanation for children at school than at home. A school's institutional values, vocabulary, system and culture may seem alien. Even if a child has picked up some understanding from siblings or friends, it is difficult to appreciate what school will be like before it is actually experienced. Children who learn to adjust, often find themselves adopting increasingly different norms from the home and community.

Transition to primary school can be greatly helped by providing services for young children, such as parental support, play groups, home visiting or centre-based care. However, worldwide there is relatively little government investment in such systems. This is perverse, because the economic, social and human benefits of investment in the early years are well documented. Studies by the World Bank³ and others estimate the benefit-to-cost ratio of early childhood development programmes at around 3:1, and almost double that if programmes primarily reach children who are most disadvantaged.

When insufficient attention is paid to the transition to school, the result is a high rate of dropout⁴ and class repetition; the average dropout and repetition combined rate in developing countries is 30 percent.



Peers, families and communities play a critical role in priming children for their next steps in life. Parental involvement is a robust predictor of a child's success at school

This makes the school system inefficient with massive financial implications for both governments and families, not to mention the associated social costs of illiteracy, unemployment, delinquency and crime.

Why is there so little government investment? One possible reason is that early childhood programmes are associated with upper and middle class children and therefore seen as a luxury. Another is that many early childhood studies identify benefits relatively far in the future, 10 years or more, and politicians tend to seek faster results. A third is that young children are usually seen as the responsibility of women, who are considered less important politically and economically.

A further contributing factor is that early childhood programmes are often perceived as competing for resources with primary schools, in part because of donor agendas emphasising formal schooling. Early childhood educators tend to be trained, paid and represented less well than their primary counterparts. Many early childhood programmes

operate in an informal sector, weakening their negotiating power. As the early childhood workforce is predominantly female, gender discrimination also plays a role.

The reasons why children drop out of school are well known⁵. Out-of-pocket expenses for books, transport and uniforms and informal payments demanded by teachers are unaffordable, as are opportunity costs in families where children contribute to household labour, child care and income generation. Parents may perceive that education is of negligible value to the foreseeable future, and children come to their own conclusions about the school environment and their preferred options. Some children encounter hazards on long journeys to school. Others are confronted with physical, verbal or emotional abuse within the school itself, involving both adults and other children.

Children who are not adequately nourished struggle to make the most of educational opportunities, as do

those whose home language or dialect differs from that used in school. Even when the language is the same, environments at home vary widely in terms of supporting language and literacy, indicated by large variations in vocabulary levels among school-entry children, correlated to socioeconomic class. Oral cultures and media are important environmental factors that add to or detract from language development. The same goes for the degree of verbal interaction with children and the presence of reading material at home.

These are well-established facts. What is less widely appreciated is that dropouts take place disproportionately in the first two years of schooling and is a worldwide trend. The dearth of small classes and well-trained teachers in the critical first years of school detracts from effective, efficient education – in some cases to a radical degree. First year teachers often do little more than crowd management, instead of dedicating time and skill to language and literacy development.

Teaching fundamental literacy and numeracy in large classes could be possible through peer interaction, multi-age groups and child-to-child methodologies. However this requires good management skills and teacher training is usually minimised for those teaching the youngest children, increasing with the age of children to be taught. In developing countries, most grade 1 teachers are not trained to foster language, literacy and numeracy skills in creative and enjoyable ways.

Another contradiction between research findings and practice involves the relationship between schools and communities⁶. We know that socioeconomic background matters more to educational performance than any preparation prior to school, and that parental involvement is a robust predictor of a child's success at school. Yet the reality is that disadvantaged families are least likely to be involved and listened to in school environments. When the child is in school, the parents are out of the picture and the teacher is the centre with a fundamentally different mindset.

Topics and strategies

Based on this analysis, the Foundation is focusing on three main topics in our work on transitions. This

choice was made using our history, which constitutes our current expertise, a scan of external knowledge, and work being done by others to identify possibilities where the Foundation might play a useful future role. These topics are: access to early education, language development and entrenching rights in early education.

