THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO TRANSITION

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In recent years, interest in the transition to school seems to have flourished, both nationally and internationally. This has led to a wealth of sometimes conflicting information for educators and parents/caregivers who seek to enhance children's experiences. One way of making sense of the possible pathways for supporting children and their families when they move from early childhood education to school is to consider some of the dominant theoretical approaches to transition. By identifying the underlying theoretical ideas, we can make sense of the complexity of conflicting opinions and provide a rationale for our chosen way forward. In this article I consider some of the dominant theoretical ideas about transitions, including maturational readiness, "filling the gaps", scaffolding the process, looking at the big picture, and a focus on dispositions and affordances. This provides a brief look at just some of the theoretical approaches to transition that surround us.

I have drawn on data from my PhD research to illustrate the theories in practice. The research explored participants' experiences of the transition to school in one Aotearoa/New Zealand primary school, and three of its contributing early childhood centres. The study used an interpretive methodology and data were gathered, primarily through interviews and observations, on the thoughts and experiences of 23 children, their families, and their teachers. Further details are available in Peters (1999, 2000, 2002, 2003a).

MATURATIONAL READINESS

Maturational theories suggest that development is a process of unfolding or blooming with age, in a predictable fashion, and represents an outward expression of innate biological structures (Smith, 1998). This idea is evident in the writings of a number of western theorists, including Rousseau (1712-1778), Spencer (1820-1903), Hall (1844-1924), and Gesell (1880-1961). (Gesell and Ilg, 1946; Hall, 1883; Spencer, 1968; White, 1996). These theories (and others) gave rise to child-centred approaches which proposed that education should be matched to the child's "developmental" level.

Gesell (1880-1961) used large-scale systematic data collection to provide detailed descriptions of general traits and trends of behaviour for children at different ages. These maturity traits were *not* to be regarded as "rigid norms, nor as models". They simple illustrated "the kinds of behaviour (desirable or otherwise) which tend to occur at this age" (Gesell and Ilg, 1946, p.5). Writers from the Gesell Institute went on to develop a battery of tests to determine the child's developmental level, and recommended that "regardless of age in years, we consider a child's general performance needs to be at a 5-year-old level before he [sic] enters kindergarten, and at a 6-year-old level before he enters first grade" (Ilg and Ames, 1964, p.18). Readiness in this context implied fixed standards of physical, intellectual and social development that allowed children to meet the requirements of school. It was seen as biological and maturational (Crnic and Lamberty, 1994; Gesell and Ilg, 1965; Graue, 1992; Ilg and Ames, 1964). The traits that were believed to make up this readiness were seen as located solely within the child. A child who had difficulties on starting school could be seen as simply "not ready".

In the USA, readiness tests had a continued history in some states. However, few are reliable or valid, and by the 1990s their use was increasingly questioned (Crnic and Lamberty, 1994; Miesel, 1992). In Aotearoa/New Zealand, readiness tests have not featured in the transition to school, but implicit measures may be used. For example, the critical comments teachers made about some children's lack of attention or language skills in Renwick's (1984) study indicated that children were being assessed against an image teachers had of what they expected of a five-year-old.

Whether measures of readiness are explicit or implicit, it is important to be aware that there is often

a slippage from such constructed norms being acknowledged as *descriptions*, to them acting as *prescriptions* (Burman, 2000). Hence, although developmental theories are simply abstract maps, they can start to function as if they were true models of reality. The map of development provided by the theory leads people to conclude that "children of this age are like (or should be like) that" (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, 1999). Deviation from these constructed norms can then be seen as a deficit or problem (Burman, 2000).

Although widely critiqued, maturational views of readiness have had a lasting legacy in talk about children. In the case of transition to school, the response may be that children who are "not ready" should be kept out of school:

> If I was as old as I am now, and understand things better, I would have just kept him home until he was six. Maybe he wouldn't have hated school so much. (Mother)

In the USA this practice is called "red shirting". However, while "red shirting" postpones school entrance of "age-eligible children in order to allow extra time for socioemotional, intellectual, or physical growth" (Katz, 2000, p.1), it can also be seen as a theft of opportunity for the child to be part of the group, of the parents' opportunity to support the child's growth, and of the teacher's responsibility to make a place for the child in the class (Graue, 1998).

