
KINDERGARTEN TRANSITION IN A SMALL RURAL SCHOOL: FROM PLANNING TO IMPLEMENTATION

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an insight into the process of Kindergarten¹ transition at Callan Public School², a small school in rural NSW. The transition programme at Callan Public School was recently developed and had its inaugural implementation in 2007. A case study analysis revealed that the transition programme experienced clear stages of development, specific obstacles, and a generally positive reception. These elements of the programme may inform other transition programmes, particularly those in rural and remote areas.

INTRODUCTION

Starting school in a small rural community can be experienced and interpreted in multiple ways and from multiple perspectives. For students and their parents, the transition to school may be viewed negatively or positively and it often represents a time of emotional ambiguity – the trials and tribulations, but also the tremendous anticipation and joy of a new beginning. For teachers it is a time filled with mixed emotions. There is a sense of unknown surrounding the incoming students – the unknown of where they come from, and what they bring with them. It is a time of excitement and nervous energy as teachers attempt to welcome their new students to school.

TRANSITION: A BRIEF REVIEW

The perception of a “transition programme” has changed over time. Transition programmes were traditionally associated with assisting children with special needs in starting school (Howell, 1994; Karr-Jelinek, 1994; New South Wales Department of Education and Training [NSW DET], 2006). However, the notion of a “transition programme” is now moving towards involving *all* children entering Kindergarten (Rosenkoetter, 1995; NSW DET, 2006). For the purpose of this article, “transition” will be defined as being the process of teachers and prior-to-school programme providers supporting children and their families during the move from pre-Kindergarten to Kindergarten (Rosenkoetter, 1995).

The NSW DET (2006) highlights that transition is fundamentally different to orientation. Orientation programmes are designed to help children and parents

¹ In this article, ‘Kindergarten’ refers to the first year of formal schooling.

² Pseudonyms have been applied throughout the article.

become familiar with the school setting, usually taking place on a single day. On the other hand, transition programmes may include an orientation time but tend to be longer term and more geared to the individual needs of children and families than orientation programmes (NSW DET, 2006; Renwick, 1984; Rosenkoetter, 1995).

Dockett, Perry, Howard and Meckley (1999) emphasise the importance of taking into account all people involved in the transition process. They argue that when all participants in the transition to school are familiar with each other and their expectations, the transition process occurs more smoothly. This view is supported by Rosenkoetter (1995) who claims that effective transition programmes should have a coordinated approach where all adults responsible for the child's care are actively involved in the transition process, and where information to support the child's development is shared among stakeholders.

In her British study of the transition from preschool to school, Fabian (2002) suggests that children and parents need time and opportunities to become acquainted with the school, the people, and routines in order to develop a sense of security. Dockett, et al. (1999) support Fabian's notion when they state that an effective transition programme can foster a sense of security by helping children to be happy about going to school, feel positive about themselves as learners, and settle into the routines of school life. This support is echoed by the NSW DET (2006) who suggest that an effective transition to school will: support the child's initial entry into the school environment; support on-going positive outcomes for the whole of the child's school life; and contribute to an overall improvement in the child's learning outcomes.

ESTABLISHING CONTEXT

Callan Public School is a small rural school located in the village of Callan. The village is approximately 30 minutes away from Wadden, the nearest town centre. The 2007 enrolment at Callan Public School was 61 students. The school has lost several students due to families moving to Wadden in an attempt to overcome the high costs of travelling between Callan and Wadden. In addition, the Kindergarten enrolment numbers have been steadily declining in recent years, from 11 in 2005, to 10 in 2006, and only 5 in 2007. In an attempt to combat this decline, the staff at Callan Public School, led by the K/1 teacher, developed a transition to Kindergarten programme during 2006 for the 2007 school year which sought to establish links between Callan Public School and neighbouring communities. It was hoped that the programme would entice families to send their children to Callan, rather than in to Wadden. This paper focuses on the transition process during 2007. While the perspectives of the children formed a key component of this study, the children were not involved in the planning of the programme and as such, this article utilises the perspectives of the classroom teacher and parents only.

