

Understanding Parents' Perspectives on the Transition to Kindergarten: What Early Childhood Settings and Schools Can Do for At-Risk Families

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This paper addresses the importance of parent involvement in facilitating positive transitions from early childhood settings to elementary school for children with challenging behaviors and/or those at risk for more serious emotional/behavioral disorders. Qualitative interviews with parents of children with social-emotional/behavioral challenges, their Head Start teachers and advocates, and their kindergarten teachers were conducted to gain an understanding of how these parents experienced various transition activities provided by preschools or receiving schools and how these activities functioned to help support parent involvement in the transition process. Based on these data, we developed a conceptual model linking parent needs to elements of transition supports that can be provided through preschools and receiving schools. Key elements of this model include communicating information, providing emotional support, and preparing parents to act as their children's primary advocate within the school system.

Keywords: transition; Head Start; children's mental health; parent engagement

Introduction

The transition to kindergarten sets the stage for future academic success as well as for children and families' relationships with the educational system (Pianta & Cox, 1999; Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005). Yet this transition can be overwhelming for children and families, particularly when children have emotional or

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behavioral challenges. Transition supports provided by key early childhood and school personnel help ensure successful transition. There are discussions of transition best practices in the existing literature and a particular focus on the importance of involving parents in the transition process. However, few studies have focused on understanding parents of children with emotional or behavioral challenges and their perspectives on the transition process and what they feel they need to best support their children. In this study we present a parent-informed understanding of the most important elements of transition supports and provide some recommendations for how best to integrate these practices into the family, preschool, kindergarten, and community contexts. Drawing from these parent perspectives, as well as from information collected from preschool and kindergarten teachers, we propose a conceptual model linking key elements of transition practice to parent involvement in children's transition to kindergarten.

Importance of Transition to Kindergarten

Entering kindergarten is a major milestone in the lives of children and families. Children and their parents encounter new relationships, roles, cultures, opportunities, and responsibilities. The experience of starting school involves complex and significant change (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2002) that may be particularly challenging when children have social-emotional or behavioral challenges (Rosenkoetter, Hains, & Fowler, 1994). When transition is successful, children are engaged and feel positive about school, parents are partners in their children's learning, and schools provide experiences that value individual children and promote their success (Ramey & Ramey, 1999; Wright, Diener, & Kay, 2000). For children with social-emotional challenges, successful transitions result in children, parents, and teachers being better prepared to be successful in school. However, children with emotional or behavioral challenges are more likely to have difficulties transitioning to school, which in turn can set them on a negative developmental trajectory if their transitions are difficult (President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003; Osher, Magee Quinn, & Hanley, 2002).

Transition Best Practices

Based on social-ecological and developmental views of transition that emphasize the importance of understanding the contexts in which children and families make transitions, and the relationships among home, school, and community groups that support the child (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003), a number of "best practices" in transition to kindergarten have been identified. Effective transition supports, it is hypothesized, do the following: (1) view transition as a long-term process, beginning in the preschool years and extending into the kindergarten year; (2) build relationships, communication, and collaboration across settings; (3) promote continuity across settings; (4) prepare, partner with, and involve parents; and (5) prepare children, building needed academic, social-emotional, and other competencies (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). A theme

throughout all of these guiding principles for transition practice is the importance of parent involvement. Parent involvement in transition-related activities has been found to be associated with higher levels of involvement in children's schooling post-transition, a key factor in later academic success (Schulting et al., 2005). Further, studies have suggested that preschool teachers can play an important role in facilitating successful transition. Parents appear to have more communication with preschool teachers (compared to elementary and other teachers), and report high levels of trust and positive regard for them (Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufman, Gercke, & Higgins, 2001). A study examining the experiences and concerns of parents of children who had been in early childhood education programs and were transitioning to kindergarten (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGenaro, & Wildenger, 2007) found that parents generally wanted more involvement in, and information about, the transition process while their children were in preschool. Parents also expressed a desire for certain supports that they were not receiving, such as written communication from kindergarten teachers, visits to the kindergarten classroom, and informational meetings on transition. They were interested in information regarding their child's kindergarten teachers and knowing more about the academic expectations in kindergarten and what they could do to help prepare their child.

In order for parents to be involved in the transition, it may be particularly important for early childhood programs to promote parent empowerment, specifically in terms of parents' ability to advocate for themselves and their children in the school system. Scheel & Rieckmann (1998), in their discussion of the empowerment of parents of preschool children with behavioral or emotional disorders, emphasize that parent empowerment within the preschool setting provides a foundation for parents' involvement in other contexts, such as schools and service systems. Feeling empowered and having the ability to advocate for their children may be critical to helping parents overcome the many identified barriers to parent involvement in the transition process and in their children's later school careers, such as work schedules, lack of child care, language differences, transportation problems, and parents' history of negative school experiences (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005; La Paro, Kraft-Sayre, & Pianta, 2003).

