

CHAPTER 7

**SYNTHESIS AND SIGNIFICANCE IMPLICATIONS FOR
THEORY, POLICY AND FUTURE RESEARCH ON
CHILD TRANSITIONS**

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This research presented data on the transition of children from preschool and home contexts into the first grade of primary school. The methods of inquiry included the analysis of pertinent government documents together with semi-structured interviews with education officials, development activists in non-governmental organisations and school principals and teachers on their understanding of transition policies. School and home transition strategies were documented, drawing on case study interviews with school principals, teachers, parents and children. Children's adjustment was measured by both teachers and parents using the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS). The diverse perspectives and strategies identified by different stakeholders in transitions were described and specific findings posited on the transition experiences of children in a developing country context.

The context in which the transitions take place is significant in determining how such migration impacts on those who experience this process. In the existing literature, most children in Western contexts had some form of preschool experience prior to starting school. In the context of this study, as already explained, children come from both preschools and home environments (see Chapter One).

The findings from this study are now described and interpreted against theory, and the implications drawn for policy and practice, and indicative lines of further inquiry are presented.

The findings are aligned to the following research questions which framed the study undertaken.

- What are the official policy provisions for learner transitions from preschool to Grade 1 in South Africa?
- To what extent is there alignment or discrepancy between government policy for transition and the experiences of schools with respect to transition strategies for Grade 1 learners?
- What are the transition strategies deployed by the schools and home for Grade 1 learners?
- Is there the alignment of Grade R and Grade 1 curricula? What is the understanding of schools of the Grade R curriculum as a continuum of practices, knowledge and skills in Grade 1?
- How do teachers, parents and children understand and articulate transition strategies encountered by Grade 1 learners?
- What is the level/degree of adjustment shown by children as they enter Grade 1?

This chapter concludes with a separate section or postscript offering reflections on methodological learning that resulted from this intensely personal research experience.

7.2 POLICY PROVISION AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF TRANSITION POLICY AMONG STAKEHOLDERS: ALIGNMENT OR DISCREPANCY

This study interrogated policy documents to find if transition policies are being addressed and the extent to which they are being integrated in schools. The questions that framed the data collection were:

- What are the official policy provisions for learner transitions from preschool to Grade 1 in South Africa?
- To what extent is there alignment or discrepancy between government policy for transition and the experiences of schools with respect to transition strategies for Grade 1 learners?

The study revealed that in South Africa, despite policy positions addressing transitions being available (White Paper No. 5 on ECD, 2001a; RNCS, 2002), they do not specify exactly how transitions should be planned and implemented. There appears to be a lack of concrete mechanisms by which these policies are filtered down to practitioners who have to apply them. Furthermore, it appears the school staff themselves are unaware of policies governing their working lives, and the policies are not given prominence they deserve, and that implementation and monitoring systems are not well established.

When asked about who is supposed to inform schools about new policies, the DOE official delineated the responsibility according to the hierarchical order of governance. The responsibility of implementation accordingly was accorded to the district offices. The DOE official assumed the responsibility for distributing policies to schools, but whether they were used or not she could not confirm. The directorate in which she was attached was responsible for the development of policy and guidelines for ECD and the coordination and support of ECD centres and personnel. Her role within this directorate was to ensure the implementation of White Paper No. 5 on ECD.

Darling-Hammond (1998) argued that for policies to be effective they should not only be distributed, but should be discussed and explained fully with the end-users so that the aim of the policymaker is realised. McLaughlin supports this view by maintaining that “policy depends on how policy is interpreted and transformed at each point in the process and finally on the response of the individual at the end of the line” (1998:72). The schools in this study indicated their lack of awareness of transition policies and that training in the RNCS was not sufficient for them to do the work required. In most

cases the schools devised their own strategies suitable to deal with own context which were not derived from the national policies.

Sehoole (2001), following Darling-Hammond, expounded reasons that lead to policy failure and amongst them is that policy makers in a developing country like South Africa do not embark on "policy literacy" to make certain that policies are understood among practitioners. In order for policy to take effect, policy makers must "build capacity for and commitment to the work required, rather than assuming that edict alone will produce new practice" (Darling-Hammond, 1998:647). Policies left to the devices of people may not even take off as initially intended, but may be reinvented in a myriad of unforeseen and even harmful ways by end-users working under very specific local conditions.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), expounds four layers of influence on the developing individual. The third layer, the exosystem, consists mainly of policies which influence how transition should be experienced. In the case of this study, policies do exist, but their influence is very minimal if at all felt. The exosystem layer which is important in laying rules on how transition should be experienced is not effective in terms of influence – hence the lack of knowledge and awareness of policies by teachers. It is recommended that educational 'policy literacy' becomes a priority in South Africa to ensure policy enactment.

