PASSING ON THE BATON

Jenny Mayo

Box Hill North Primary Kindergarten

Abstract

This practitioner article identifies and describes the practices that support children’s transition from home to kindergarten, kindergarten to school, and during the induction period of the first year of formal schooling. The involvement of experienced kindergarten and school children in these processes is described.

Box Hill North Primary School is situated 14 kilometres east of Melbourne in the state of Victoria. For the past ten years, the school council has operated a kindergarten on-site. This is unusual as very few government primary schools in Victoria offer programs for children under school entry age. This is because schooling is located in the government education portfolio and the provision of preschool education is located in the government community services portfolio. The kindergarten provides sessional groups for 3 to 5 year old children in the two years prior to formal schooling, and thus primary schooling covers 9 years from 3 year old kindergarten to Year 6. Approximately 85% of the kindergarten children continue on to prep (the first year of schooling) at the school. Families come from a diversity of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Children are usually second or third generation Australian-born and English speaking, with 10% being bi-lingual.

Transition to school

Children entering prep have to adjust to an environment that can differ greatly from their previous experience at kindergarten and it important to plan ways to support children in adapting to these changes. There are changes in routine, in the length of day, the timetable, in times for toileting and eating/drinking. At kindergarten children choose and don’t have to ask or take a friend. They drink whenever necessary from cups, not taps. Toilets at kindergarten are inside the room, child-sized and used by either gender whenever necessary and without asking. At school toilets are outside, specific to girls/boys (and with urinals), and children need to ask to use a toilet during class time. There is an expectation that children will understand and comply with an increasing number of verbal instructions and a lack of choice and input into the program which often involves predetermined themes rather than the curriculum being co-constructed by staff and children. A distinction is made between “play” and “work”

Starting school often involves changes in friendship and social groups. There are different teachers for different curriculum areas and the adult child ratio changes. In Victoria, prep classes typically have one teacher and about 21 children. There is not as much emphasis on aesthetics or the physical setting. Little if any changes to the physical space or room arrangement are made throughout the year. Outdoor spaces are not seen as part of the learning environment (other than sport) - no choosing to play indoors or outdoors or to spend whole days outside. No swings, dress-ups, woodwork bench, outdoor blocks, wheel-toys. School playgrounds are huge and seem to have no boundaries. There are lots and lots of bigger children who play sophisticated games that are complicated by rules, rituals and chants that preps may not understand, or they treat the preps as objects - “you’re so cute”.
I believe it is important to provide children with time to cope with these and other changes and to support them through the transition and induction processes.

**Our programs**

Box Hill North Primary School is sensitive to the needs of children and the challenges they face in the move from home to kindergarten, and from kindergarten to the formal years of school. The transition program gives children extended experiences to gradually become familiar with a kindergarten and school environment. It operates over three years and encompasses home to kindergarten transitions, transitions from the 3 year old kindergarten group to the 4-year old group, and the transition and induction to the prep year. An important feature is the involvement of older or more experienced children in different components of the transition and induction programs. Staff and students from the wider school community, and all kindergarten children are involved in the transition program irrespective of which school they will attend when they do commence school.

The transition component of the early childhood curriculum has been developed to support and nurture children to acquire the experiences, confidence and skills needed to cope with major transitions, new situations or changes in their lives. We believe that it is important that children and their families are introduced to school life when they are in kindergarten; that there should be a natural seamless flow and continuity between programs by developing a shared understanding of educational curriculum and practice; the anxiety that some children may experience can be reduced by providing them with emotional support and nurturing through the induction period; and children's perspectives about school and their needs, and the needs of parents and teachers should be acknowledged and used to inform transition.

**Home to kindergarten**

In the year prior to the commencement of kindergarten, discovery days are held for children who will be new to kindergarten in the next year. Small groups of parents, children, and sometimes siblings and extended family members, attend these sessions, and are also able to visit more informally as needed. Invitations are personalised and addressed to each child. These sessions enable new children and families to develop a sense of familiarity and 'ownership' of this new kindergarten setting. Parents are provided with information folders decorated by current kindergarten children. As well as 'official' information, the folder also contains a specially decorated list of comments from existing children about kindergarten. I ask the current kindergarten children to tell me either 'what they enjoy about kindergarten' or 'what they think other children will like about kindergarten'. Comments such as: 'I like it when we sing songs'; 'We learn about interesting things like the old fashioned days'; 'I like it when we do puppets' are included. New parents have commented that this list of about 25 comments helps them talk with their child about Kindergarten.

At the end of the school year (December), I send all new children a Christmas card. Children who are already at kindergarten are sent a letter from me about the summer holidays and telling them that I am looking forward to our new year together with new friends.