PLANNING FOR TRANSITION

The transition programme at Callan Public School took place during Term 4, with the children attending the programme one day a week for ten weeks. The actual days and hours of the programme were flexible throughout the term, depending upon the needs of the families. Due to the school's location in a small rural village, a considerable amount of thought went into the planning of the transition programme at Callan Public School. As Rochelle, the K/1 classroom teacher, pointed out, planning a transition programme for a metropolitan school would be quite different: *What they do in the city is generally a preschool feeds a primary school.* However, this village does not have a preschool, and the school draws from farms and other villages up to 40 kilometres away. The village also utilises the services of the large town nearby, thus making the drawing circle of early childhood services quite large. Rochelle was required to consider the facilities located in all the nearby towns and villages, and establish which networks needed to be built in order to successfully implement a transition programme in this school.

ESTABLISHING NETWORKS

The key to Rochelle's transition programme was establishing networks with the playgroups in Callan and surrounding communities that were attended by families from her school. Because there is a large town within reasonable travelling distance, Rochelle felt it was important to show the parents what her school could offer: *We thought if we go down there [to the playgroups] you're enticing the parents your way, which is what we need to do for small schools. We need to show what we do and that we're keen.* Rochelle's intention was to attend the playgroups *just to go in so I become a familiar face.* Rochelle also offered the playgroups the opportunity to have a playgroup at the school: *We invite them to have a playgroup at our school, in the school setting. We don't do anything at that playgroup, it's just within the school setting.*

By establishing connections with the playgroups, Rochelle is demonstrating her awareness of the importance of identifying the people involved in the transition process (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2006; Renwick, 1984; Rosenkoetter, 1995). Because of this commitment to involving the relevant people in transition, parents were also actively involved in the implementation of the programme.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE TRANSITION PROGRAMME

There is a strong case for ensuring that parents are an integral part of the transition process, and that parents and teachers establish an effective collaboration in the early stages of transition in order to understand each other's worlds, because without this sharing of dialogue the different views of teachers and parents about the education process may well hinder the child's transition (Fabian, 2002). As such, it is crucial that parents are actively involved in the operation of any transition programme. Rochelle credits the successful involvement of parents in the transition programme to the rurality of her school: *It's good being rural. The parents are very open to you, and they want to have a part in their child's education. I find that fantastic.* The actual operation of the programme was planned in consultation with the parents in

order to ensure that they were involved and informed, and that it operated on days which were convenient for them: *Notes were sent home to say this is what it is, are you interested in it, and if you are, what days are suitable. We went through those and picked a day which didn't affect preschool or anything the children were doing.* Rochelle's actions demonstrate a respect for the parents and their commitments, and also a recognition of the fact that the children were involved in a range of experiences prior to school, and that the transition programme needed to take these into account.

PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROGRAMME

The parent response to the programme has been very positive. One of the parents I interviewed, Chloe, had a child in Kindergarten and a child in Year 1 during 2007. As such, she was able to explain the difference having a transition programme has made to starting Kindergarten at this school. Chloe explained what the starting school experience was like for her daughter Tilly, who was in Year 1 in 2007: *With Tilly, I sort of felt like I was being thrown in the deep end. We had one morning to answer absolutely every question and query, and that was it. And then we just turned up on the day.* As Chloe felt some concern about Tilly's ability to cope at school, she did not find this to be enough support. However, with her son Henry, Chloe was able to experience the transition process. In comparison to Tilly's experience, Chloe was very impressed: *With Henry, I just thought that was the biggest bonus, being able to go in the last term, it was just the way it should be.* Chloe feels Henry was much more prepared to start school than Tilly: *I had to answer heaps of questions for Tilly, but Henry knew it because they taught him it prior to going. Massive difference.* Another parent, Sheree, also noticed the difference that having a transition programme made: *We had the staff talking to us and everything. I thought it was great, because not having it with Amelia and Catherine [her older daughters], I just thought it was a brilliant idea.* The positive response to the transition programme appears to be because of the many benefits it offered the teacher, parents, and students. These benefits will now be discussed in greater depth.

BENEFITS OF TRANSITION

The participants in this study were able to identify many benefits of the transition programme. These benefits apply not only to the children, but more broadly to the classroom teacher, parents, and school as a whole. While the benefits discussed here are case-specific, they may prove informative for other school settings. This study could serve as a guide for the implementation of future transition programmes not only in rural schools, but also in more diversified school settings.

Rochelle feels that one of the main benefits of transition is being able to find out about the children entering her class before the beginning of the year: *Transition was very beneficial, very very beneficial to the children, and also to myself because I really knew where to start this year, knew where the kids were at. I was sort of looking for something different each week, without testing to find it out.* Transition visits are an opportunity for the teacher to observe and build up a picture of each child (Fabian, 2002). By finding out about the children, the classroom teacher is better prepared to

welcome the children into the classroom, and the children are able to start school at a level appropriate to their individual needs.