- The understanding of Grade R

Issues around the purpose of Grade R came to the fore in the course of this study. This became an area of contention between the government and stakeholders. The DOE official in addressing this issue expressed her directorate's dilemma in as far as the placement of the Grade R classes was concerned. Were they better off in preschools or attached to primary schools? If left in preschools, who was going to monitor their progress as preschools fell outside the governance structure of the government? Most of these classes (subsidised by the government) are now attached to primary schools. The NGO officials did not support this stance by the government

as they felt that their scope of influence was being eroded with the shifting of Grade R to primary schools. Despite this they lauded the establishment of Grade R as a positive step towards addressing problems brought about by lack of readiness to learn.

7.3 TRANSITION STRATEGIES DEPLOYED BY SCHOOLS IN ADDRESSING TRANSITION AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH GRADE R

The study enquired about transition strategies used by schools and whether these showed any continuum between what they were practicing and what transpired in preschools. The questions which were instrumental in data collection were, and guided this sub-section on schools' transition strategies:

- What are the transition strategies deployed by the schools and home for Grade 1 learners?
- Is there the alignment of Grade R and Grade 1 curricula? What is the understanding of schools of the Grade R curriculum as a continuum of practices, knowledge and skills in Grade 1?
- How do teachers, parents and children understand and articulate transition strategies encountered by Grade 1 learners?

Given that schools were seemingly unaware of government policies associated with school transition, which according to White paper No. 5 on ECD of 2001 is supposed to be on a continuum with the Grade 1 curriculum, this study found that schools developed their own transition strategies. These varied considerably according to what was perceived as important in their own context, and depending on the nature of the relationship between the school and the preschool.

Province A teachers perceived insignificant differences between preschool children and home-school children when they entered formal schooling. Province B teachers, on the other hand, lauded the considerable impact the preschools had on children entering formal education. They viewed the difference between preschooled and

home children as significant and that it impacted on the manner in which children make adjustments and learn in Grade 1.

The difference in the perception of teachers in the two provinces as expressed in the interviews may have resulted from the differential treatment of ECD in the two different governments of these provinces.

ECD in Province A for urban black South Africans was largely in the hands of NGOs and community structures. That is, the apartheid government completely neglected ECD in these areas. Moreover, the education of ECD teachers/practitioners was not regulated so that anyone without prescribed qualifications could take charge of an educare centre. A large number of educare centres still exists outside the government's regulatory framework. The purpose of these centres is merely custodial and not educative.

ECD in Province B initially developed along the same lines as in Province A. But in the early 1980s the then homeland government, where Province B is presently located, established a new regulatory framework so that ECD was controlled by this rural-based government. This meant that the training of teachers/practitioners and the subsidisation of these ECD centres were the responsibility of the homeland government. Teachers/practitioners were also paid by the government. Some preschools in the Province B are still being subsidised by the government, and thus far it is still the only province which has upheld this system of governance and control. However, not all preschools are part of this practice as they are not within the subsidy framework of the government. The practice in these subsidised preschools seems to have been replicated and had significant influences on the smaller and unsubsidised ones.

Despite these differences in the perceptions of teachers in the two provinces, they agreed that transition programmes are imperative to help the child adjust in a school environment for successful learning to take place. Margetts supports transition

programmes as dealing with impacts associated with transition thus minimising the adjustments required for success in the first year of schooling (Margetts, 2002).

The most important transition strategies identified by the practitioners in the two provinces were:

- In-house strategies such as bringing children to school at the end of their preschool education or the beginning of the year in which they start school as an important way in which to familiarise children with the new environment.
- Visiting preschools at the end of the year which acknowledges that a relationship with preschools is a necessity and has to be nurtured.
- Emphasising the importance of parental support which acknowledges the importance of the role played by parents in their children's education.

The above strategies are highlighted in the transition literature as amongst the most efficient in settling children in a school (Taal, 2000; Dockett and Perry, 2001 and Cleave *et al*, 1982)

Teachers indicated that they developed their own transition strategies in the absence of established school strategies. Some of these strategies such as orientation of both parents and children are similar to what has been espoused by literature. Most of the transition strategies gleaned from literature involved the whole school and not just teachers involved with the reception of Grade 1 children (Corsaro and Molinari, 2005). In this study principals were said not to be involved in the day-to-day experiences of transitions by children. Teachers consulted with colleagues to help deal with difficult cases of adjustments.

