

Transition of children from preschool and home contexts to grade 1 in two township primary schools in South Africa

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Abstract: In South Africa, the development of the 2001 White Paper No. 5 on Early Childhood Development (ECD) has been an instrumental policy in the development of changes to assist in preparing children for formal schooling, along with a strong focus on early childhood education. However the extent to which these are being enacted is relatively unknown. This study investigated understandings and practices of stakeholders involved in the transition of children moving from preschool or home into primary school in South Africa. A case study approach was adopted focusing on two schools situated in economically disadvantaged provinces of South Africa. School principals and teachers were interviewed to determine their knowledge of, and relationships with preschools, and practices around school transition. Grade 1 teachers were also asked about the factors influencing children's transition to school. Parents were asked about their views of transition and how their children were supported as they started school. Taking note of the children's own voices was imperative in determining how they experienced transition to school. While case study findings cannot be generalised, the results suggest that much needs to be done to increase awareness of early childhood education and for the government to move beyond universal accessibility to ensuring the quality of provision at the local level.

Résumé: En Afrique du Sud, l'élaboration du Livre blanc n° 5 de 2001 sur le Développement de la petite enfance (DPE) constitue une politique essentielle dans le cadre de l'élaboration de nouvelles orientations pour préparer les enfants pour l'enseignement formel, mettant un fort accent sur le développement de la petite enfance. Toutefois, l'étendue de l'application de ces mesures est relativement peu connue. La présente étude s'est penchée sur les entendements et les pratiques mis en œuvre par les partenaires impliqués dans la transition des enfants de la maternelle ou du foyer vers l'école primaire en Afrique du Sud. La méthode des cas a été adoptée pour étudier deux écoles situées dans des provinces économiquement défavorisées en Afrique du Sud. Des directeurs d'école et des instituteurs ont été interviewés pour établir leurs rapports avec les maternelles et les pratiques autour de la transition vers la scolarisation. Les instituteurs de la première année du primaire ont également été interrogés sur les éléments ayant une incidence sur la transition vers la scolarisation. Les parents ont été interrogés sur leurs vues concernant la transition et le soutien fourni aux enfants en début de scolarisation. Il était important de prendre en compte les opinions des enfants eux-mêmes pour établir comment ils vivaient cette transition. Bien qu'il n'est pas possible de généraliser à partir des constatations d'études de cas, les résultats suggèrent que beaucoup reste à faire dans le cadre de la sensibilisation au développement de la petite enfance et l'État doit, au-delà de l'accessibilité universelle, assurer une prestation au niveau local de meilleure qualité.

German: Die Schaffung der öffentlichen Diskussionsschrift No. 5 aus dem Jahre 2001 über die Frühe Kindliche Entwicklung (Early Childhood Development (ECD)) stellte in Südafrika eine bedeutende Herangehensweise im Hinblick auf anstehende Veränderungen dar, die zusammen mit dem Schwerpunkt auf das Lernen in der frühen Kindheit dazu dienen sollte, Kinder leichter in das formelle Schulsystem einzugliedern. Das Ausmass der Anwendung dieser Empfehlungen ist jedoch weitgehend unbekannt. Die Studie untersuchte das Verständnis und die Praktiken all derjenigen, die an dem Übergang von Kindern, die in Südafrika vom Kindergarten oder von Zuhause aus auf die Grundschule weitergehen, beteiligt sind. Dies wurde anhand von Fallstudien beleuchtet, die sich auf zwei Schulen in wirtschaftlich unterentwickelten südafrikanischen Provinzen konzentrieren. Schuldirektoren und Lehrer wurden in diesem Zusammenhang interviewt, um deren Wissen um diesen Schulübergang und deren praktischen Hilfestellungen für die Kinder zu bestimmen. Lehrer der ersten Klasse wurden zudem über die Faktoren befragt, die den Übergang der Kinder in das formelle Schulsystem beeinflussen. Eltern wurden nach ihren Ansichten, den Übergang betreffend befragt, und auf welche Weise ihre Kinder zum Schulanfang unterstützt werden. Es war dabei unerlässlich den eigenen Meinungen der Kinder Beachtung zu schenken, um herauszufinden wie sie selbst den Übergang empfanden. Die Ergebnisse der Fallstudien können zwar nicht verallgemeinert werden, zeigen jedoch, dass noch viel getan werden muss, um das Wissen um das Lernen in der frühen Kindheit zu fördern und um die Regierung dazu zu veranlassen sich über die allgemeine Zugänglichkeit hinaus zu bewegen, damit die Qualität der Bereitstellung auf lokaler Ebene ermöglicht werden kann.