One of the needs that Rochelle pays particular attention to is the children's literacy needs. As Marney explained: *Rochelle paid lots of attention to the children and their needs, particularly their literacy needs.* Rochelle explained that one of her priorities during transition was determining what type of literacy experiences the children had prior to starting school, and what skills she needed to develop: *I'm a big believer in literacy, but I can't make up for those experiences that are lost, but from what I know about where they are, I can try to build, and if I know I've got a lot of children who aren't exposed to books, who aren't exposed to vocabulary, you pick that up pretty quickly by talking to the kids.* By talking to the children, Rochelle is able to see evidence of the types of literacy understandings which may be lacking: *I have had children who have really shocked me in the last couple of years, who I've asked a question to and they can't answer a question. To have children start school and for me to say to them "What did you have for tea last night?" and for me to get a response "Tea have last night?" I am just absolutely shocked.* Rochelle highlights that her understanding of the literacy capabilities children have when starting school is often based on her own children, but she acknowledges that not all children have been given the same experiences: *I realise that maybe my children were spoken to a lot and read to a lot, but there's an awful lot of kids in the world who haven't been, and I need to pick that up and try my best to do a lot of reading to them, and talk to those children who I believe probably haven't been spoken to.* By picking up on the needs of the children during transition, Rochelle is enabling the children to start school in an environment that is conducive to developing these literacy needs.

ENABLING READINESS

A major concern for teachers and parents is a child's school readiness (Sailor, 2004). Readiness can be interpreted in a number of ways. Definitions of readiness can be described in terms of age, stage of development, demonstrated skills, relationships, and interactions (Dockett & Perry, 2007). A fundamental question when considering readiness is whether the children should be prepared for school, or the school should be prepared for the children. Transition programmes allow for both. Through transition, teachers are able to gauge a child's suitability for, and adaptability to, the school environment. Simultaneously, the teacher is able to assess the needs of each student and design a learning environment which is embracing of these needs, and can be sustained over time.

Parents sometimes wonder if there are any particular skills their child should have learnt before starting school (Renwick, 1997). Rochelle believes that rather than identifying what a child can or cannot do prior to starting school, it is far more beneficial to see the child in the classroom environment and make a judgement based upon this. Transition allows for this to occur. As Rochelle explained, there were students in her 2007 Kindergarten class that may not have even attended school that year had they not had the transition experience. In the following passage, Rochelle recounts the experience of one such child.

Rochelle's story:

I do know that one child's parents were told that he was not ready for school this year, for various reasons. He didn't know his colours, and wasn't very good at following instructions. He also couldn't answer questions. He sort of paraphrased the question and repeated it back. But his mum was very open with me about that and asked me at the end of transition how I thought he went, whether I thought he'd be right for school. With the five children that I have in Kindergarten I thought he was fine, he was very much like the rest of them. And here we are, we're through Term 1 and he's doing quite well.

Parents benefit tremendously from being able to see their child in a classroom setting. In the 'Starting School' project conducted by Dockett and Perry (2001), parents who had a chance to observe their child in a school setting felt that they were better equipped to make decisions about whether or not their child was "ready" to start school. This is an issue which was raised in my study, and two parents shared their experiences of how they made the decision to send their children to school. In both cases, the parents identified transition as being the deciding factor when determining their child's readiness.

Sheree's story:

I had the option to put [Tom] in to school, and if he really wasn't ready just take him out. I thought maybe I'd made a mistake and I should have sent him to preschool, and that he wouldn't interact socially at school, but he seems to be getting along OK. Socially he's shy and doesn't want to join in...but I think that will come with time, because [his sister] was the same and she did go to preschool...But just to see him in the school, in the class environment, he seemed very comfortable to me. Transition taught me to be a little bit more comfortable with the idea, and it really helped me as well, to make that decision, to see that he could go and sit in the class and do work...and how proud he felt when he came home and showed me the work that he'd done. That helped me a lot to make the decision to send him.

Chloe's story:

I didn't want Henry to go to school, but my husband did... I knew what [his sister] went to school knowing, and Henry didn't know anything... we just put it in the hands of the school... I wouldn't have known whether to send him, or whether the decision was right, and I didn't have to send him, so there was no commitment by going to transition. So that was great, and we both agreed that whatever the school says we just take their word, and he's done really well. He was only five in February, and I didn't want him going with a lot of coming-up six-year-olds and being left behind... I didn't know whether he'd survive. It was great to find out beforehand.