At the start of the new school year in late January, interviews are conducted for new families (optional for existing families). At these interviews, time is allocated for each child to tell me about their interests; to ask me questions and to tour kindergarten with me. Children are specifically asked 'What do you want to know?' and 'What do you really want to do at kindergarten?' I make sure that these activities are available, wherever possible, on the first day of kindergarten. Parents are asked about their expectations; what they hope their children
will achieve; and of any transition concerns for their child or themselves. Flexible options for interviews are made for working parents or parents where English is not the first language. These session are particularly important for gaining important information and building relationships.

All children are photographed in the first days of kindergarten, and photos are compiled into a book along with children’s comments and reflections about kindergarten. To support parents, as well as children in getting to know more about each other, Family Stories are collated with photographs and information provided by parents. These books remains available to children and families throughout the year. Parents or grandparents are also welcome to stay with their children for as long as they want, to assist with, and support separation and attachment issues. Rarely does this exceed a month or so. If children have siblings at the school, visits to or from siblings are organised and this often helps anxious children to settle in better.

During kindergarten

The language we use is important to help our families feel part of the wider school community. Our information booklet is called ‘Starting School – Kindergarten’ because children and families are members of the wider school community and not just the kindergarten. We talk about ‘our school’ having classes from kindergarten to Year 6.

Early in Term 1, the 4 year old kindergarten groups (who will be commencing school in the following year) have familiarisation tours of the school classrooms that are located in the same building in which the kindergarten is situated. We go in and out of all classes, offices, ancillary areas and the staffroom. Later in the year we venture to the other buildings where older children have classes, the library, art room, toilets, performing arts centre, gymnasium and playgrounds. It is important that the children are familiar with all aspects of the school environment, not just the classrooms. A variety of opportunities enable us to regularly be part of the P-6 school activities including use of the school facilities and participating in whole school events such as education week, open days, carols night, literacy/numeracy week.

The Principal is an integral part of the transitions program and quickly becomes a well known and important person. We visit him in his office and he visits us. We make a book “Who is our Principal and what is his job?” with the children’s comments and drawings. Comments have included: “He’s the boss of the school” or “He’s a Princespull – but I have no idea what he does” or “He works in the Office…on the computer” Before being put into book form, the drawings and responses are displayed in the school’s entrance foyer.

This year, the Principal held weekly woodwork sessions with the children at kindergarten. This was intended to be more than just an opportunity to become familiar with the Principal – I wanted the children to see a man in a caring, nurturing role, as the majority of staff in the early childhood/primary years are female. Later in the year, when revisiting our book “Who is our Principal and what is his job”, the children’s reflections and understandings had changed because of this direct experience: “His job is to make things with us”. “He looks after us.” “He helps us.” “He’s a woodwork teacher.” Other staff are introduced to the kindergarten children on a more informal basis and often meet the children on familiar “home ground”; at kindergarten.

Informal play opportunities are very important for helping children cope with the change in role from a kindergarten child to a school child and associated feelings and understandings. Some of our most effective transition experiences are very simple play-based ones such as providing items of school uniform and schoolbags with pretend lunches in dramatic play areas. Others experiences are spontaneous or adapted from particular circumstances. For example when the Prep to Year 6 classes have a non-school day and kindergarten is the only
class in attendance, the children have enjoyed wonderful opportunities to have more use, control and ownership of the school. We visit all the empty classrooms and buildings, eat lunch in the prep rooms. A recent highlight (they’re still talking about it) was running up and down the empty corridors like a herd of elephants (“We are not really allowed to do that when we are big school children”).

Importantly, we talk about feelings; how children felt when they started kindergarten, about change and growing up. We discuss how children won’t all be together next year, nor in the same class and we how children could maintain contact especially for children moving to other schools. “Passing on the baton” is an important part of transition and we talk about new children including siblings who will commence kindergarten and what they may need to know. This leads to the development of the list of statements about kindergarten that are compiled for commencing families.

We have a range of special transition activities that assist with the transition and induction to school.

Preps-for-a-Day. This is an annual event where the children spend a day practicing being a prep child. Activities include dressing in school uniform, having lunch orders, art/music/gym classes, lunch with buddies in kindergarten or in the prep classrooms, a special assembly (smaller than normal) with the principal and perhaps one or two other classes, a class photo and family photos with siblings, and playing in the school playground.

Prep Pals. This program operates during the two years of kindergarten and during the prep year. Current preps, because of the closeness in age and developmental stages and recent kindergarten attendance, provide valuable peer support to the kindergarten children and are able to bring closure to their own transition to school experience. The preps visit the youngest kindergarten groups and answer questions about prep and reflect on their own kindergarten days. With promoting I encourage them to tell the kindergarten children ‘What they remember about kinder’ or ‘What they miss about kindergarten’ and ‘What is different about being in prep’. Children participate in kindergarten activities together and reciprocal visits to the prep classrooms are organised. Sometimes we create our own ‘prep classroom’ within kindergarten and have used the prep pals as mentors, asking them for suggestions and how to make our ‘prep room’ authentic. This is a great opportunity for recognising similarities and differences between settings, but our ‘prep room’ rarely lasts for long.