Resumen: En Sudáfrica, el desarrollo del Informe Oficial Número 5 de 2001 sobre el Desarrollo Infantil del Primer Ciclo (sigla en inglés ECD), ha sido una política que contribuyó decisivamente en el desarrollo de los cambios para asistir en la preparación de los niños hacia la escuela primaria, junto con un fuerte enfoque en la educación infantil del primer ciclo. No obstante, es relativamente desconocido el alcance de las políticas aplicadas. El estudio investigó acuerdos y prácticas de los interesados involucrados en la transición de los niños de edad preescolar o del entorno

hogareño a la escuela primaria en Sudáfrica. Se adoptó un enfoque de caso práctico enfocando dos escuelas situadas en provincias sudafricanas con desventajas económicas. Se entrevistaron a los directores y maestros/as de las escuelas para determinar su conocimiento sobre escuelas preescolares y sus relaciones, así como prácticas acerca de la transición escolar. Se les preguntó a los/las maestros/as de Grado 1 sobre los factores que influyen a los niños en su transición a la escuela. Se les preguntó a los padres sobre sus puntos de vista sobre la transición y cómo eran apoyados sus niños al comenzar la escuela. Fue imperativo el tomar nota de las opiniones de los niños para determinar cómo ellos experimentaban la transición a la escuela. Mientras que las conclusiones del caso práctico no pueden ser generalizadas, el resultado sugiere que se necesita hacer mucho más para incrementar el conocimiento de la educación del niño de edad preescolar y para que el gobierno avance más allá del acceso universal escolar para asegurar la calidad de lo que se provee a nivel local.

Keywords: transition; school; teacher, child, and parent perspectives; policy and practice; South Africa

Early Childhood in South Africa

In South Africa, the preschool phase has for decades been a neglected area of education. The movement for establishing the early childhood development (ECD) sector in South Africa can be traced back to the early 1940s but until the dawn of the democratic era in 1994, the provision of early childhood services was based on racial lines. For example, from the 1950s until the early 1970s there was no preschool provision in the black sector of the country (National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI), 1992).

The first indications which pointed towards the importance of preschool education being recognised at government level in South Africa started in the 1980s. The De Lange Commission, tasked with the responsibility of looking into ways of improving the education system countrywide, was instrumental in highlighting the importance of preschool education for disadvantaged communities in improving performance in formal schooling. The commission recommended the establishment of a bridging class in preschool to prepare children for school, but this recommendation was not implemented.

At the dawn of the new democratic era, progressive movements started to regroup in order to influence the course the policy the new government was to take. NEPI investigated the Early Childhood Development (ECD) provision in the country and came to the conclusion that in order to promote school readiness and transition and to cut the costs of funding the early childhood sector the government should introduce a bridging class (Reception or Grade R) within preschools in which children would be prepared to enter the school sector ready to learn (NEPI, 1992). The recommendation by NEPI has influenced more recent developments in the early childhood education sector and led to the development of the White Paper No. 5 on Early Childhood Development of 2001. As a result, the government in South Africa, for the first time, took responsibility for early childhood education which was previously in the hands of non-government organisations (NGOs).

White Paper No.5 also came with the proclamation that Grade R classes should be moved to primary schools on the basis they would benefit from monitoring by District officials. Serious debates ensued on the feasibility of such a move. NGOs construed it as a measure of rendering them redundant especially since the inception of Grade R came with some measure of funding from the government. The move has also been seen as reducing the informality and play-based nature of this phase of education since these classes are expected to sit together with the Foundation Phase curriculum (Grades 1-3) in determining their learning programmes. Teachers are thus expected to teach literacy, numeracy and life skills (Clasquin-Johnson, 2010; Phatudi, 2007).

While the phasing in of Grade R began in 2001, and was expected to be fully adopted by 2010, President Zuma, in his 2009 State of the Nation Address, indicated that the date for realising universal attendance in Grade R had been shifted from 2010 to 2014 (RSA, 2009).

Associated with the proclamation, school readiness tests are no longer the benchmark used for accepting a child into Grade 1. This means that children cannot be discriminated against if they do not possess the basic literacy, numeracy and life skills previously deemed appropriate for entry to Grade 1.