The Current Research

In the current research, we seek to gain a deeper understanding of how parents of children with emotional or behavioral challenges, as well as preschool and kindergarten teachers, experience a variety of transition activities and supports, and how these activities may function in regard to parental involvement in transition. We bring together parents' views of their children's transitions, along with the perspectives of the Head Start staff (teachers and family advocates) and kindergarten teachers working with these families, to provide multiple perspectives on the transition process and how these three stakeholders support children with emotional or behavioral challenges. The following research questions guided this exploratory study:

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Research Question 1

What was the role of the Head Start program and the kindergarten school in the transition process for parents and their children with emotional or behavioral challenges?

Research Question 2

What did parents view as the most important transition activities, and how did those activities support the transition process?

Research Question 3

What linkages in the transition process most need to be improved, and what other barriers overcome, to best support transitions for children with emotional and behavioral challenges and their families?

Methodology

Sample These data were collected as part of a larger study evaluating the implementation of an intervention designed to enhance program and staff capacity to support children with social-emotional challenges and ease their transitions to kindergarten (results from which are described in Green, Malsch & Hood [2011]). For the current study, data from the control and intervention years have been combined, as the key research questions are not evaluative in nature. Children were selected to participate in the study if they: (1) showed evidence of a developmental delay or suspected delay in the social-emotional area on validated assessment tools (determined in one program by scores in the atypical/concern range for the social-emotional subscale of the Ages and Stages Questionnaire [ASQ], and in the second program by scores of 60 or above on the behavior problems component or 40 or lower on the protective factors component of the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment [DECA]), and (2) their Head Start teacher/staff member had concerns about the child's ability to transition successfully to kindergarten either because of these social-emotional issues or because of the teachers' concern about the parents' ability to successfully support the child through the transition process. Children who were participating in Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education (EI/ECSE) were not eligible for this study. Head Start staff nominated children for the study and obtained consent from parents to be contacted by the researchers. Members of the research team then contacted parents by telephone to explain the study. Of 59 families referred to the research study, 57 (96%) agreed to participate and completed an initial interview.

As part of this study, qualitative telephone interviews were conducted to collect information about the transition process for children at high risk for transition problems. Telephone interviews were conducted with 50 Head Start teachers and family advocates, and 15 management staff in the winter or early spring prior to children's transition to kindergarten. Telephone interviews were conducted with 57 parents in the late spring or early summer prior to their children's transition to

kindergarten. In situations where children had two parents, the primary caregiver (typically the mother) was interviewed. Parents were interviewed a second time in November–December after their children had transitioned. Of those parents interviewed in the spring, 44 (80%) were also interviewed in the fall. Telephone interviews with these children's kindergarten teachers ($n = 45$, 82% of the teachers of these children) were conducted in November–December as well.

Interview Instrument

Head Start staff interviews consisted of primarily open-ended questions focused on understanding the nature, timing, and frequency of transition activities and supports provided by the Head Start Program; the barriers and challenges to communicating with kindergarten teachers and schools; their perceptions of the effectiveness of the transition activities; the barriers and challenges to engaging parents in transition activities; and staff perceptions of the most effective transition activities. The Head Start staff interviews were not focused on the particular target child but rather on the general transition process. Specific questions about additional transition activities or supports for children with challenging behaviors were included.

Parent pre-transition (spring) interviews consisted of primarily open-ended questions focused on what transition supports they or their children had received from either Head Start or the school (nature, timing, and frequency), their perception of their child's readiness for school, the extent of their concerns with their children's successful transition, what was most helpful about the transition supports they had received, and how they felt transition supports could have been more helpful. Post-transition interviews asked about any additional transition activities or support provided since the last interview; their perceptions of how successful the child's transition was; their level of communication with the child's kindergarten teacher during the transition; and their perceptions, post-transition, of what could have made the transition process easier.

Kindergarten teacher interviews consisted of primarily open-ended questions about the target child's transition (any challenges, issues, or concerns), how involved the parent was in the child's school, what information or communication they had received from the parent and/or Head Start program prior to transition, what kinds of transition supports were provided by the school, and what information or activities they felt would make transitions more successful. Thus these interviews included both specific questions about the transition of the identified child, as well as general questions about the nature, frequency, and timing of transition activities provided by the school and level of communication and collaboration with parents and Head Start around transition.