Filling the gaps

Another response to children who do not fit theoretical views of what children of a certain age should be like is for pedagogical practice to get taken over by preventing and correcting deviations from the norm (Dahlberg et al., 1999). This is reflected in what Dockett and Perry (2002) call an environmental view of readiness, where the focus is on external evidence of children's skills and knowledge, such as naming colours, shapes, and the letters of the alphabet. "Filling the gaps" to match a child to a constructed norm generally starts with a deficit model of assessment. (Carr (2001) provides a useful comparison of deficit and credit models). This approach can create tension and anxiety for children and for parents/caregivers, and provide an unbalanced picture of the child. This was evident in the experiences of Anna, one of the children in my study.

As Anna neared her fifth birthday, she started to show an interest in writing:

> She's really interested in writing but she won't do real letters, but she can write her name now. She just does these books. She's got a little notebook and pieces of paper, and she just does scrawls.... So she's very interested in writing. Every time I try and show her some letters she just gets frustrated. She hasn't been as bad this week. I wrote a few letters and she wrote them underneath, so maybe she's just getting to that stage where it looks right for her. (Anna's mother)

When Anna got to school, she enjoyed retelling stories, and after three days was telling people, "I can read three books", because she had brought home three books on three different days.

> It wouldn't matter that I could have shown her the same book a few days later and she couldn't read it. She was really excited about that.... She got a lot of kicks out of getting the little book and "reading" it to Sarah [a younger child]... to actually be able to read a book to someone else. (Anna's mother)

Clearly Anna was interested in literacy activities, but on a checklist assessment of her alphabet knowledge, she performed below her teacher's expectations. This was followed by well-meaning advice for the family to work on these things with Anna. Anna's mother explained:

> So we worked on two [letters] over the weekend and at the end of the weekend she still didn't know them. We were doing fun games and doing things all the time so there is a mental block there.
>
> She doesn't even know the letter "m" and yet we've talked about the letter "m" every time we've come down the road. "There's 'm' for McDonalds" but the two haven't connected.
>
> As I said to her [teacher] after the weekend, "Look we've worked on 't' and 'q' all weekend and she still doesn't know them. We've had fun games and finding it in books... taking out the pieces of her jigsaw puzzle and seeing if she can remember which one it is and doing the tongue twister rhymes, and if I point to the 't' or the 'q' she still doesn't know what they are".

In the classroom observations, Anna appeared to receive little support from peers or teachers, and sometimes found it difficult to meet the expectations for writing tasks. The problems came to dominate Anna's transition, even though she was very capable in other areas. Her identity as a child who was having difficulties was established quickly, and then seemed to exacerbate the problem, as it appeared to work against her accessing support from peers (*see* Peters, 1999). This showed similarities to case studies carried out by Pollard and Filer (1999), which revealed the important connection between teachers' actions and perceptions of a child and his/her role, acceptance and status within the peer group. Within weeks, Anna moved from making a positive start to saying, "I hate school. I only like playing and the eating. I don't like the writing" – a view that persisted through most of her first year.

In the advice associated with both red shirting and correcting "deviations", the complex, contextualised reality of the children's everyday lives tends to be overlooked, as does the social construction of the norms against which children are being measured. More promising theoretical perspectives for understanding the complexity of individual experiences can be found in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and in Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1992) ecological systems theory.

Scaffolding the process

For Vygotsky (1896-1934), the cultural context was central to development. A key feature of his theory was the child's interactions with others. Vygotsky distinguished between a child's actual level of development, which he defined as functions that have already matured, and those functions that were in the process of maturation. A central idea was the zone of proximal development, described as:

> the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86)

Rather than waiting for developmental "readiness", adults and peers stimulate development by challenging the child within the zone of proximal development. School learning and instruction should be ahead of the child's cognitive development, creating a zone of proximal development (John-Steiner and Souberman, 1978; van der Veer and Valsiner, 1993). New experiences such as transition can therefore be seen as actually promoting development, and school does not have to be the same as prior to school contexts, provided the child receives appropriate support to negotiate

the changes. However, the zone of proximal development may be different for each child. Vygotsky (1978) stated that if the challenges are beyond the level of the zone of proximal development, the child will not be able to benefit from the help that is offered.