These stories demonstrate the way in which transition programmes can assist children in achieving a positive start to school. As was highlighted in the stories, a child's ability to socialise forms a key factor when considering a child's preparedness for school. In this study, the transition programme allowed for beneficial observations, and enabled the development of valuable social skills.

SOCIALISATION

Rochelle feels that the transition programme at Callan Public School enabled the children to participate in a formal school setting: *The social side of it is that they're now ready for formalised education.* She feels she has an obligation as a teacher to ensure that the children in her class are able to interact in a social environment: *We have to teach that, that's part of our job, to get them ready, get them to relate to other children.*

The ability of transition programmes such as the one at Callan Public School to enable socialisation becomes more pertinent in a rural community, as the children may have had limited opportunities to interact socially with other children their own age. As Chloe explains, the opportunity to meet and socialise with other children offers one of the greatest benefits of the transition programme in this school: *I think kids in rural areas mightn't have socialised as much as the kids in the city, so that's why transition is great for them, to get them socialising and meeting the kids.*

DEVELOPING FAMILIARITY

It has been suggested by Fabian (2002) that in order to develop a sense of security, children and their parents need time and opportunities to become acquainted with the school, the people, and routines. As Chloe explains, one of the greatest benefits transition offered her son Henry was familiarity with the school and its routines: *He knew where the toilets were, knew the other teachers' names, knew the routine of the school, and when the bell rang what you had to do.* If the setting is familiar, children are likely to feel comfortable and can use their skills, knowledge and past experiences more easily to make sense of new activities. Sheree feels that as a result of transition, her son Tom is now able to interpret the classroom environment, and can participate in activities: *He knows when he's in class now that when it's time to sit down and do painting, it's time to sit down and do painting, and we're not just going to stop and go off and do something else. Follow directions from somebody, rather than just do your own thing all the time.*

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

One concern Rochelle has about the current transition programme at Callan Public School is that it has not been implemented to its full potential due to a lack of resources: *We started last year with transition to school, but we didn't get to do everything we wanted to do, because, I guess, funding was one of the reasons.* Financial and other resources are essential to release staff from teaching responsibilities in order for them to visit schools and prior-to-school settings and to provide support for transition programmes (Dockett & Perry, 2001). Because the school did not have the required funding, Rochelle was unable to attend the playgroups as she had planned. Rochelle explains that this relates to the financial burden of securing casual staff to

cover for her absence: *I think whether or not I attend the playgroups will depend on funding. If we don't get funding, it's going to be really hard to get a casual for half a day. It's going to be really hard to get either two half days of casuals - you know, that's over two hundred dollars, nearly three hundred dollars, to do that - or if we can't get a casual out for half a day, to get two full days. So funding has a huge impact. I guess, if we get the funding we can do so much more.*

The injection of money into programmes is a rare, yet welcomed, occurrence because it signifies to the community the worth and value of transition programmes (Dockett & Perry, 2001). Rochelle feels the school will be able to provide a much more effective programme with greater financial aid, but is determined to continue the programme with or without funding: *If we do secure some funding we can obviously provide a much more worthwhile programme than what we can do without it. But if we don't get the funding we will still go ahead with it, it just won't be what we would like it to be.*

Funding is of particular concern due to the rurality of Callan Public School. Rochelle feels that finding money for initiatives such as transition is much more difficult in small schools: *Our funds are tighter, we don't have as big a pool of money to draw on because we're rural, because we're small.* The positive aspect of this though is Rochelle's determination to provide a quality transition programme, funding or not. Despite the fact that Rochelle was unable to implement the programme to her full intentions, the parents felt great satisfaction with the benefits it offered their children.

CONCLUSION

Insights from this paper demonstrate that implementing a transition programme is a process of negotiation involving all participants, with the children as the central focus. There is no "right" or "wrong" format for transition programmes. It is a matter of creating a programme which is suited to the needs of the children, families and school community involved, and making the most of the available resources. Both the literature and the results from this study indicate that the development of transition programmes should consider: the specific needs and values of the school community; the needs of the incoming children; the perspectives of the parent community; and the available resources and networks. However, as evidenced by Callan Public School, transition programmes do not need to be costly or over-ambitious endeavours. Rochelle made the most of the limited resources at her disposal and was able to create a programme which was held in the highest regard by the parents and met the needs of the children.

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