The above changes were effected within an ECD background fraught with disparate and unequal provision amongst different racial groups that started before 1994. This inequality in provision has persisted and continues to plague the early childhood sector, even into the new democratic era. The Nationwide Audit of 2001 revealed that almost 70% of preschool teachers do not have any recognised qualifications to teach in preschools and almost half of the cohort of children aged 5-6 years was not registered in any ECD centre (DOE, 2001b). Furthermore, not all children attend preschool and not all schools have Grade R, and concerns are raised about possible disadvantages to these children. However, these deficits can be ameliorated in part when children they have strong parental encouragement and support

for their learning (Moletsane, 2004; Senosi, 2004) and are supported in their transition to school (Fabian, 2000; Margetts, 2003).

How Do Children Experience Transition?

The transition from home or preschool to primary school is imbued with emotional and social adjustments. This often involves the reorganisation of both the inner life and external behaviours of the child as they move away from preschool, separate from parents, and finally become incorporated into the new school, accepting and adopting the culture of the new school (Dockett & Perry, 2003; Fabian, 2000; Margetts, 2002). The values, attitudes and culture of the child, and of the family and the school, affect and shape the way the child will to adapt to the new school. Key stakeholders such as the parents and relatives, government officials, teachers and members of the wider community are important in this process and coherence among them is critical (Pianta & Cox, 1999).

The diversity of each child's background and experiences means that each experiences transition differently. This transition is tantamount to a socialisation process, whereby the child constructs their own knowledge and skills that will eventually enable him/her to make successful adaptation within a particular social-cultural context (Elliott, 1995).

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) highlights the complex interactions of the social and cultural systems and processes around the child that contribute directly and indirectly to effective functioning. This includes the individual characteristics of the child and their interactions and experiences in the family, with peers, carers, teachers, schools and the wider community as well as government policies and legislation. Bronfenbrenner (1979: 3) argued that an individual is not influenced by the immediate environment only but their development is "profoundly affected by events occurring in settings in which the person is not even present".

The interrelationships amongst the different people, contexts and settings in which the child operates as they commence school, influence the direction these transitions will take and can result in successful or flawed transitions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Synergy and synchrony between stakeholders including joint participation and sharing of information is thus important for children's successful transition into school (Early, Pianta & Cox, 1999; Moletsane, 2004). When the goals and attitudes of one system or level are not reflected in another, the disparity can have far-reaching effects on children's learning and development (Kagan & Neuman, 1998).

For example, children and parents have reported feeling insecure and nervous at the start of school. Children have been concerned about the lack of continuity between preschool and primary school and disliked having less freedom of choice, while parents have been concerned about children's progress and dealing with teachers (Broström, 2002; Clarke & Sharpe, 2003; Corsaro & Molinari, 2005; Einarsdóttir, 2003; Griebel & Niesel, 2000). Other children appear to be delighted to learn new things in a new environment, and see this as a challenge rather than a threat (Dockett & Perry, 2002b).

In South Africa, the Early Learning Resource Unit (ELRU) supports the above view when it maintains that children experience transition positively if parents are involved in their education. However in disadvantaged contexts this valuable contribution by parents is 'extremely limited and non-existent in very many instances' (ELRU, 2004: 6). This presupposes that transition is difficult for many children in these contexts. In these circumstances the education level of families is usually very low and children's attendance at preschool has been shown to better prepare them for formal education (Umek, 2008).

Empirical research provides a detailed account of perceptions of Western children parents and teachers, and modern contexts of school transitions (eg. Margetts, 2002; Dockett & Perry, 2002; Ramey & Ramey, 1998; Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Griebel & Niesel, 2000). What is unclear is their universal authenticity and application to children, given the dominant focus on white middle-class children, parents and teachers whose voices and experiences may not be representative of those in developing countries (Phatudi, 2007).

In the light of White Paper 5 and associated policies and proclamations, there is little or no information available about how much schools in disadvantaged areas (and their stakeholders) are aware of and respond to these initiatives and understand and experience children's transition to school. In seeking to address these issues, this paper reports a study that investigated the perspectives of Principals, Grade 1 teachers, parents and children in two disadvantaged schools.

The study sought to identify understandings and experiences of transition to school in two poor South African communities. By seeking the different voices of those involved, the study was premised on the 'supposed' interactions and engagements between the participants and policy initiatives and the synergy between them and how this translates into smooth transitions as purported by Bronfenbrenner (1979), Early et al. (1999) and Moletsane (2004).