Later, Bruner (1985) explored the role of the tutor in the zone of proximal development. Bruner proposed that the tutor serves as:

> a vicarious form of consciousness until such a time as the learner is able to master his [sic] own consciousness and control…. The tutor in effect performs the critical function of "scaffolding" the learning task to make it possible for the child, in Vygotsky's words, to internalize external knowledge and convert it into a tool for conscious control. (pp.24-25)

This approach is evident in apprenticeship models of learning, which are found in many cultures (Cole, 1985; Rogoff, 1990, 1997), and is consistent with the Māori practice of tuakana/teina, where an older child assists a younger one in his/her learning (Royal-Tangaere, 1997).

With regard to transition, it is not only adults but also older siblings and peers who can support the child within the zone of proximal development. This highlights the importance of not viewing the child in isolation (as a focus on readiness tends to do), but instead looking at opportunities for parents/caregivers to become familiar with the classroom and activities at school, so that they have the necessary information to scaffold the process for their children.

In my study, teachers preferred the children to make school visits alone, as they felt this was beneficial for the child. They also encouraged children to play with their own age groups, rather than with siblings. These policies did not support the families in their scaffolding role, as a number of mothers explained:

> I would have liked to have gone into the classroom and actually, physically, seen where it was, and who was in his classroom, just so I could key him up a bit more, because he was asking questions about the classroom and I had no idea.... I didn't have any idea of what he'd do with his bag or if they sat at desks or tables or anything.
>
> I felt very uninformed…. A visit would have allowed me to comprehend what the routine was like during the day. Then you can discuss it with your child and explain the whys, etc. behind certain activities.
>
> Maybe if parents could stay for the first visit, the parents could learn a lot about school in that visit, they could *see* what children do, *see* that they sit in groups… see how long they spend at something… I think that's good opportunity because you have got your own personal questions and you can ask them… Perhaps if you could stay there for morning tea you could introduce them to some other children, and see for yourself that there is a teacher on duty, I can feel safe about leaving my child here.

Viewed through the potential for scaffolding, children's sibling and peer relationships also take on a different perspective. The careful scaffolding one child could provide for another has been described in Peters (1999), and the benefits of fostering opportunities for friends, peers, and siblings to provide support for each other during transitions are discussed in Peters (2003a). Often peers will bring insights to what it is important for children to know that adults might not be aware of (*see* Dockett and Perry, 2003).

With the increasing popularity of sociocultural theory by the late 1990s, there was a move to the notion of "ready" schools. In the USA, Shore's (1998) report suggested policies and strategies that allow schools to become "ready for the particular children they serve" (p.3), and Graue (1998) proposed that the big question for teachers was "How am I ready for this child?". The implication is that teachers will work within each child's zone of proximal development, rather than expecting children to meet particular norms.

Sociocultural theories therefore provide a useful base for exploring the transition to school, but the focus tends to be on small group and dyad interactions. An approach that considers how a person's biological dispositions interact with environmental forces in a complex system of relationships, affected by multiple levels of the environment, is Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1992) ecological systems theory.

Looking at the big picture

Bronfenbrenner (1979) directed attention to the different levels of the environment (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems), and how they both influence and are influenced by a developing person. The microsystems are patterns of activities, roles, and relationships experienced in a given setting. The mesosystem comprises the interrelationships between the microsystems. The exosystem refers to settings that do not involve the developing person, but affect or are affected by what happens in the microsystem. The macrosystem refers to the overriding beliefs, values, ideology, practices and so on that exist, or could exist, within a culture. In addition to looking at the different levels of the environment that influence development, Bronfenbrenner (1979) described ecological transitions, which occur "whenever a person's positioning in the ecological environment is altered as a result of change of role or setting, or both" (p.26).