While schools do visit preschools at the end of the year prior to children's commencing school, other contact is very limited. The contact between preschools

and primary schools regarding the curriculum and philosophies underpinning teaching, which is highlighted and promoted by government policies (White paper No.5 on ECD, 2001) is almost non-existent. Schools are not aware of what is being done in preschools, nor are they aware of the assumed continuity between the preschool and primary school. The literature (Yeboah, 2002); Schweinkart and Weikart, 1998) concur with the findings of the study when they allude to the fact that the lack of cohesion between the preschool and primary school lie in the historical differences between the two institutions. The Ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner expounds and highlights the importance of interrelationships between different settings, and most especially between the preschool and the primary school for smooth transitions to occur (Dunlop and Fabian, 2002). However this relationship seem not to be possible all the time.

This is not a problem experienced only by schools where the study was conducted but was noted by Cleave *et al.* (1982:110) in relation to British schools:

“Reception teachers have no more than a vague idea which preschool new entrants have attended, even when there is a nursery unit attached to their own school. We found that some of our sample schools had absolutely no contact with any preschool provision in their area, nor did they want to.“

Similarly, a more recent study in Iceland declared that teachers failed to understand that Grade R and Grade 1 were on a continuum rather than discrete experiences and recommended that contact between teachers of Grade R and Grade 1 needed to be strengthened (ELRU, 2004:7).

The primary school principals in this study accorded very little significance to preschools – only one principal with Grade R as part of her establishment spoke highly of the preschool phase as a critical foundation for formal education. This attitude was also echoed by children when they associated preschools with eating and sleeping and primary schools with serious work such as reading and writing.

Of notable importance also is the debilitating effect poverty had on the adjustment of children. Teachers explained that poverty had a tendency of undermining the good work they delivered in response to the adjustment needs of children. This is an important area that needs attention and further study to determine the impact of poverty on learning and teaching.

Teachers in the two provinces noticed the significant role of preschools for the transition of children to school. The extent to which this influence was felt varied from one province to another. The teachers in Province/school B were vociferous in according the importance of preschools on the adjustment of the child. The Province/school A teachers on the other hand did not perceive preschools as highly important on the adjustment of children. The difference in the ECE history of the two provinces might be contributing towards the difference in perspectives in as far as the influence and impact of preschools have on the child. The preschools within the context whereby this study was conducted are mainly home-based centres which are poorly resourced, with children crowded in small classrooms which barely have enough space to move around.

Most of the home-based preschools are characterised by ill-trained teachers, lack of resources and ill-motivated teachers (sometimes these teachers can go for months without a salary). These settings as explained above can have detrimental effect on the child's preparedness for formal schooling. Despite the poor conditions of the preschools, children from these centres have shown more adaptation skills for school than home children.

The importance of supporting children having difficulty adjusting to school is noted by Raban (2001), who suggests that children growing up in disadvantaged or non-supportive settings can adjust well to the demands of school and become successful with thorough intervention by the teacher. Despite the fact that some children came from home or attended under resourced preschools, a teacher in Province /school B indicated that it is the amount of effort put into integrating children into the classroom

that pays off. This became evident in a classroom in Province /school B whereby the teacher dedicated more time to those struggling with settling in. At the end of my stay at the school, there was very insignificant difference between those coming from preschool and those coming from home.

Schools are aware that it is critical for them to establish links with preschools. The Province B/ school B indicated that such a relationship does exist between itself and the preschool, even if it does not include curriculum matters. The ecological theory highlights the importance of relationship between the children's immediate settings in influencing how transition should be made. Recognising the importance of relationships and even entering into the relationships is an important step towards a joint influence in how transition is being negotiated.

7.4 PARENTAL PARTICIPATION IN AND CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARDS TRANSITIONS

In this study, parental participation and their strategies in settling children in school was explored. The following questions were key in gaining access to the data:

- What are the transition strategies deployed by home for Grade 1 learners?
- How do parents understand and articulate transition strategies encountered by Grade 1 learners?

The children's transitions were confirmed as being important by government and NGO officials, teachers and the children themselves. Indeed, the literature on transitions also acknowledges parental contributions are crucial to the children's smooth transition to school (Clarke & Sharpe, 2003; Corsaro & Molinari, 2005; Griebel & Niesel, 2002) In the study by Cleave *et al*, (1982) schools emphasised the importance of parents in the education of their children and regarded the information obtained from parents as more important than the profiles provided from preschools. Teachers also commended the participation of parents as helpful in the adjustment of children.

Parents in the present study felt that it was their responsibility to prepare their children for school even though some of these children had attended preschool. This preparation mainly emphasised teaching children academic skills as parents feel these skills are important in adjusting and learning in the classroom. Social and emotional skills were rarely mentioned except when parents were probed. This is not uncommon as studies by Clarke and Sharpe (2003) on Singaporean children's transitions to school revealed the same concern amongst parents, viz. that academic skills were important for children going to school for the first time. While less of a focus for parents, socio-emotional and behavioural skills have been found to be more important in helping the child settle in a class than academic skills (Gresham & Elliott, 1990).