The Study

To examine stakeholder understandings and experiences of transition to school including awareness of policies, a case study methodology was employed focusing on two schools situated in economically disadvantaged areas in two different provinces (A and B) of South Africa. Some of the children commencing Grade 1 in these schools have

attended preschool while a large cohort typically move from home into Grade 1. The two schools are situated in black townships which were created as the domicile for the black population of the country during the apartheid years and even in the present democratic era are still predominantly black and disadvantaged.

The provinces in which these schools and preschools are situated have different ECD histories beginning in the pre-democratic era. Preschool education in Province A - previously a homeland government - largely enjoys funding from the government. However, not all preschools in the province receive this funding. ECD in Province B, which was previously in white South Africa, is mainly in the hands of Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) and Community Based Organisations (CBO). The feeder preschools for the schools in this study were not receiving any funding from the government and were home-based privately owned centres. Neither of the schools involved in the study had Grade R classes.

Participants

Participants included 2 school principals, five Grade 1 teachers (2 from Province A and 3 from Province B), 12 children (six from each school), and eight of the children's parents (four from each school). Some parents could not participate in interviews as they were employed as domestic servants. As one of them expressed "you don't get paid for days absent from work". In consultation with the class teachers, three of the six children from each school were selected for participation if they had attended preschools and the other three were selected because they had not attended preschool and had come directly from home. Children and families who were part of the research came from poor economic backgrounds and some of the parents were not working. Some of the families lived in informal settlements as they could not afford to buy houses for themselves.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the two principals individually to identify their awareness of new policies and , and with teachers, parents and children in separate focus group sessions at each school. The benefit of using focus groups was that participants interacted with one another and shared ideas so that at the end of the session it was the participants' agenda that predominated and not that of the interviewer as suggested by Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000). Focus groups enable group discussion and influence and stimulate ideas and memories of what is essentially a collective experience. Having a group of participants also reduces the dominance of the interviewer that would occur in one on one interviews (Heinzel, 2000b, cited in Griebel and Niesel, 2000).

Guiding questions for the interviews were designed to find out how the participants understood transition and their perceptions of their roles in the process. For example, principals were asked about their conceptions of transition including their relationships with preschools and the district office, and the implementation of policies that underpinned the transition. Teachers were asked about their understanding of preschools and their strategies for supporting children's transition to school and factors they believed influenced this transition. Parents' views about transition and how they supported their children's transition to school were sought. Focus groups with children were an integral part of the study as their experiences of transition from home or preschool into primary school provided a particularly valuable and 'lived' voice.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed to identify emerging themes and categories and are reported briefly in the following section.

Permission was obtained from the Departments of Education in both Province A and B, as well as from the school authorities and the parents of the children before the study could proceed. Permission was also sought from the relevant University Ethics Committee. Pseudonyms have been used to conceal participant identities.

The Understanding and Articulation of Transition by School Principals

Both school principals were not aware of any policy provision for transitions. Their awareness of new policies and their understanding and conception of transitions and relationships with preschools in the two provinces appears to be impacted by their limited personal engagement with school transition issues and their reliance on the district office. The principals, in describing this link, emphasised that policies related to administering the schools are filtered down from the district office, and they always take their cue from these offices. Their approach was that if 'transitions' were not part of key issues to be addressed by the district office they were subsequently not addressed by schools. Principals spoke of their relationship with district offices as largely administrative. In matters relating to the children and the curriculum, schools had to find solutions to problems with very little support from the district office.

Both principals indicated they were aware of the existence of preschools within the schools' precincts, but admitted

that they did not know what was going on inside those classes. This sentiment was also expressed by school teachers in both schools as noted later.

Similar to the Province A school principal, the Province B school principal indicated the lack of a formal relationship between her school and the preschools in the vicinity. Her knowledge was limited to the view that preschools:

“feed the children, teach them how to handle crayons and to colour, discipline matters like sitting together, playing and learning”.

Teachers Experiences of Transition

In relation to interactions with preschools for supporting the transition of children from preschool into Grade 1, teachers, as with the Principals in both schools, were aware of the existence of preschools but they had limited knowledge of what transpired in them.

Teachers in the Province A school were the only ones to visit preschools for end of year functions when they were invited, and for assessment purposes of children to determine their school readiness. However, teachers at this school also reported that potential Grade 1 children from nearby preschools visited the primary school for the whole day at the end of the school year. This was to familiarise them with the new school context which was to be their ‘home’.