Results

Sample Characteristics Participants were parents, Head Start staff, and kindergarten teachers from two sites in the Pacific Northwest. Overall, 57 parents (30 from Site A and 37 from Site B), 50 Head Start staff (18 from Site A and 32 from

Site B), and 47 kindergarten teachers (25 from Site A and 22 from Site B) participated in the interviews. The large majority was female (92.3% of parents, 100% of Head Start staff, and 98% of kindergarten teachers). Of those who reported their race/ethnicity, the majority was Caucasian/European-American (parents: 68.8% Caucasian, 24.4% Hispanic/Latino, 6.6% mixed race; Head Start teachers: 78.7% Caucasian, 12.8% Hispanic/Latino, 4.3% Native American, 4.3% mixed race, 2.1% Asian; kindergarten teachers: 95.7% Caucasian, 2.2% Hispanic/Latino, 2.2% other). The interviewees' ages ranged from 21 to 64 years.

Coding

Interviews were transcribed and entered into NUD*IST (Non-numerical, Unstructured Data Indexing, Structuring, Theorizing) software (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd & La Trobe University, 1993). Interviews with Spanish-speaking participants were conducted in Spanish, transcribed in Spanish, and then translated into English before coding.

For the present study, first-level coding was developed to capture the barriers and facilitators of parent involvement in transition activities. Preliminary codes were developed by the four-person research team, each of whom read through three transcripts and identified categories describing the relevant transition activities related to involving parents in the process. The team met to share their categories, develop operational definitions for each code, and to come to consensus on a set of codes. Subsequent transcripts were read by pairs of researchers who met weekly to review coding and discuss any discrepancies and to reach consensus about coding each exemplar. The first set of codes consisted of the following categories of activities that could be implemented by either Head Start or the receiving school:

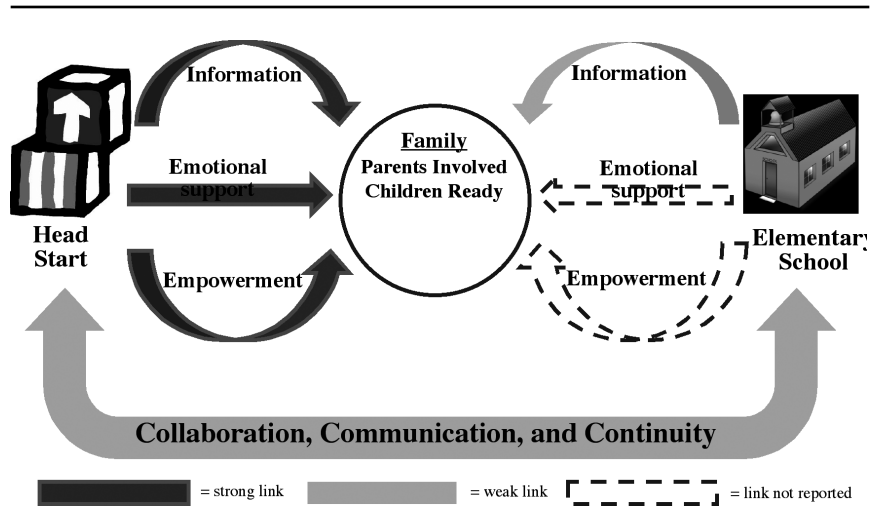
1. Key transition activities by either the Head Start program or the receiving school (or comments about the absence of these activities):
 - encourages parents to be involved in transition activities
 - facilitates parent visits to receiving school/classrooms
 - facilitates children's visits to receiving school/classrooms
 - facilitates parent communication with kindergarten teacher/school
 - holds parent group meeting focused on transition
 - holds individual teacher-parent conference focused on transition
 - provides information to parents about transition process
 - provides information to parents about kindergarten environment/expectations
 - empowers parents to advocate for children's needs within school system
 - involves parents in supporting children's school readiness skills
2. Barriers to parent involvement in transition, including: (1) communication barriers, (2) transportation, (3) language, (4) motivation/interest, (5) employment, (6) cultural issues, (7) single-parent status, and (8) poverty

Analysis

Subsequent analysis of coded data focused on establishing substantive themes and relationships among primary-level codes that informed the key research questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Specifically, we were interested in understanding: (1) what were the most important aspects of transition activities for parents, (2) how these transition activities were experienced by parents in terms of facilitating positive involvement and transition, and (3) the extent to which the activities promoted connections across the three settings. For the current study, three members of the research team, including the principal investigator, read through the coded information listed above. Each reader developed a set of themes and identified source coding in the interview that supported the theme. Team meetings were held to discuss the proposed themes and to review the evidence in support of the theme. Discussion of each theme involved review of evidence from the coded interviews, discussion, and consensus-building around the importance and uniqueness of each theme and how each identified theme contributed to our understanding of the process of parent involvement in transition.