Suggestions have been made that the low socio-economic background of parents undermines parenting and does not always cater for the children's needs (Senosi, 2004; Moletsane, 2004). In contrast and despite their low socio-economic status, parents in this study felt the need to help their children with their schooling. The role of family members was also noted by children who singled out parents and older siblings as being responsible for familiarising them with the school context. The reason may be that since they are always in contact with children they could more easily recall the latest interaction with their parents than with their teachers about what to expect on entrance to the school.

Despite the family's low socio-economic standing, parents have shown keenness to support their children during their transition to school. In studies conducted the views of children about primary schools was said to have largely been influenced by the views of parents or older siblings (Clarke and Sharpe, 2003). Ramey and Ramey (1998) reported that parents of Head Start a project involved with primary school children from disadvantaged backgrounds, despite their poor background participated in school activities and even volunteered in their children's schools. This implies that if

parents are given support, they tend to be supportive to their children, despite the fact that they come from poor backgrounds.

7.5 THE TRANSITION EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN

Children were interviewed on their experiences in as far as transition is concerned. The researcher wanted to find out about children's experiences in preschool and how these experiences are valued as important to what is being done in Grade 1. The key question which framed this section of the study was:

- How do **children** understand and articulate transition?

Recognising children's voices is to acknowledge their influence in shaping how transitions are being made. The ecological theory states that the process of transition is bi-directional and reciprocal (Mayer, 2004) The child influences and at the same time is influenced by the settings in which he/she finds him/herself. To view transition as though it is happening on the child only is to deny the child the right of being in a reciprocal process.

Children in the study proclaimed their happiness about leaving preschools. They viewed preschools as places of play and eating and that what they acquired was not through teaching but as a result of their own effort. This is not erratic as children in the transition literature also viewed schools as places where learning was to take place and that no learning took place at the preschools (Corsaro and Molinari, 2000 cited in Einarsdóttir, 2003). In the current study, this view most likely reflects the poor physical environments of the preschools and community attitudes. Schools were seen as places where children's future would be decided upon. School could eventually help children earn good money so that they could build houses and buy cars for their parents.

7.6 CHILDREN'S LEVEL OF ADJUSTMENT AS MEASURED BY THE SSRS

The level of children's ability to adjust to formal schooling was measured by using the SSRS. The findings of this rating scale will be discussed under the various sub-domains. While the small sample sizes for each province were small and findings cannot be assumed to be representative of the school populations from which they were drawn, some trends require attention.

- Social Skills Ratings

The ratings in both provinces indicated that preschooled children received higher total social skills scores than home children. Girls tended to have higher scores than boys. There was less variation noted between Province A children's total scores and Province B's total scores. There were more similarities and consistencies with total scores for preschooled children which were higher than for home children across the provinces. These findings reflect those of Margetts (2002) who found that children cared for at home and who did not attend child care or preschool services in the year before school were more likely to have difficulties adjusting to school. Parent ratings across the provinces tended to be higher than the teachers'. The difference may be attributed to contextual factors including expectations between the home and the school. The school functions within a more structured framework. The home, on the other hand, has no defined programme to follow. Entwistle and Alexander (1998) attribute the difference between the teacher and the parent ratings to children at home being rated in terms of how well they perform against own record, whereas at school they are rated to how well they perform against others.

In comparing preschooled children with home children, results suggest that preschooled children have better social skills that enable them to adapt in a new environment. Preschooled children were rated higher than home children by both parents and teachers.

- Problem Behaviours

Preschooled children appeared to have fewer teacher-rated problem behaviours than home children. In comparing teacher and parent ratings for all children, teachers generally rated children with fewer problem behaviours than parents. This contrasted with the ratings for social skills where parents typically rated children with higher levels of social skills at home. As with social skills, children's behaviour ratings are likely to be context dependent. There was less discrepancy between teacher and parent ratings for children in Province A and teachers in Province B reported lower levels of problem behaviours at school than teachers in Province A. Gender differences could not be clearly identified. The literature studied expounds different views mentioned by children that they deem important to know before going to formal school. One of the things mentioned by children in a Starting School Research Project conducted by Dockett and Perry (2002b) was that school rules are very important to know for good adjustment to school. Children have therefore elevated school rules above all else – hence their good behaviour in school as compared to the home.

- Academic Competence

In both provinces, preschooled children generally received higher ratings for academic competence than home children. Overall, children in Province A were rated higher than children in Province B. Results for Province A indicated that children were rated in the middle 40% to top 10% of the class while children in Province B were mainly in the middle 40% to lower 10% of the class. There was also less discrepancy in the academic competence of children in Province A compared with children in Province B.