This inconsistent and limited contact with preschools appears to have emerged from the physical distance of the preschools from the schools which may also have contributed to teachers not perceiving preschools and schools as part of a continuum.

Teachers also believed it was the responsibility of the government to establish transition strategies. They recommended that the government needed to appoint someone responsible for dealing with adjustment and learning problems. However, given the lack of formal support and an absence of in-house school policies on transition, they took it upon themselves to devise strategies for dealing with new school entrants. This included the development of their own criteria for assessing children’s readiness for school. The teachers were oblivious that school readiness tests are no longer to be used as benchmarks for children’s enrolment in Grade 1, and that schools were required to be ready for the children.

In terms of children’s transition to school, teachers noted that adjustment and learning problems for children were multi-fold and ranged from socio-economic matters to the lack of basic academic skills. Key issues related to the effects of poverty and disability. There was unanimity among the teachers in both schools on the debilitating effects of poverty on classroom adjustment. Children who showed signs of poverty were always listless, and this affected their concentration level. Teachers complained that the feeding scheme did not provide these children with nutritious meals. To make matters worse these children were not fed on Fridays, thus facing a bleak weekend without food until the following Monday.

The other serious condition mentioned by Province A teachers was disability. Teachers had no expertise of dealing with disabled children despite the policy that now made it lawful for any child of school age to be admitted into mainstream schools. The district officials were the only people who could intervene, and recommend if children should be admitted or not. According to teachers the district office was seldom available to deal with the matter thus leaving the whole responsibility up to the schools.

Teachers believed that parents, and attendance at preschool, had some positive influences on children’s transition and adjustment to school. All teachers noted that parental support is imperative if children are to adjust well in the classroom. Teachers complained that the progress of children of parents who never responded to their requests to come to school affected their progress negatively. However those who were quick to respond had positive effect on their children. Children from preschool were seen as more capable learners than those who came directly from home. However, the home-based preschools that children had attended were viewed as not very effective. Teachers complained that very little was done in terms of equipping the children with knowledge and skills to enable them to participate meaningfully in the school classroom. Children who came to school from home and did not attend preschool were seen as even more disadvantaged. As noted by a teacher in Province A:

“I think most of the ones coming from preschools have already developed the motor-skills which are essential - but with the ones from home, that is, those who did not go to preschool, they are learning from their sisters. They develop own interest preparing themselves to come to school to attend for the first time. So maybe that is why at times they differ but slightly - there is such a big gap,”

Differences in socio-emotional skills between the preschool children and the children who attended school directly from home were noted by teachers in both provinces. Children coming directly from home were seen as lacking in confidence, had difficulty sharing, cried most of the time, and lacked basic perceptual skills, such as the ability to be attentive for a longer period.

In dealing with these differences the Province A teacher indicated that in seating children in the classroom she took the following into consideration:

“I always take those who come from home and sit them next to the one who come from preschool - so that when involved in group activities they must see to it that the ‘home’ one is involved. So after a month you find that they are okay – you will find that they had adjusted in the classroom.”

She further explained the disjuncture brought about by some preschool education in as far as the language of instruction was concerned. Most preschools use English, but primary schools use mother-tongue instruction (African Languages). National Curriculum Standards have recommended that English is phased in from Grade 1, rather than Grade 3 only if children are taught in their mother tongue. Children from preschools, are therefore ill equipped to express themselves well in mother tongue and this adds to teaching and learning difficulties. In addressing language problems, the teacher explained that she teaches in both Setswana and English.

Parents Views About Transition: Moving from Home into Grade 1

Parents of eight of the twelve case study children were interviewed about their views of transition and how they supported their children’s transition to school.

They expressed trepidation about their children leaving home and were unsure about how they were going to adjust in school. One parent commented that her child was scared of other people, especially large groups of people. This parent encouraged the child to join other children as they passed by going to school. This helped him to get used to other children and like schooling.

Parents from both provinces expressed the desire to get much more involved in their children’s education, but because of job commitments, they were unable to do so. One parent in Province A who was a domestic worker told how she tried to make time for her child’s education. She would send an aunt or someone who was not working to go and see the teacher rather than miss a day of work and associated wages.