Based on these discussions, we developed the conceptual model shown in figure 1. The model is rooted theoretically in developmental models of transition that see successful transition as a result of interconnected relationships between schools, early education settings, parents, and communities (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). The focus of the model was on understanding how the transition activities provided by Head Start and the schools helped to engage parents in the transition process, thereby supporting children's transition success. Analyses showed that

Figure 1. Links to Parent Involvement in Children's Transition to Kindergarten



transition activities tended to focus on three key dimensions, all of which played a role in fostering parent involvement: (1) *providing information*, including basic logistical information, information that helps parents understand the similarities and differences between Head Start and kindergarten settings, and information about ways parents could be involved in the transition process; (2) *emotional support* and encouragement; and (3) active *empowerment* of parents to act as advocates for their children in the school system. In addition, collaborative linkages between Head Start and the school were seen as important in supporting parents and building a foundation for parent involvement. The model depicts the strength of each of these linkages among the three contexts (Head Start, family, and school) based on the perspectives of participants in the current study. That is, while all of these links may be important, some were reported to be actually occurring, while others were viewed as important but were less frequent or nonexistent in terms of parents' experiences.

Information

Providing parents with information about the logistics of the transition process (how to register, when to register, when orientations and other meetings are, when they can visit the schools, etc.) as well as details about the elementary school context (dates and times school starts, options for a.m./p.m. kindergarten, how to request or find out which kindergarten teacher their child is getting, information about the school daily routines and calendars, transportation options, etc.) was one of the key things that parents talked about as important for helping them with the transition process. It also appeared to provide the foundation for reducing parents' feelings of helplessness and engaging them in the transition process. For these parents, information truly was power, and many felt that, without Head Start, they would have lacked critical information for understanding and negotiating the transition process.

They [Head Start] were pretty much the ones that did everything to help us transition by giving us information and talking to us about it. They let us know what we needed to do and what we could do.—*Parent*

This was especially true for parents who were experiencing the transition to kindergarten for the first time:

The other thing that was very helpful is that Head Start organized a big meeting for principals and teachers from the elementary schools to come to. They gave lots of information about what school was like, when to register, where we might be sending our kids, and to get to know some of the people that were there. This was very helpful to me because this is my first child going to kindergarten and I really didn't know anything.—*Parent*

Head Start played a major role in providing logistical information regarding important dates and events, such as kindergarten roundup and registration. Most often this occurred through paper documents sent home (either by Head Start or

the receiving school) or through meetings/home visits. However, it was clear that it wasn't simply providing information, but *how* Head Start provided the information that was important. Specifically, parents and teachers talked about how Head Start staff provided information early and provided opportunities for follow-up and questions.

We let them know when kindergarten roundup is coming. We let them know when dates are coming up through a letter. We provide transportation when necessary. We let them know what's happening and if there's anything we can do to help.—*Head Start Teacher*

His Head Start teacher sent things home and gave us papers during home visits, like notices on what days we had to be at kindergarten to sign up. She gave us the papers way ahead of time, so it gave me time to get stuff filled out and turned back in.—*Parent*

A number of kindergarten teachers reported having parent-teacher conferences in the first week of school, where they had an opportunity to get to know the child, do initial assessments, and speak with the parents. Parents who participated in these generally found them to be helpful and reported receiving useful information.

[The kindergarten teacher] had a class before school even started. She explained the folders, the schedule for the week, what they would be doing, and they all got to sit in their own spot.—*Parent*

At the conference, I talk to parents about emotional and behavioral problems and other potential concerns. I also do a quick check on the child to determine what level they are at. These conferences take place during the first two days of school.—*Kindergarten Teacher*

In addition, opportunities to learn from other parents (and, for experienced parents, to share their knowledge and expertise with their peers) were seen as extremely valuable. This helped new parents and offered a chance for experienced parents to take a leadership role:

We got to hear from parents who already had kids in kindergarten. The people who were sending their first kids to kindergarten were nervous and insecure. But we could share a little bit with them the kind of help that the schools give. We gave them tips. I have a nine-year-old; I shared my experiences with them. Lots of sharing.—*Parent*

Types of Information Provided

Information provided by Head Start and the schools fell into three primary categories. First, as described above, parents needed and received considerable amounts of logistical information about the transition process, kindergarten schedules, the registration process, and so on. Second, Head Start in particular tended to provide information to parents about ways that they could be engaged

in the transition process, including concrete things that they could do to learn about the elementary school and to help their children feel more comfortable and prepared:

[The Head Start teacher] gave us lots of information, like worksheets on preparing for kindergarten. The sheets said things like, it was a good idea to meet the kindergarten teacher before school starts and that we should familiarize ourselves with the new school.—*Parent*

Thus information was not just about the logistics, dates, and schedules but also concrete suggestions for things that parents could do to be involved with the transition process. Many parents and teachers also indicated both general and specific ways in which they were involved in helping children to become behaviorally ready for kindergarten. Head Start staff spoke about the ways they involved parents who, in turn, would involve their children. For example, Head Start staff discussed how they talked to parents about specific things they could do at home to help this process. Head Start staff told parents about explicit ways that they could set boundaries with their children and develop habits that would help better prepare their children for kindergarten:

We talk to mothers about the stress children are going to go through so they can help them with that during the summer to prepare the child and give the child security.—*Head Start Teacher*

Head Start staff also mentioned paying special attention to working with parents whose children had specific behavioral issues that needed to be addressed, such as anger management and emotional control. Parents stated that staff helped bring important factors to their attention in an effort to get parents more involved, which they found to be very helpful.

It was just that they brought things to my attention that I could work on with [child's name]—that [he] had some anger issues and played a little rough with friends. They showed me different ways to teach [him] about his feelings and anger management ideas for me to teach [him].—*Parent*

Third, Head Start and the schools provided information to parents and children about what to expect in the kindergarten setting. Information about how the kindergarten and Head Start settings would be different was seen as especially important for Head Start parents. Parents reported that Head Start staff explained what kindergarten was going to be like:

Talking with [Head Start staff] and getting a refresher of what to expect and just having her be there to help out if I had any questions was the most helpful.—*Parent*

One of the things we do in the spring is to have a day where they come and visit and get to know the classroom, so it isn't so overwhelming when they start. I think that is really important.—*Kindergarten Teacher*

One elementary school had a special three-week summer program designed to support Spanish-speaking children making the transition to kindergarten. Children attended school during this period for two hours per day and were oriented to the school building and spent time getting to know their teacher. Although only one of the Head Start children in the study was enrolled in this program, it was described as very helpful:

She was in the Jump Start program. They went to school for a couple hours a day and got a backpack filled with school supplies. She loved it! It made her so excited for school.—*Parent*

In addition, kindergarten teachers often came to Head Start parent meetings to talk about what kindergarten would be like and what parents should expect. Kindergarten teachers acknowledged that there are significant differences between the Head Start environment and elementary school, especially for parents:

I think the biggest adjustment might be for the parents because I think that they've had a lot more one-on-one with Head Start teachers and then they come here to a regular school, and I have to divide my time between a lot more parents. I think that is hard for these parents.—*Kindergarten Teacher*

A final aspect of information provision that deserves mention is the consistent translation of information provided by Head Start and support for non-English-speaking families. Hispanic families are a growing, but still relatively small community within the programs studied, and a number of parents commented that schools were unable to translate or were inconsistent in their assistance with translation:

We provide translation and all materials [are] translated. I go with the parent to kindergarten roundup and translate as much as I can. When I have a parent-teacher conference in kindergarten, I will go to that if they want. The kindergarten doesn't have a translator. I keep in much more contact with families who don't speak English. It's tricky. I don't want to leave them hanging because the school doesn't have a translator.—*Head Start Teacher*

Emotional Support and Encouragement

In addition to providing information to parents, a key aspect of the transition supports provided by Head Start involved emotional support and encouragement. Head Start staff reported ways in which they encouraged and supported parents through the transition process. In turn, parents described the things that Head Start staff did to help them feel more comfortable with the transition process. Emotional support and encouragement was not mentioned as a part of what schools provided for families by any of the participants.

Because I didn't know anything, I was always wondering what we needed to do, and especially because I don't speak English. I was scared, and the things they [Head Start] did made me feel more relaxed about the whole thing.—*Parent*

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Oftentimes this emotional support was given or received in conjunction with more instrumentally supportive activities:

We discussed reading with him and activities to do over the summer with him to prepare him for kindergarten so he didn't forget all of the letters and numbers and things he'd learned at Head Start. . . . [His Head Start teacher] also let us know that if we had a hard time transitioning him the first week of kindergarten that she'd make time in her schedule to come to his new school and talk to him about that this was his new class, that the teacher was his friend, and that he'd be safe here.—*Parent*

Parents talked about the role of the Head Start program in helping reduce children's worries and fears about starting kindergarten. This included both general activities that may have helped reduce anxiety among all children by helping them to become more familiar with the circumstances and expectations that they would encounter in kindergarten (such as taking field trips to the school, visiting the school playgrounds, and visiting kindergarten classrooms), as well as specific work for children and families with particularly heightened anxiety.