Children in Province B who were rated with low levels of social skills had low levels of problem behaviour (good adjustment) and low levels of academic competence (children no. 10 and 11). This needs further study for investigation to find out what causes this low level of adjustment especially in connection with the social skills and the academic competence. Is this reflective of the home or school context?

Differences in children's adjustment may be a result of historical differences in ECD provision in the two provinces as explained in Chapter one and the diverse nature of the communities where these schools are situated which makes it difficult for all children to follow the language of instruction, as some children come from households where the language of instruction is not the home language. It was difficult to make the same assessment in regard to boys' as against girls' performance as the scores were not conclusive. The same conclusion was reached by Margetts (2002) who noted that gender predicted mainly social and behavioural skills but not academic performance.

Given some of the findings of the SSRS it can be recommended that children with lower levels of social skills and higher levels of problem behaviour be identified and strategies be implemented to support these children. Teachers should be equipped with knowledge and skills to settle in children and should not be left to their own devices. Given the high levels of academic and social skills ratings of preschool children, the significance of enrolling children in preschools prior to starting school should be emphasised and supported and monitored by the government to ensure that policies supporting the implementation of Grade R are carried out. The Committee for Economic Development (2006) in its investigation of the effects of quality preschool education reported that "preschool programs for all children is a cost effective investment that pays dividends for years to come and will ensure our states' and our nations' future economic productivity" (ix). The above supports preschool education as a weapon to address all ills related to early dropout, dependency on social welfare grant and inability to achieve acceptable academic performance.

That preschool children made better adjustments than home children-this suggests that preschools had an influence in the way in which children made adjustments in primary schools. Attention should therefore be focussed towards improving and promoting preschool provision in order to harvest its benefits, such as good adjustment to schooling.

7.7 THE CONTRIBUTION OF THIS STUDY TO NEW KNOWLEDGE ON TRANSITIONS

The study makes a modest contribution to understandings and conceptions of school transitions of children in a developing country context. Pulled together, these are the key findings of this research:

The critical and key finding of this study is that policies formulated with good intention of smoothing to-school transitions are not known or familiar to the final interpreters of those policies. Teachers and school principals were not aware of the policies that impact on children's transitions, nor were they aware of the intended continuity between preschool and primary school. Policy documents exist on transitions but are not known by those who have to use them. If policies are to be effective, policy literacy should be embarked upon for the users and strategies for informing key persons about the policies and for implementing and monitoring them should be developed to ensure that policy takes effect where it is supposed to. School in-house transitions strategies are also not informed by government policies but instead by contingent needs as they arise in the school context. This became apparent due to lack of knowledge of the policies by the users. The RNCS training also came under the spotlight. The training according to teachers was not sufficiently intensive to make a difference to what they are supposed to do. Monitoring system needs to be put in place to identify those teachers incapable of implementing the new curriculum and providing them with necessary help to elevate their proficiency to be on the acceptable level.

Further findings are noted below:

- There were noticeable difference in perspectives held by the stakeholders on their understanding of transition. Teachers felt that they were in most cases left to their own devices to help children settle in the classroom. They felt that the principal should be key in helping them together with the Department of

Education, particularly with children with adjustment difficulties. The National Department of Education in turn laid the responsibility of policy implementation at the doorstep of the provinces, and that the facilitation of transition was therefore the provincial responsibility. Schools on the other hand were not aware of the services they were supposed to get from the district offices, hence they did not request for any help. Since none of the stakeholders wanted to take responsibility for facilitating transitions, it became the responsibility of the schools, especially Grade 1 teachers to settle in children in their new environment.

- According to the results of the SSRS it was noted that the preschool had significantly higher impact on formal education. This experience was almost equal with the scores in both Province A and B clearly citing preschool as having significant influence on the adjustment of children. Both provinces rated preschool children as having superior social skills and academic competence as compared to the home children. The SSRS instrument confirmed that preschool children have better social and adaptive behaviours skills than children who did not go to preschool. This rating scale showed that preschool children were more adept in adjustment in the class and that they had an advantage over the home children.
- Government officials, principals, teachers and parents all agreed that the participation of each of these key players in children's transitions is important for the subsequent learning experiences of the child. All singled out the importance of parental involvement in the success of transitions. This was also articulated by children during an interview when they claimed that parents and siblings were the first people to tell them about schooling.
- Teachers claimed that their efforts to help children adjust to the classroom were nullified and compromised by poverty. The impact of poverty, which is very high, is detrimental to educational interventions of teachers. The White Paper

No.5 on ECD with its priority on the implementation of Grade R, was also aimed at targeting children from poor backgrounds so that they started school ready to learn. The White Paper No.5 also recognised the debilitating nature of poverty in that it undermined any productive learning. Moletsane (2004) in her study of township high school teenage boys by using the Roscharch scale acknowledged the negative effect poverty had on parenting and learning and this is manifested in the parents apparent lack of interest in their children's education.