Parents of children who attended preschools gave credit to preschools as having laid down the foundation for their children’s transition into Grade 1. A parent whose child had not gone to a preschool said that if he could have had his way, he would have sent his son to a preschool as he saw a big difference between him and the older siblings who had gone to preschool.

The parents, especially of those children who moved from home into school, admitted that they had to take much greater responsibility for their children’s learning than they were doing at present. They nevertheless felt that it was the school’s responsibility to ensure that learners learnt as well as possible in conducive environments.

What was common in the parent interviews in both provinces was the emphasis on academic skills as the most important skills for children to have before commencing schooling. One parent maintained that she taught her child everyday and believed that her child, despite not going to preschool, was doing very well and this gave her an advantage over the others when she started formal schooling. Parents of children who did not attend preschool and who could not support their children’s learning indicated that siblings assisted their younger brothers and sisters in reading and writing. Siblings and other children were also seen as providing new entrant children with information about school. One parent from Province B explained:

“He had a friend who used to tell him what they were doing at school, so he did have an idea of what was to happen.”

Parents also believed that learning English was a sign that a child was ready for school and formal education. This was apparent in an interview with one parent in Province A who spoke proudly about his son who “used a few English words in his conversation”.

Parents developed a range of other strategies to help their children settle into school. One parent noted that her child was crying all the time when she began school. She decided to deal with this by letting the child walk to school with an older cousin; to help him get accustomed to the routine. The child was able to overcome fears of the school and

teachers. On the other hand, a parent from Province B who had a child who cried a lot when going to school decided to leave him alone as he was afraid of being labelled “an abusive parent”. The child eventually outgrew the crying stage and according to his father, is now happy.

Children’s Views about Transition

Children’s transition to a primary school is a critical point in their lives. Transition presupposes a change in context for children and an expansion of their identity as they move from home and preschool into a primary school and commute between two cultural worlds that also define who they are as the “child” and “learner” and how they experience these worlds (Wong, 2003).

In developing the argument that children’s voices carry the essence of how transitions are being made and experienced by those who make them, this section reports children’s views about the transition to primary school.

Children’s responses to school related to the physical structure of school; fear of the unknown; relationships with other children; differences between home/preschool and school; and the futuristic nature of schooling.

A mixed reaction came from children when asked about how they felt when leaving home and preschool. The following response was indicative of their feelings:

“I was afraid and my heart was so painful to leave the preschool - we were told (school) teachers were beating children.”

Another child noted:

“The school was full of people and I was afraid of getting into the school”.

At the same time, there were children who were very excited about leaving preschool and home, because preschool was associated with playing and not with serious work, and they complained that at home they were made to wash dishes, a task they loathed. Children expressed it this way:

“at crèche they gave us food, we sleep and play”

“at home we are made to wash dishes – it is much better here at school”.

All children knew that at school they were expected to read and write, and that there was no time for sleeping.

Despite some negative responses about school, there were children who felt that school was better than preschool and the reason given was that they learned how to read and write. As expressed by a child in Province B:

“Schools help us to pass and find jobs so that we can get money to give to our parents to buy food in the house, clothes and cars”.

Children who had not attended preschool, believed they were in their own way ready to participate in school activities. One child explained that her parents taught her to read and write.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to investigate the understanding and experiences of transition to school from the perspective of school principals and teachers, parents, and the children who made those transitions.

There was little interaction and engagement between the participants and policy initiatives and this lack of synergy is reflected in what appear to be difficult transitions particularly from the perspectives of teachers and children. The lack of school principals’ knowledge of new policies, the limited understanding by school principals and teachers about preschool and minimal contact between the two types of services is of concern. As noted by Bronfenbrenner (1979), Early et al. (1999) and Moletsane (2004), without meaningful interrelationships, transitions are likely to be flawed. The two case-study school principals were not aware of what “was being done in preschools”, nor were they aware of the importance of continuity between the preschool and primary school, despite the increased focus on ECD brought about by White Paper 5 (2001). This lack of connectedness, may account in some way for the principals disengagement from school transition issues.

It appears that the lack of knowledge of transition policy and transition strategies was related to the principals’ limited

understanding and ability of the schools to respond to children's adjustment and learning needs. Rather than taking a personal proactive approach to the issue the responsibility for this lack, it was put at the doorstep of the district office. This is rather disconcerting in that White Paper No. 5 came with much anticipation that it was a tool that would help lay conditions for children to access schooling better prepared. Instead the continuity that it proclaimed seemed not to be taking effect as schools and preschools remain separate in terms of policies and the curriculum.