Empowerment

Head Start staff talked about working to help empower parents; in turn, parents we spoke with felt a sense of empowerment. Staff encouraged parents to assert their personal influence by taking initiative in regard to their children's education.

I stress to parents how important it is to be involved with the school. I stress that they should ask questions of the teachers. It doesn't matter if you think it is not important, you should still ask the question.—*Head Start Family Advocate*

I told them never to hesitate speaking up to the teacher or principal about anything they are concerned about. How they, the family, are in charge of his education.—*Head Start Teacher*

Parents reported that Head Start staff helped them to do things they might not have otherwise done:

She just told me about how I could go down there right before school started and meet the teacher and tell her about [child's name] year and Head Start so that she could have a heads-up.—*Parent*

Head Start staff used several strategies for supporting parents to be proactive in communicating with the school, including modeling and providing tools that encouraged communication with the school:

I call them [the kindergarten school] from home visits to demonstrate how easy it is to get their help.—*Head Start Family Advocate*

The center manager gave me examples of letters to the teacher and all kinds of information on what to ask the teachers.—*Parent*

Head Start staff encouraged parents to visit the school in advance and attend the pre-kindergarten events. Head Start staff also identified and recognized parents' fears and encouraged parents to move beyond those uncertainties. Many Head Start staff understood that the kindergarten environment would be quite different for children and families, and they also knew that once families left Head Start, parents would need to take on more responsibility in regard to their children's schooling:

As teachers, we empowered the parents to get their transition needs met because, once they leave Head Start, they become responsible to do all the work. The [transition planning process] was validating to parents that they can take control.—*Head Start Teacher*

Barriers to Parent Involvement

The two most consistent barriers to parents feeling engaged in the transition process were: (1) lack of communication with or from the school, and (2) problems relating to these low-income parents' work status or schedules. Other barriers included: (3) feeling that Head Start staff lacked key logistical information about the kindergarten system; (4) language and translation problems; (5) personal situations, such as health problems; and (6) having multiple children to care for.

School Communication with Parent

Head Start parents reported a number of problems communicating with schools about their children's transition, and many experienced frustration with communication in terms of the transition process as well as with ongoing communication after their children started school. Perhaps the most consistent theme was the lack of information from the school in advance of school starting and a feeling that the school was not interested in what parents had to say:

Right before they informed us who his teacher would be, I had to call the school and ask because I hadn't heard anything. I asked, "Is my child even enrolled in kindergarten? Because I haven't heard anything." They said they were still reviewing applications [one week prior to school starting], so they didn't know.—*Parent*

A few parents reported attempts to communicate their concerns about their child but felt that the school was unresponsive:

They really didn't care that there were concerns, just that they would take care of it when [child's name] went to school. They were polite, but didn't take our concerns seriously. They just said, "Don't worry about it," which kind of bugged me. But what can you do?—*Parent*

Other parents reported that efforts on the part of Head Start to help facilitate transition-related activities were not successful:

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[The] Head Start teacher did call the elementary school a couple of times to see if we could get in the school ahead of time, but she got the same response I did when I called [that visiting during the day was not allowed].—*Parent*

However, other parents reported concerns about the frequency of communication with teachers after school started, and were especially concerned about the lack of communication around specific behavioral issues that the child was having:

I really haven't had any communication with the teacher since the beginning of school. . . . I had one conversation with [child's] teacher about the school bus problems, and she was quite rude to me, so I haven't wanted to talk to her about anything since then.—*Parent*

Several parents noted that the information provided by schools was overwhelming:

They send home PTA stuff, but it's hard to understand. It's so jumbled that it's hard to understand what all of the information means on the flyers.—*Parent*

A number of parents were also concerned about requests for money from the schools with insufficient warning:

We didn't get anything in the mail until a week before school. I was thinking, "Well, some people, like our family, we need to save money for the all-day kindergarten program [\$230/month]." So it would be nice to know in advance.—*Parent*

However, it deserves mention that several kindergarten teachers described engaging in efforts to communicate with parents:

I send out letters to parents before school starts, inviting them to come in before school. But usually I don't hear from most of them.—*Kindergarten Teacher*

I feel pretty good about what we do to provide information about starting school to parents. We have the roundup, we send information in the mail, we give them lots of information . . . but some parents just don't seem to respond.—*Kindergarten Teacher*