- Schools were perceived by children as places that can lead to an affluent type of life. This view, which was echoed by a large number of children, is an extension of the school as the place of equipping one with knowledge and skills. Going to school held hope for children as an escape route out of poverty. Poverty was seen to be perpetuated by lack of schooling-thus going to school held a promising future for the children.

7.8 THE THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY

The theoretical framework expounded earlier (Chapter Three) was critical in how this study understood transitions. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory views a child as a situated being who impacts and is impacted upon by various factors that shape their development. This approach was evident in the responses of the interviewees when they declared that transitions are not shaped by a single source, but a combination of factors was responsible in how children experience and traverse this as positive or negative. Bronfenbrenner (1979) agrees that the context in which transitions take place is imperative in how the child experiences the process. This perception of transitions together with their preparations was to some degree what underlined the understanding of the key players in transition. Without good preparations nothing good will come out of the transition process. Policy implementation, when ignoring "policy literacy" of those who have to implement

policies, is in contradiction to the ecological theory which emphasises the importance of policies on how transition should be experienced.

Government and NGO officials, principals and schoolteachers have alluded to the importance of the collective effort by all those concerned with the well-being of the child in making transitions successful. Instead of viewing transition as a well-defined process they acknowledge the difficulty of the process.

Children are shaped and understood within their own context-and this makes them different from other children. This notion of a globalised childhood was discounted in this study and a narrower and more contextual understanding of the child was adopted. Transition as a process was understood within the context in which this study took place and within the understanding of childhood held by those who help the child in making those transitions.

Transitions are conceptualised as life markers or rites of passage. A rite of passage marks a turning point in one's life and thus it affects the socio-emotional development of an individual.

7.9 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Transitions are not an event but a process. Transitions start long before the child starts schooling. Programmes from as early as when the child starts preschool should promote the eventual entrance of a child into a primary school. As noted by Glazier (2001), transition programmes should operate over a longer time, i.e. they may operate over a term, or even throughout the first year for them to be effective. Parents who visited the schools on regular basis felt quite confident that their children were in good hands. According to research (Richardson, 1997) the parents' initial contact with the school and their cooperation and involvement has implications for the child's long-term educational progress.

Teachers/practitioners should also be made familiar with curriculum guidelines of their own phase and the ones lower than what they teach to ensure that they have an impact into how adjustments are made in class. Given the lack of official curriculum and programmes to be followed for the pre-Grade R children it therefore becomes even more imperative that schools establish their own in-house strategies to help children settle in. Since schools are the ones handling the child on his/her entry to school, they therefore have to take the initiative of establishing transition programs rather than wait for the government to do so.

The literature recognises the importance of parental support in transitions (Ramey & Ramey, 1998; Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Korkatsch-Groszko, 1998). Transition programmes would not be complete if they left out the parents. Consultation with the parents and working together with them should be uppermost in transition programmes. Dockett and Perry (2001:32) say in support of involving parents in their children's transitions, that "families know their children well and can provide a great deal of valuable input to transition programs". They further state that "the power relations encountered as families and schools interact are potent forces and need to be acknowledged", and that "significant changes need to be made in order for such power relationships to move towards equality" (Dockett & Perry, 2001:32). Children are able to change their attitudes if they realise that their parents contribute to and are accepted by the school. A relationship of trust should be established between the school and parents before the parents are able to share their needs and expectations with the school. An unwelcoming school environment will drive parents away, and it will have negative consequences for the adaptation of children. It is therefore important for schools to build on the positive attitude by parents for children's learning and utilise it for the benefit of children.

Children's relationships with others are central to children's early experiences at school. "Warm and supportive relationships with teachers can provide children with protective factors that buffer them from negative effects of early experiences" (Cory, 2001:1). Creating a secure and warm classroom will make children less anxious

about starting school and more trusting of the teacher and the school. Establishing relationships with peers in the classroom assures the child of stability and a less threatening and hostile environment. Children are said to thrive in a classroom if they have friends. This is an important point for the teacher to note and promote in the class. The province B teacher explained that she seated the preschooled children with the home children, and that this produced good results as children learn from one another. Children should be made to feel as comfortable as possible for any learning to take place. If it means seating children with friends this should be pursued by all means, as the Province B indicated.

