BRIDGING THE GAP: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE TRANSITION FROM PRESCHOOL TO PRIMARY SCHOOL

Carlotta Degli Esposti, & Ada Cigala

Department of Humanities, Social Sciences and Cultural Industries, University of Parma (Italy)

Abstract

The transition from preschool to primary school represents a critical event shaped by several interconnected factors. Previous research highlights the importance of teachers in this process, but also emphasizes the lack of comparative studies on the practices and collaboration between them. Our study aims to explore the perspectives of preschool and primary school teachers, focusing on their representations, emotions, concerns and practices about the preschool-to-primary school transition. A group of 284 teachers participated (130 KT, preschool teachers, and 154 PT, primary school teachers), with a mean age of 45 years, including three males. Participants responded to a questionnaire constructed ad hoc, based on previous research. The analysis revealed that *curiosity* characterizes the emotional experience for both KT and PT, but the emotion of *nostalgia* [$F_{(1,277)}$=61,21; p.<.001] and *sadness* [$F_{(1,277)}$=25,19; p.<.001] more strongly connotes the experience of KT, while *anxiety* characterizes more that of PT [$F_{(1,277)}$=28,33; p.<.001]. Main concerns involve *teaching style* and *parental disengagement*; specifically, primary school teachers worry most about parental disengagement [$F_{(1,273)}$=92,3; p.<.001], while preschool teachers focus on teaching style [$F_{(1,273)}$=7,50; p.<.007]. Most teachers reported beginning to introduce transition support activities in the second half of the final year of preschool, and multivariate analyses show that anxiety [$F_{(1,262)}$=3,157; p.<.044] is significantly lower in educational settings where transition practices start earlier. These results suggest coordinated interventions to support smoother transitions. Findings emphasize the need for tools and strategies to enhance the transition experience, benefiting both children and teachers by fostering an adaptive, high-quality educational environment.

Keywords: Teacher practices, preschool, primary school, transition to first grade, teacher perspectives.

1. Introduction

The transition from preschool to primary school represents a critical event in children's growth, shaped by several interconnected factors (Margetts & Phatudi, 2013; Nicholson, 2019). Research highlights that the success of this transition depends not only on children's individual skills but also on their interaction with external factors, including the preparation and support provided by preschool and primary school teachers (Dockett & Perry, 2013; Margetts & Phatudi, 2013). The educational environment provides children with valuable time and opportunities to express and explore their potential (Loizou, 2011). In this context, preschool and primary school teachers play a key role in shaping children's well-being and their ability to adapt to the school environment. Teachers' actions can have a significant impact both on short- and long-term outcomes (Aksoy, 2021; Lazzari et al., 2020). Moreover, the differences between the two school levels can be perceived by children as a discontinuity, making it essential to prepare them for primary school during their preschool years (Wilders & Wood, 2023), and to organize activities that support their adaptation during the first grade (Sylaj & Ramabaja, 2022).

Positive relationships between children and teachers, marked by closeness, support, and respect, enhance engagement, behavior, and academic performance (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). These relationships promote school adjustment, social skills, and academic resilience, fostering a supportive learning environment (Rimm-Kaufman, 2015). Despite the importance of this topic, studies emphasize the lack of comparative research on educational practices and systematic collaboration between teachers from the two school levels (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Peters, 2010).

2. Objectives and methods

This study aims to explore the perspective of preschool and primary school teachers.

Specifically, it aims to investigate teachers' perceptions, emotional experiences, and concerns related to this transition, as well as explore the educational practices they propose to prepare children for it. To explore the teachers' perspectives on the preschool-to-primary school transition, two tailored questionnaires were developed for each participant group, based on the existing literature on the research topic. Both questionnaires include 10 questions, of which 3 are open-ended questions aimed at investigating the teachers' representations about the transition, and 7 closed-ended questions that explore teachers' emotions, concerns, and educational practices.

A total of 284 teachers participated in completing the questionnaires (130 preschool teachers, KT, and 154 primary school teachers, PT), with a mean age of 45 years, including three males. Subsequently, the collected data were analyzed using the SPSS statistical software, with variance analysis and multivariate analysis performed.

3. Results

3.1. Teachers' representations

The five most recurring words that emerge when KT think about the transition of children to primary school are: *Growth* (mean = 0.33; SD = 0.576), *Skills and knowledge* (mean = 0.32; SD = 0.557), *Continuity* (mean = 0.28; SD = 0.502), *Collaboration* (mean = 0.26; SD = 0.536), and *Learning prerequisites* (mean = 0.24; SD = 0.702). Meanwhile, among PT, the five most frequent words are: *Welcoming* (mean = 0.36; SD = 0.483), *Collaboration* (mean = 0.26; SD = 0.645), *Growth* (mean = 0.21; SD = 0.442), *Novelty* (mean = 0.20; SD = 0.529), and *Socialization* (mean = 0.20; SD = 0.418). Futhermore, the results indicate that both KT (mean = 0.43; SD = 0.497) and PT (mean = 0.27; SD = 0.447), represent the transition as a *process that respects the individual developmental trajectories of children*. Moreover, results highlight areas of deficiency in the organization and management of the transition process. The most significant shortcoming, for both KT and PT, concerns the *collaboration between preschool and primary school* (mean KT = 0.28; SD = 0.453; mean PT = 0.15; SD = 0.358).