Access is about maximising young children's access to early childhood education and primary school. This is a huge topic, but access is the vital first step to a successful transition. It needs to take account of 'push' factors like the attitudes of parents, peers and family, and 'pull' factors such as the quality and accountability of schools.

The Foundation is concentrating on funding, testing and publicising existing relatively simple, efficient approaches and bringing children into services or schools. Key questions are: what motivates children to go to education centres or school? What motivates parents to put their children in pre-school or school and keep them there? The answers are largely known: peer influence, stimulating and child-friendly environments, safe spaces for boys and girls, no school fees, convenient services, education and its relevance to life and future opportunities, and pre-school and school combined with other responsibilities.

Our second topic is improving language development and literacy and numeracy skills among children under 8 years. Language continues to be one of the major stumbling blocks to a child's transition to formal education, particularly when the medium of instruction is not the child's first language⁷.

Functional literacy and numeracy within the first two years of schooling are necessary skills for future learning and adjustment in society. The Foundation will concentrate on curriculum approaches, supporting literate environments, promoting emerging literacy in homes and communities, and encouraging family members and peers to support language development, regardless of their own level of literacy.

As with access, there is already substantial literature on the role of language and the Foundation will seek to build on and advocate existing approaches, rather than expect to contribute significant new knowledge.

Our third topic is to entrench knowledge and implementation of child rights within early childhood education, schools, homes and society. Trendsetters in these settings need to be identified to act as vanguards in introducing child rights in practice.

Everyday interactions and routines in the classroom and early childhood education centres determine behaviour, attitude and performance expectations. To survive the difficult first years of school, children need formidable social skills and emotional resilience to navigate explicit rules and the implicit codes of hierarchy formation, making new friends and solving conflicts.

Classroom culture is formed by teachers, parents, caregivers and, most of all, by children, and is constantly in flux. Educators can play an important role in setting boundaries and creating norms but approaches tend to be teacher-centred and may overestimate the importance of adults in creating classroom culture. Of the three topics, this is the one where the Foundation sees the greatest potential in contributing new insights, by concentrating on the role of peer relations in creating cultures consistent with respect for children's rights.

We will be examining how best to build relationships between centres, schools, caregivers and communities, which create cultures that effectively implement rights, even if the language of rights is not common in the local discourse. In particular, we will emphasise children's agency, taking into account that the numbers and influence of children among themselves often far outweighs that of adults.

We have identified five themes that cut across these topics, forming the basis for our strategies on transition. They are:

- *Peers and 'priming'*. The importance of peers in supporting children through transition tends to get less attention than the role of parents and teachers. Older children play a big role in 'priming' younger children or siblings for what to expect in new situations. This is particularly noticeable where children are a large proportion of the overall population.
- *Intergenerational support*. Parents and grandparents tend to be the decision-makers about

whether or not, and for how long, children go to pre-school or school. Children are more likely to stick with school if they perceive that their families expect it. Issues here include family literacy, the role of fathers and elders in the transmission of cultural knowledge, and maternal education.

- *Curriculum and pedagogy*. Whether they are formulated in detail or as a general guideline allowing for local adaptation and input, curricula ultimately need to be judged in terms of practice and outcome. Key questions are: Do we need improvements in existing curricula, or only to translate them into practice? What are the gaps between curricula, practice and the expectations of parents and children?
- *Children's agency*. Children should be encouraged to influence their environment, but should also learn responsibility within collective and communal identities. Indicators of agency must be nuanced with reference to a child's evolving capacities, motivation, self-confidence and relationships.
- *Leadership and supervision*. Schools and early childhood centres should be the centre of, and accountable, to the community. Institutional decision-makers and supervisors should provide leadership to justify performance improving changes in the transition years, especially appropriate policies, resources and training. There should be a smaller class sizes per teacher; more training, especially in language, literacy, numeracy and rights; greater efforts to listen to children and caregivers; and more explicit attention to non-cognitive factors such as self-esteem, development of social identities and emotional security.