Children should be familiarised with the new setting by deliberate intervention in a form of a programme designed towards addressing such insecurity. A programme needs to be developed in conjunction with parents and other interested and concerned key players in transitions that will address key skills deemed important in adjusting to a Grade 1 class. Parents being the first educators of children possess valuable knowledge regarding their children which can be useful to schools (Pianta & Cox, 1999; Dockett & Perry, 2001).

Opportunities which define preschool learning should be extended to the first year of formal learning. Teaching and learning in Grade 1 become too formal too quickly so that children are left behind pining to be still in a position of making own decision with regard to their learning. An NGO member had this to say regarding the Grade 1 curriculum; “Why is there a formal approach to the foundation phase? Why shouldn’t it be de-formalised so that one is moving up in this way because if you think the development theory, nothing says that children should start learning at a formal way at the age of five or six”. Teachers also indicated that children had difficulty in severing ties with the past. Children still wanted to sleep during the day and they wanted to work if they felt up to it. Unfortunately the Grade 1 programme insists on the participation of all children if they are to complete the year successfully. Those children still trapped in the old ways of doing things are likely to fail, as the system does not recognise the learning methods they bring with them. More attention should

be focussed on creating continuity between the preschool and Grade 1. There should be mechanisms put in place to promote collaboration between the two classes even if they are not in the same environment.

The establishment of Grade R in 2001 signalled the new era in South Africa whereby the foundations of education were recognised and acknowledged as important in the child's school career (DOE, 2001a). However it appears that the Grade R itself has not lived up to its promises, simply because the aspirations expounded by the policy on children transiting to Grade 1 were not communicated to the policy implementers. Policy and practice should be implemented, whereby the teachers in both Grade R and Grade 1 are aware of what is happening in each other's class so that continuity in learning and teaching is maintained and that children do not experience an abrupt detachment from the previous setting as they enter formal schooling.

This study has shown significant benefits of preschool attendance for children starting school. To make their starting school experience even more worthwhile, a comprehensive transition program may well contribute to children's adjustment to school. It is recommended that preschool programs or attendance in Grade R are made available to all children prior to commencing Grade 1.

7.10 LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Limitations of this study which curtailed the results of the study to be generalised are noted. One significant limitation was the small number of the case study involving children. The results from this case study could not be generalised to similar situations. To counteract this, a bigger and varied case study should be employed that will enable the researcher to make a generalised conclusions that will be significant to contexts other than the one for the study.

A bigger and a longitudinal study of transitions from Grade 1 to at least Grade 3 is an important task for further research if the sustainability of preschool or home effects

are to be understood over time in the unequal and impoverished contexts of countries like South Africa. How sustainable are in-school interventions that seek to adjust children to formal schooling?

A range of strategies used by teachers and their impact on school adjustments should be studied. The strategies employed to support different cohort of children and parents should be recorded. If children persistently experience difficulties in adjustments despite the fact that different strategies were employed to support their adjustments-reasons should be sought for why the problem persists.

SSRS should be applied at the beginning of the year in which children start with formal education and at the end of the year together with the student scale (rating scale used by the learner to rate his/her adjustment ability). In my study only the parent and the teacher rating scales were used to measure children's social and adaptive behavioural skills related to good adjustment in class. This should be made in order to identify children with adjustment difficulties and to support such children. At the end of the year the rating scale should be administered in order to find out if difficulties have been reduced or eliminated. The learner rating scale should be introduced at the end of the year to see whether children notice any difference in their adjustment abilities.

The SSRS being a normative rating scale for the American society, but the same cannot be ascertained for the South Africa society. A similar tool developed for the South African context could make the results far more reliable and valid than they are at the present moment. To make the rating scale even more user friendly it can be translated into different South African languages. This would limit the number of visits made by the administrator to the homes – as these visits might also lead to the administrator 'imposing her own will upon the parents' thus rendering the results even more unreliable.

Adjustment takes place over time and may not be realised within a short space of time – hence longitudinal studies are needed to trace any changes in the adjustment of children and the reasons for the changes.

7.11 CONCLUSION

Much has been written on preschool to school transitions of children in developed contexts, but very little on those in developing contexts. Factors that impact on this process differ according to the context in which the transitions take place. This study represents an important shift in the focus of research by shedding preliminary light on children’s social adjustment and academic learning in a primary school. However, more needs to be done by way of research. For example, what kinds of teachers can best help the child’s adjustments, transitions and learning in resource-deprived third world classroom conditions? The transition of children should translate into economic and social benefits for the country. It has to be addressed in a concerted effort by all stakeholders with the government taking the lead. Research has lauded the importance of early childhood education for the development of the economy and in solving the social ills experienced by adults without a good schooling foundation (Committee for Economic Development ‘CED’, 2006). The CED (2006), commissioned by the USA Federal government to study the effects of quality preschool education, reported that “getting it right from the beginning would leverage all other educational investments”. A child who experiences good beginnings will not cost the country financially in terms of repetition and remediation and social support benefits as an adult. This is a challenge to all stakeholders in the children’s transitions to make sure that the child’s transition into Grade 1 is a positive and worthwhile experience and that it eliminates all other consequent results of ill-adjustments.