In seeking to support children's transitions to school, teachers were more engaged and proactive than school principals, and developed their own transition strategies in the absence of established school strategies. While teachers visited preschools at the end of the year prior to children commencing school, other contact and knowledge of related policies governing their work as teachers appears to be very limited, despite this being highlighted and promoted in the curriculum and philosophies promoted by government policies (White Paper No.5 (DOE, 2001a). The awareness of teachers of problems for children and their learning associated with poverty is heartening

While the South African ELRU (2004) has noted that the contribution of parents in disadvantaged communities is often limited or non-existent, the parents in this study indicated their desire to be more involved in their children's education but employment prevented this. This is a complicated issue that needs to be addressed in poor communities. Reflective of the work of Umek (2008), parents also noted the benefits to children's learning of preschool attendance, even if their child did not attend. Although parents believed that schools should have the responsibility of ensuring children were well taught, they also believed that they needed to help prepare their children for school, regardless of whether they attended preschool or not. This preparation focused mainly on teaching children academic skills. Some parents also showed awareness of social and emotional issues related to their children being in large groups or having difficulty separating from parents. Socio-emotional and behavioural skills have been found to be critically important in children's adjustment to school (Fabian, 2000; Margetts, 2003).

Children in the study proclaimed their happiness about leaving preschool and home as they were viewed as of less importance than formal schools. This reflects the opinions of children in Italian and Icelandic and other studies who also viewed schools as places where learning was to take place and that no learning took place at the preschools (Broström, 2002; Clarke & Sharpe, 2003; Corsaro & Molinari, 2005; Einarsdóttir, 2003; Griebel & Niesel, 2000). In the current study, this view most likely reflects the poor physical environments of the preschools and community attitudes. By contrast, schools were seen by children as places where their future would be decided upon. According to a Province B child, schools could eventually help them earn good money so that they could build houses and buy cars for their parents.

Concluding thoughts

Transition to school is an important phase in a child's life. As a phase full of socio-emotional apprehension and academic challenges, it needs the support of schools, parents and the wider community to make the process easy to negotiate and navigate. While parents and teachers alike, in this study, seem to have internalised the responsibility of imparting skills to enable children to learn in the classroom, much more is needed. This study has highlighted the need for greater communication and support by government bodies in effectively communicating and implementing new policies to better support children's learning and to realise a smoother and more coherent transition to school. It is incumbent upon the government to ensure that White Paper 5 becomes more than rhetoric. Action is needed.

Principals and teachers alike suggested they needed more help from the district offices to help mitigate the problems related to the transition and adjustment of new entrant children to Grade 1. It is recommended that the upskilling of district office staff with knowledge and strategies around school transition will go some way in ameliorating the current situation and facilitating links between preschools and schools. Workshops whereby both preschool and primary school personnel are present will also go a long way in addressing the disjuncture purported by school personnel. This forum would present a good opportunity for both parties to learn about each others responsibility and how to equip the child with necessary skills that would enable him/her to learn with ease in primary school.

Schools should be encouraged to take it upon themselves to create enabling environments that facilitate smooth transitions for all children and support children with difficulties in adjusting.

Parents and children had positive views about school. However some parents expressed their regret that they could not be as involved in supporting their children's transition to school as they wanted – this can only happen with adequate support, information and procedures, particularly in facilitating greater parent participation in children's education without jeopardising family income.

While views expressed by teachers and parents partly recognised the important role of preschools in supporting children's adjustment to school and reflect government policy, it is imperative that quality preschool provision is at the forefront of government spending if the recommendations of White Paper No 5 are to have an effect.

Salim Vally (2005) laments the state of preschools and especially the poor uptake of Grade R. He writes that the lack of access to quality ECD not only impacts negatively on children's emotional and social development, but fails to mitigate school failure and high dropout, and its positive impact on the economy of a country largely suffers from meagre resources. The implication of this and the current study is that more still needs to be done to increase awareness of the importance and effectiveness of early childhood education in preparing learners for successful learning.

Transitions between informal and formal phases of children's lives are important milestones. To be experienced successfully they require the input of all stakeholders so that synergy is created that will carry the process smoothly into and contribute towards good adjustments and eventual successful learning. The situation should not be left to its own devices, instead government energies should be rededicated towards ensuring that learning is grounded on solid foundation which ensures both the quality and the accessibility needed for successful learning.

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