Ecological systems theory has been widely used in relation to understanding the transition to school. In looking at the microsystems in which the child operates, Carr (1998c) wrote of the bi-mondial four-year-old, who spent time in the two worlds of home and early childhood service, becoming a tri-mondial child at five, and having to figure out the roles, rules, and relationships in at least three worlds (home, early childhood service, and school). Within this theoretical approach, transition can be understood in terms of the child taking on the role of the pupil. Hill et al. (1998) proposed that learning the culture of the school, and their role within it, i.e. what it means to "do school", was a necessary step before children could focus on the *content* of schooling. Parents/caregivers, too, have to become socialised into the pedagogy of their child's school and classroom (Brooker, 2002) and experience changes in roles and relationships, when their children move to school.

During the transition to school, there may be mesosystem connections in the form of people who participate in both settings; for example, the parent/caregiver may be involved in the school, and siblings and friends may be present in both school and home microsystems. Communication between settings is also important. Smith (1998) stated that if there are "warm, reciprocal and balanced relationships between preschool and school teachers the transition will be supportive of development" (p.14). This also applies to relationships between parents/caregivers and teachers. Krasnow (1990) suggested that the greater the difference between home and school, the less likely it is that a smooth transition will occur. Thus the advice to schools is to make links with children's home and early childhood experiences. Similarly, visits and information

days/evenings allow children and families insights into what happens at school, so that connections can be made. In all cases, if responsive and reciprocal relationships are to be established, issues of power need to be considered. If one party feels dominated by another, this is likely to be a barrier to effective partnerships (*see* Peters, 2003b for more details).

Features of the exosystem, such as the parents'/caregivers' work, external supports for the family, and the activities of the Board of Trustees, all potentially impact on the child. Beliefs and ideology at the level of the macrosystem play a part too. In America, Kagan and Neville (1996) noted that schools and early childhood services differ in the legitimacy accorded to them by society, their mission, and level of support. They suggest these differences affect the approaches of the two sectors to pedagogy, parents and families, and their sense of professionalism. While Kagan and Neville's discussion does not completely reflect the Aotearoa/New Zealand situation, a number of parallels can be drawn.

Bronfenbrenner's (1992) model considered the characteristics of both person and context. These are "regions in the environment that are especially favorable or unfavorable to the development of individuals with particular personal characteristics" (p.194). In the final section of this article, I explore this idea in more depth by looking at learning dispositions and the pedagogy associated with fostering particular dispositions within a given context.

Dispositions and affordances

In recent years, Carr's work in the area of learning dispositions has been particularly influential in early childhood. Carr (1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2001) focused on the learning dispositions of courage and curiosity, trust and playfulness, perseverance, confidence, and responsibility. These relate respectively to Belonging, Well-being, Exploration, Communication, and Contribution, which are the strands of the early childhood curriculum in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1996). Carr (2001) described the domains of these dispositions as: taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty or uncertainty, expressing an idea or feeling, and taking responsibility. These domains are translated into observable behaviours, and together the sequence described here has been called a Learning Story (Carr, 1998b, 2001).

Claxton and Carr (in press) described dispositions as verbs (rather than nouns), so that persisting (for example) is not seen as something a learner acquires, but a response that an individual engages in "more or less frequently, or skilfully, or appropriately" (p.2). Learning environments may be:

(a) prohibiting, where it is dangerous or impossible to express a particular kind of learning response;
(b) affording, where there are opportunities to develop a range of learning responses but no particular attention is drawn to these or value placed on them;
(c) inviting, which not only affords but highlights particular responses as valued; and
(d) potentiating, where there are jointly constructed opportunities for the development of powerful learning responses.

Carr (1998c) suggests that learning dispositions are one of the key things that children take to school. This provided a useful framework for looking at the experiences of the children in my study. One example, drawn from Tessa's story, is discussed below.

As a four-year-old, Tessa did not fit with the ideas of "readiness" that her mother had, which were of the type described earlier in this paper. Tessa's mother worried:

> My oldest will sit there and do puzzles, read books. Tessa is more search and destroy. She is very different. She is more outdoorsy and outgoing.
>
> There isn't really any structure at [Tessa's] kindy. They eat when they are hungry or when they feel like it. They can play outside all day and she often does. I'll say "did you do anything [make any products] at kindy today?" and she'll say "Nah I forgot". If she had the choice to run around outside and play or sit inside and do something constructive she would rather run outside and play.
>
> I think it's going to be a real shock to her and I think she is going to have real trouble, she is going to want to eat her lunch at nine thirty and go out to play at quarter past, so I don't know how she will go that way.
>
> Really with her, it's just will she last the distance with pen and paper? I just don't know if that's her. Give her a field and a ball and a couple of boys to run around with and she'd be home and hosed but I have a feeling that she thinks school is a lot of play.