POSTSCRIPT: METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

My research experience was filled with exciting and interesting moments, but also low and sad moments. While I am satisfied that the study broadly followed the path outlined in the research design, there were instances where adaptations had to be made to make the study compatible with the contexts in which it was carried out.

When I started with the research I had a full schedule with specific timelines in place. I had well-prepared research questions and was aware of the fact that variables exist that might throw my schedule off track. What I was oblivious to, was the effects of poverty on the morale of teachers and parents. Poverty can undermine the good work done at school; teachers blamed children's lack of learning skills on poverty. I had to adapt my interview schedule to accommodate poverty as an important variable that was likely to have an impact on the findings.

I often found, while conducting my research that some subtle variables came to the fore that threatened to destabilise my study if not heeded. I took it for granted that teachers, having undergone three to four-years of training, would be aware of the education political and policy landscapes that governed their work. This perception was challenged and refuted a number of times as I interacted with teachers in their classrooms and through the interview sessions.

One other thing that struck me as I started with data collection was that all the principals and teachers involved in this study claimed that it was the first time that they were ever involved in a research project. They were quite apprehensive about that-and were not certain about their abilities to carry out the assessment of children using the rating scale. This was the teachers' first time using a measurement scale other than the curriculum-based one. This filled me with doubt and trepidation as to their ability to be objective and to generate valid findings. At times I sensed that they were despondent and reluctant to do the work. At the end of the day I decided to visit

the schools more regularly than I had anticipated so that I was available for any difficulties that might arise.

Sometimes, as the interviews went on, teachers deviated from the schedule to tell me about their dissatisfaction regarding the training of the RNCS and the running of the school. Teachers took this opportunity to air their grievances and confide in me in connection with various other problems besetting them. Teachers generally seemed not to be happy with their working conditions, and this was bound to reflect on their responses in the interview sessions. The fact that teachers questioned some of the regulations of the school and wanted me to take their side unsettled me as I struggled to retain the focus on transitions; I was not there to be a mediator in local conflict situations. I had to tread carefully so that I did not annoy them by appearing to be uninterested in their problems; at the same time, it was important that I remained as neutral as possible.

Most of the parents involved in this study came from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. They were either unemployed or were casual workers. Most of them were semi-literate. Their households were large and ranged from four to more than twenty members. Reading is not a pastime activity for this cohort of parents-hence it was unreasonable to expect them to be involved in reading all the time. It was therefore expected that they would not give the rating scales the attention it deserved, and so I made regular visits to their homes. I was obliged to give parents unlimited support and time, which was not budgeted for in the research programme.

Teachers complained that parents (not all) were reluctant participants in the affairs of the schools. On their first invitation to the school to come and meet with the researcher, only three from the Province B came, and two from the Province A. Parents complained about lack of time to visit schools as they were preoccupied with pressing domestic chores. This hesitant behaviour was taken into consideration when analysing data as it reflected on their commitment and honesty in making decisions on their children's development based on the criteria of the rating scale.

Children initially did not feel free to speak to me, especially during our first meetings, but eventually they relaxed after establishing trust with the researcher. As a stranger in a classroom, I had to build the relationship of trust between myself and children in order for me to be accepted. After two months of stay in one classroom the children became used to me. At times when I came in the classroom they would offer to read to me. This kind of trust was achieved after making a number of visits to the class and establishing good rapport with them.

Children did not like to be categorised according to whether they attended preschool or not. I realised that to be categorised as not having attended preschool was a stigma that lived in their minds. This stigma would even result in the child being ridiculed by others. If this was allowed to go on it could affect how children acted and further affect the validity of the findings. This information became the privilege of the teacher and myself, and not children.

The lesson I learnt from this whole process is that qualitative research should not be pursued with too many preconceived ideas on what to expect in contexts far removed from where research designs are clinically composed. I found that research should be conducted with an open mind, and that a new researcher should be ready to deal with the unexpected. In the more unpredictable contexts of doing research in poor environments, a research schedule should be flexible and, to some extent, open-ended. The literature review should serve only as background knowledge on what has been found, but it does not provide answers to all contexts. I learnt that before embarking on a study, a novice researcher should familiarise herself with the context and be alert to subtle variables that may derail a study, and include such variables in the heart of the investigation. Careful preparation in relation to understanding the context of the research is important before one commences with the study.