Messages

The Bernard van Leer Foundation is a learning organisation, committed to refining our understanding. But we are also an advocacy organisation, intent on sharing messages when we feel they are sufficiently established.

In terms of transitions, our key message is that *schools should focus attention and resources on the first years of schooling*. Most primary schools prioritise resources towards the later years to strengthen exam results. The best teachers with the best training and salaries are in the later years

and group sizes are often smaller. Yet the greatest school challenges are supporting children's learning experiences in the first years, motivating them to do well later on. Socioeconomic and parental influence on children's educational performance tells us that schools need to understand, and interact with, the situations where children come from, not just the places they are going to.

A second important message is that *significant improvements are possible in a relatively short term, i.e., 2–3 years*. This is important in order to garner political support for early childhood. Schools will save money if class repetition and withdrawal rates are reduced, freeing resources to improve teaching quality, institute smaller classes and create an environment conducive to active learning during the first years of school. A strong focus in the transition years will help children achieve language fluency, literacy, numeracy, rights awareness, social identities and knowledge of the world around them. Education should motivate children to learn in spite of obstacles and equip them with valuable life skills, even if their school tenure is short.

The role of the Bernard van Leer Foundation

Through support of *direct intervention*, the Foundation expects to improve day-to-day learning opportunities of young children, ensuring access to education and a degree of quality that allows children to develop according to their potential. We will track rates of enrolment, class repetition, retention in school as well as analyse qualitative feedback from children, parents, caregivers, teachers and leaders. We will learn from the strategies at hand, compare them with others and share those insights among local circuits.

The Foundation will try out new approaches and ideas in local contexts and document and compare them with other documented results. Where warranted, it will disseminate evidence or ideas in a form appropriate for use in any country.

The Foundation will cooperate with influential networks and establish alliances that will multiply our own influence.

Lastly, it will bring together individuals and institutions from different disciplines and sectors

(public, private, academic, civic) in order to test our ideas, engage with wider knowledge and position our own messages among prominent circles.

Notes

- 1 Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), United Nations General Assembly Resolution, 44/25, 20 November, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: www.ohchr.org/english/law/pdf/crc.pdf
- 2 General Comment No 1, 'The aims of education; Art. 29 (1)'. Convention on the Rights of the Child. 17 April 2001. General Comment No 7, 'Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood'. Convention on the Rights of the Child. 1 November 2005.
- 3 Mingat, A., and Jaramillo, A. (2003) 'Early Childhood Care and Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: What would it take to meet Millennium Development Goals?', Washington DC, World Bank. Van der Gaag, J., Tan, J-P. (1998) 'The benefits of early child development programs: an economic analysis', Washington DC, World Bank. Heckman, J. (1999) 'Policies to foster human capital', NBER Working paper series No. 7288. Schweinhart, L.J., Montie, J., Xiang, Z., Barnett, W.S., Belfield, C.R. & Nores, M. (2004) Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Pre-school Study Through Age 40, Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.
- 4 Arnold, C., Barlett, K., Gowani, S., Merali, R. (2006) Is everybody ready?: Readiness, transition and community: reflections and moving forward. Bernard van Leer Foundation. Background document for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007. Forthcoming Foundation Working Paper.
- 5 UNESCO, 'EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005: The Quality Imperative'.
- 6 Heckman, J. (1999) 'Policies to foster human capital', NBER Working paper series No. 7288. Roopnarine, J.L. (2005) 'The Roving Care Program in Jamaica: Its Theoretical and Research Foundations and Efficacy. The Case for Home Visiting Programs', report submitted to the Bernard van Leer Foundation.
- 7 Alidou, H., Boly, A., Brock-Utne, B., Diallo, Y.S., Heugh, K., Wolff, H.E. (2006), 'Optimizing Learning and Education in Africa –the Language Factor, a Stock-taking Research on Mother Tongue and Bilingual Education in Su-Saharan Africa'. Association for the Development of Education in Africa, Paris. Malone, S. (2004), 'Manual for Developing Literacy and Adult Education Programmes in Minority Language Communities', UNESCO, Bangkok.