However, when Tessa actually started school her mother reflected:

> There was never a tear…. I had no trouble at all…. She just loved it…. I'm really pleased. It's just been no trouble… I just did expect it [trouble] with Tessa. It's just been such a nice surprise.

Tessa was excited to be at school and her teacher found her to be relaxed and happy in the classroom. In the event, her mother's fears about Tessa not adapting to the structure of set activities were unfounded. Tessa appeared not only to be doing all the work that was required of her, but to be "thriving on it".

While her mother worried that Tessa rejected what she saw as scholastic activities in favour of more energetic pursuits in early childhood, it was clear during the observations that Tessa was developing effective learning strategies, and a positive view of herself as a learner. Carr's (1998b, 2001) Learning Story framework provides insights into some of the positive features of Tessa's learning experiences.

First, Tessa appeared to find plenty of interest at kindergarten. While many of these activities were not the directly school-related tasks that her mother felt would be helpful, there were important opportunities for learning spatial skills, science, mathematics, and literacy in the observed activities. It seemed that Tessa had taken on some of the culture's roles to do with "being a learner" (Carr, 2001, p.27). Although many of the activities at school were different from those she had been most interested in before starting school, she was able to find topics of interest within the new entrant classroom.

Tessa also had the skills to become involved. Her early childhood and early school activities were characterised by a sense of well-being, or "feeling at home", "being oneself" and/or "being happy", components of involvement described by Carr (2001, p.29). This was perhaps fostered by her familiarity with her new entrant teacher, and with the classroom, following regular visits when her older sister started; having her older sister and a number of other older girls as friends and supports at school; and having experiences at home and in early childhood that helped her develop skills and attributes that were valued in the school context. In addition, Tessa seemed able to involve herself intensely in an activity, and the contexts in both settings *afforded* this.

Persistence with activities was a feature of her mother's description of Tessa, and was also evident in the kindergarten observations. This

applied both to completing tasks and also to her social interactions, where she had continued to make a series of new friends as, one by one, her existing friends had turned five and left for school. This was an area that her kindergarten teachers *invited*, in highlighting and supporting children's social skills:

> The kindy is very much into, if someone is doing something that you don't like, this is how you cope with that situation. If you have no one to play with and you want someone to play with, this is how you cope with that. They actually drum those things home very well, which [the kindergarten Tessa's sister went to] never talked about. (Tessa's mother)

As the third domain in Carr's (2001) Learning Story, persistence can be seen as illustrating an important orientation towards learning goals. Smiley and Dweck (1994) looked at how children oriented to learning goals strive to increase their competence, to understand or master something new. Given the apparent importance of friends (Peters, 2003a), persistence with friendships may have been one of the key factors assisting Tessa's transition.

Carr's (2001) fourth disposition is communicating with others, and again there was evidence in Tessa's story that she was able to interact positively with others and share her ideas. She had experienced settings that either *afforded* or *invited* this. Positive relationships with peers and adults also connect to Carr's (2001) fifth disposition of taking responsibility, for shared activities, curriculum and assessment, and social justice.

Conclusion

A topic as complex as the transition to school lends itself to a range of theoretical approaches, as there are so many different aspects that can be considered. While this article has focused on starting school, many of the theoretical ideas apply to other transitions. The Ministry of Education in Aotearoa/New Zealand has, as part of the strategic plan for early childhood education, an aim to "promote coherence of education between birth and eight years" through improved early childhood and school teachers' understanding of the links between curricula and pedagogy in each sector, and through shared information "about effective transition from ECE to school practices" (Ministry of Education, 2002, p.17). The current interest in transitions is therefore likely to continue. As educators and families explore what this means in practice, it is relevant to consider the theoretical approaches on which advice or decisions are based. The legacy of "maturational" and "filling the gaps" approaches remain in our discourse, but it is to be hoped that more promising alternatives can be negotiated, drawing on the insights provided by sociocultural and ecological theories.

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