3.2. Transition activities

Among the transition activities proposed to children, *peer collaboration* is the most frequently suggested activity by KT (mean = 3.40; SD = 0.694), while for PT, it is the *promotion of children's processing of their experiences regarding the change* (mean = 4.40; SD = 0.732).

The results highlight that *meetings between preschool and primary school teachers* are among the most common practices for both groups, aimed at organizing transition activities (KT: mean = 3.07; SD = 0.949; PT: mean = 3.09; SD = 1.519).

Moreover, for a smooth transition, KT believe that *welcoming children* is the most important action carried out by PT (mean = 3.72; SD = 0.467), while PT identify *encouraging children to participate actively* as the most important action that KT can perform (mean = 3.71; SD = 0.496).

3.3. Emotional experiences

Results underline that *curiosity* is the predominant emotional experience among both KT (mean = 2.96; SD = 0.820) and PT (mean = 3.37; SD = 0.704). On the other hand, *anxiety* is the least frequent emotion among KT (mean = 1.37; SD = 1.482), while *sadness* is the least frequent emotion among PT (mean = 1.34; SD = 0.607).

Multivariate analyses highlight that *anxiety* [$F(1,262) = 3.157$; $p < .044$] is more pronounced when transition activities start in the second half of the last year of preschool, with a further increase in the first half of the first year of primary school.

3.4. Concerns

The results show that KT are more concerned about *teaching style* and the *relationship with children* (mean = 2.59; SD = 0.655). On the other hand, PT express greater concern about *parents' lack of interest* in the children's school life (mean = 2.84; SD = 0.892).

Multivariate analyses show that a delay in the start of transition activities is associated with an increase in concerns related to children's [$F(1,262) = 3.033$; $p < .050$] and parents' [$F(1,262) = 3.525$; $p < .031$] lack of interest.

4. Discussion

The data emerging from the research highlight the importance of a gradual approach, starting from the very first moments of transition-supporting activities. A process that takes this aspect into

account could prove to be of fundamental value, both for teachers and for children, contributing to a more harmonious and conscious transition (Cronin et al., 2022).

In particular, the results could have a significant impact on teacher training, making their representations of the transition process more informed. By comparing the experiences of teachers from different schools, it will be possible to highlight similarities and differences in the processes implemented, allowing for a deeper reflection on the methods and strategies used (Marcineková et al., 2020). In this context, the research opens the possibility of designing effective teaching strategies and tools to facilitate an adaptive transition, capable of improving not only the quality of education but also the overall well-being of both children and teachers.

Finally, the data collected suggest the possibility of initiating coordinated interventions among all stakeholders, in order to make the transition process more gradual and structured, with tangible benefits for all parties involved.

References

Aksoy, P. (2021). A classroom-based training program involving preschool children for developing prerequisite learning skills and social skills: ready to learn. *Adiyaman Univesity Journal of Educational Sciences*, *11*(2), 107-124. https://doi.org/10.17984/adyuebd.709921

Cronin, L. P., Kervin, L., & Mantei, J. (2022). Transition to school: Children's perspectives of the literacy experiences on offer as they move from pre-school to the first year of formal schooling. *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, *45*(1), 103-121. https://doi.org/10.1007/s44020-022-00008-0

Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2004). Starting School: Perspectives of Australian Children, Parents and Educators. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, *2*(2), 171-189. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X04042976

Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2013). Trends and tensions: Australian and international research about starting school. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, *21*(2–3), 163-177. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2013.832943

Lazzari, A., Balduzzi, L., Van Laere, K., Boudry, C., Rezek, M., & Prodger, A. (2020). Sustaining warm and inclusive transitions across the early years: Insights from the START project. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *28*(1), 43-57. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2020.1707361

Loizou, E. (2011). Empowering aspects of transition from kindergarten to first grade through children's voices. *Early Years*, *31*(1), 43-55. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2010.515943

Marcineková, T., Borbélyová, D., & Tirpáková, A. (2020). Optimization of children's transition from preschool and family environment to the first grade of primary school in Slovakia by implementation of an adaptation programme. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *119*, 105483. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105483

Margetts, K., & Phatudi, N. C. (2013). Transition of children from preschool and home contexts to grade 1 in two township primary schools in South Africa. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *21*(1), 39-52. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2012.760341

Nicholson, P. (2019). Play-based pedagogy under threat? A small-scale study of teachers' and pupils' perceptions of pedagogical discontinuity in the transition to primary school. *Education 3-13*, *47*(4), 450-461. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2018.1496124

Peters, S. A. (2010). *Literature review: Transition from early childhood education to school: report commissioned by Ministry of Education*. Retrieved November, 2013, from https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/ECE/98894

Pianta, R. C., & Stuhlman, M. W. (2004). Teacher-Child Relationships and Children's Success in the First Years of School. *School Psychology Review*, *33*(3), 444-458. https://doi.org/10.1080/02796015.2004.12086261

Rimm-Kaufman, S. (2015). Improving students' relationships with teachers. Retrieved March 9, 2015, from https://www.apa.org/education-career/k12/relationships

Sylaj, V., & Ramabaja, A. H. (2022). Exploring Factors in the Adaptation of the First Grade Student: Transition from Preschool to First Grade Primary School. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, *13*(3), 56-78.

Wilders, C., & Wood, E. (2023). 'If I play I won't learn': Children's perceptions and experiences of transition and school readiness from Maternelle to Year 1. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 1476718X2211454. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X221145460