Work/Work Schedules

The other primary barrier that emerged for parents was difficulty engaging in transition activities such as orientations, roundups, and parent meetings because of parents' work schedules. This issue is exacerbated for these parents, who often work hourly jobs at non-standard hours, which poses a challenge for Head Start and the schools:

I don't have time to visit or volunteer in the classroom because I work two jobs.—*Parent*

I am not really sure [what transition events were] because my husband left for Mexico, so I had to work extra, and I didn't have time to go to parent meetings.—*Parent*

Language Barriers

Language barriers and the lack of translated materials were mentioned by a number of parents:

All of the written and oral information that was presented to us was in English, so there were many of us parents that didn't understand. After the orientation, we asked the school interpreter to explain to us in Spanish, and this was great. I do speak and understand English, but the problem is that this just isn't the same culture, and for this reason sometimes I don't understand.—*Parent*

Head Start often helps to bridge this gap during the transition process:

When [parents] are frustrated with schools for not being bilingual, I will step in and translate or step in for them during the phone call for support, clarity.—*Head Start Teacher*

Other barriers mentioned by parents included having other children to take care of, high family mobility (resulting in uncertainty about which elementary school the child will attend), and chronic health problems being experienced by parents and/or children.

Summary of Findings

Results of this study suggest that Head Start plays a key role in facilitating parent involvement in the transition process. In particular, parents valued the information that helped them to navigate the logistics of transition, helped them to understand and prepare for what the kindergarten setting will be like, and provided concrete ways for parents to be involved in the transition process. Head Start staff also helped support parents and children emotionally, reducing their stress and anxiety around the transition process. Finally, Head Start staff and parents talked about the ways Head Start helped them build skills and confidence to be advocates for themselves and their children during the transition process. Transition supports provided by schools primarily involved providing information to parents, although a number of parents felt that the information was late in arriving, and not sufficiently helpful. Parents who experienced events that brought Head Start and schools together—such as having school staff attend Head Start parent meetings or having Head Start staff attend school orientation sessions with them—found these bridge-building opportunities to be extremely useful. Opportunities for children to visit the kindergartens, including one transition-specific, specialized program, were also valued by parents.

Discussion**Implications for Transition Practice**

Findings from this study underscore the importance of collaborative efforts between Head Start and other early childhood educators, families, and schools to effectively support families whose children have social-emotional challenges in the transition to kindergarten. At least in the communities involved in this study, parents reported significant transition support from the Head Start program, but little support beyond basic information from the elementary schools. The lack of significant transition supports being provided by schools, especially transition supports that reach back and start before the beginning of the school year in ways that might help to ease parent's and children's fears about schools, is consistent with prior research (Schulting et al., 2005; Early, Pianta, Taylor, & Cox, 2001). This study highlights the relevance, from the parents' perspectives, of viewing transition as a developmental process embedded in multiple social contexts. This view may be particularly important for children with emotional or behavioral challenges who are at risk for difficult transitions.

Our findings offer a greater understanding of the needs of parents and inform the development of new strategies to address the challenges involved. For example, successful transition supports that involve developing positive relationships between parents and kindergarten teachers before the beginning of the school year may be especially important for children at risk for difficult transitions. The importance of providing emotional support and encouragement, in addition to concrete information, was highlighted by these parents.

The qualitative data reflecting themes of encouragement and empowerment speak to the need for early childhood educators to prepare parents to act as their children's primary advocate within the school system. Furthermore, collaborations between Head Start and elementary schools that can help to reduce the culture shock experienced by these parents are important. Parents who are prepared by Head Start to act as advocates for their children can too easily be dissuaded in their efforts by school systems that are not responsive to their inquiries and requests. By prioritizing parent involvement in transition processes and procedures, the stress experienced by families and children during a time of significant change can be reduced.

Finally, schools need to begin to move beyond the traditional transition activities such as roundups and rigidly scheduled preschool parent-teacher conferences in order to better meet the needs of families who are at high demographic and social risk, especially when these families also include children with social-emotional challenges. Individualized and personal outreach may be far more likely to engage and support these families. Schools may need to devote more resources to providing meaningful, individualized transition supports that build relationships between families and schools, such as home visits to entering families, better pre-kindergarten orientation of parents and children, and engaging preschool teachers and early educators in facilitating parent-school relationships.