Buddies. The Buddy program operates for three years during the final year of kindergarten, in Prep and in Year 1. A year 4 student is carefully matched with a kindergarten child and this relationship then continues across the next 2 years of schooling. Buddies are selected after a meeting with me where the roles and responsibilities of a buddy are discussed and these students are also encouraged to reflect on their time at kindergarten. This program has a cross – curricular focus that complements our early childhood goals and the requirements of the primary curriculum, and the older students regularly visit their younger buddies.

Memory stones. Because young children live in the present, abstract concepts such as “next year” can be hard to grasp. Memory stones and year books are two tangible ways for children to remember the past. After reading “Milo and the Magical Stones” (Marcus Pfister 1997), each child is given a stone ‘filled’ with memories. They are asked to keep it in a safe place and when needing to remember their time at kindergarten and their friends, simply hold the stone close to their heart and know that instantly I will be thinking of them at the same time. Memory stones have been especially important for children experiencing difficulty settling into prep – particularly for children attending new primary schools and it not unusual for these stones to be kept in school bags.
The transition program places great emphasis on communication, collaboration & community, but as we move into the induction period, the critical factor in ensuring successful transition to prep is, I believe, in the way we help young children adapt to change.

A ‘Steps to Prep’ talk is conducted with kindergarten families and gives parents the opportunity to discuss transition practices and issues. Sometimes they feel more comfortable asking me questions because of their 1 -2 year association with kindergarten.

**Induction**

The induction period commences at the end of the kindergarten year with many visits to school as part of a more formal program, and continues during prep. One way that I support children during the induction period, starts at the end of the final kindergarten year. Prior to children attending prep orientation sessions, I record each child’s response to: “What do you think prep will be like?” “What do you need to know before you start prep?” “How will you find out about prep?” A child’s response will often differ greatly from an adults. The following year, towards the end of the first term at school, I interview the children again and record their answers to questions such as: “What is prep like?” “What have you learnt in prep?” “What is the best thing about being in prep?” I believe this helps the children 'accept' and recognise the benefits of being in prep but it also assists me in planning the transition program for my next groups of children.

Specific support is provided to children who may need additional help as they start school. Sometimes we are aware of a child’s needs and can plan additional support, but other times these needs appear to arise just before school starts. For example, this year on the day before prep started, I received a phone call from a distressed parent – her daughter was worried and was expressing concerns about starting prep. I suggested that they came to school that day, and I was able to talk with the child, acknowledge her feelings, offer some suggestions for the first day and take her into the empty prep room to see how it was set up, where her bag would hang and so on. We met the assistant principal and had a friendly chat – needless to say starting prep the following day was a happy time for both the child and her parents. Another time, I had taught a child with autism whom experienced anxiety about changes. In the day before starting prep, I arranged for him to help me at kindergarten and to visit the prep area at the same time.

The kindergarten year starts with family interviews and I am able to allocate times to visit the preps on a daily basis in their first week and to visit other children in their new schools. This helps alleviate children’s concerns, especially when they do not know other children in their school class. Further visits occur on an informal or “needs” basis during Term 1.

An ideal situation at our school occurs through having the kindergarten located in the same building as prep classrooms. If children are upset or anxious, prep teachers will bring them in to visit me.

In the early days of school, we try to provide some consistency between kindergarten and prep by providing familiar experiences including the use of the kindergarten playground when we are not in session. Preps also visit the kindergarten for story sessions. Our family picnic at the start of the school year includes new families to kindergarten and a reunion opportunity for the previous year’s families.
Successes

Transition programs require commitment and passion. It is important for school and kindergarten teachers to be aware of current research and literature about transition, to be flexible in their approach to transition, to listen to children’s perspectives and concerns, and involve children, families and all staff in the co-construction of experiences that support and foster children’s agency in these critical life experiences.

I believe our transition and induction program is successful because:

- The variety and duration allows children to have a gradual but extensive introduction to school life.
- It is flexible and adapts to circumstances and needs as they arise.
- It acknowledges that children bring with them a variety of previous experiences, and knowledge and skills, and that transition is a two-way process.
- The experiences are mostly play-based; focussing on children’s needs and incorporates the child’s understanding and perspective.
- It gives children time, practise, and familiarisation opportunities, and some form of control over what will happen.
- Educators work together in a collaborative way to ensure that the transition to prep is as smooth and “seamless” as possible.
- The program is ongoing and extends through the induction period.
- The quality of the prep experience is likely to be greater because of the prep teacher’s knowledge of the children and their kindergarten experience prior to prep entry.

Correspondence about this paper should be addressed to:

Jenny Mayo
Box Hill North Primary Kindergarten
Elizabeth Street
Box Hill North, Victoria, 3129 Australia
jennym@bhnps.vic.edu.au