One major barrier to implementing improved transition practices at all of the elementary schools in this study was the practice of waiting to make kindergarten assignments until immediately before the start of the school year. While the reasons for this practice were clear from school administrators' perspectives (many children do not register until right before school, decisions need to balance the distribution of children across multiple classrooms, etc.), this practice was a significant barrier to a number of potentially important transition activities that should ideally occur in the spring prior to the child exiting Head Start. Head Start staff expressed a strong desire to meet with kindergarten teachers to share information about specific children; this was largely impossible given the ways schools assigned children to teachers. This practice further limits the ability to provide any individualized outreach to families or children by schools until very near the start of the year.

Another clear implication of these findings is the need for enhanced transition supports to make formal and explicit the focus on parent involvement and to view parent involvement as a mutual, reciprocal process—not just placing the responsibility on the parent to become involved. Such simplistic models of parent involvement (e.g., offering opportunities for parents to become involved and providing basic logistical information only) may be sufficient for well-resourced middle- and upper-class families with children without emotional or behavioral challenges. However, for parents struggling with poverty and whose children have emotional or behavioral issues, such a perspective significantly underestimates the barriers faced by these parents. Strikingly, parents in this study were eager for information about the transition process and highly valued the transition supports provided by Head Start. However, they also faced significant barriers to being involved in their children's transition, many of which were related to the family's poverty status. Thus the families in this study represented a group whose children may benefit the most from improved transition supports but whose demographically high-risk status makes engaging in transition supports even more difficult. Clearly, for many of these parents, involvement in the transition process must include active outreach from schools and school staff, including individualized contact prior to school starting. This study suggests that this contact should include not only information but emotional support and encouragement, provided in a way that recognizes and encourages parents as advocates for their children in the school system. This may represent a more significant practice and policy change for schools and elementary school educators than is the case for Head Start staff, who are guided by federal policy to engage and involve parents directly in the service provision process.

The current study also highlights the importance of listening to families when developing and implementing transition practices. These parents clearly articulated both the strengths of the transition supports they had received and their frustrations with a lack of transition information and support. Their experiences underscore the need for individualized supports that provide information in multiple ways (e.g., written, through orientation sessions, and via parent-to-parent information-sharing) and at multiple times and which bring families to the table in engaging in transition-planning with representatives from both preschool and

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elementary school partners. Practices that consistently demand parents to rearrange their schedules, secure child care and transportation, and bring their own translators are clearly insufficient for adequately reaching higher-risk families. Elementary schools have much to learn in this regard from Head Start programs, and strengthening the partnerships between Head Start and other early childhood educators and school systems might have the added benefit of helping schools do a better job at engaging these populations.

Limitations

The current study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the transition process by examining parents' experiences of various transition practices. While these qualitative methods were appropriate to this goal, the results should be considered exploratory and descriptive. Future studies that can examine the linkages in this conceptual model directly, using more quantitative methods, are needed to test the model empirically. It is important to note that this study was not able to measure either parent involvement or the success of these children's transitions quantitatively. Thus the extent to which these transition practices are associated with more positive child or family outcomes remains to be tested.

Further, the results are based on a relatively small sample of parents and children from two Head Start programs that engaged with a small set of elementary schools. The linkages in the model may be different in different community contexts. Many early education settings outside of Head Start do not provide the types of transition supports described here, and, indeed, the transition practices across Head Start programs vary considerably (Mangione & Speth, 1998). The model does, however, point out key aspects of transition practices that can be used by both early education and school programs to guide the development or improvement of current transition practice and policy.

Areas for Future Research, Practice, and Policy

Understanding which transition practices provided through schools and early education settings are most helpful in supporting children with emotional or behavioral challenges to transition successfully to kindergarten remains an area greatly in need of more empirical research. Interventions designed to test the efficacy of specific practices or sets of practices on parent involvement and transition success can begin to help develop this knowledge base, as can large-scale survey research such as that done by Schulting and her colleagues (2005). This research can also help to move the field toward greater understanding of the importance of transitions for at-risk families and has the potential to influence transition policies at the community level. Not surprisingly, a key issue mentioned across the board by both Head Start staff and kindergarten teachers was the concern with the lack of time and resources for more comprehensive transition practices. Clearly the burden for implementing more time-consuming (but potentially more effective) transition supports cannot rest solely with classroom and direct service staff, but

requires leadership commitment to the importance of transition practices that support relationship-building, information-sharing, and continuity across home, early childhood, and school settings. Research that can carefully document the type and intensity of transition supports parents receive from both early childhood and school settings, and which tracks children's academic and social outcomes from preschool through the kindergarten transition, will help to bolster the need for such policies. In addition, some changes in attitudes, especially within the school system, toward greater recognition of the level of effort and skill needed to successfully engage parents *on their own terms*, may be especially important for the success of at-risk children.

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