



Early Years Transitions:
**Building Bridges
for Children**



Henry David Hochstadt
Early Childhood Education
Endowment Fund

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Early Years Transitions: Building Bridges for Children

by

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An Institute of



Published by National Institute of Education (Singapore) –NIE

1, Nanyang Walk,
Singapore 637616

www.nie.edu.sg

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Printed in Singapore

ISBN: 978-981-14-2860-9

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Preface

The field of early childhood education in Singapore, in recent times, has received much attention and experienced unprecedented changes, mainly due to an increasing recognition of the significance of the early years in the lives of children. Many of the recent developments and initiatives within this field in Singapore have been aimed at improving the quality of early childhood education through enhancing the quality of teaching in the early years settings. That being said, there are many local early childhood (preschool and lower primary) educators who are excellent in delivering quality teaching and, more importantly, exemplary in their efforts to learn and implement new and effective curricular and pedagogical practices for the children they teach.

When the Early Childhood and Special Needs Education Academic Group (ECSE AG) at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) received the Henry David Hochstadt Endowment gift in 2013 to fund efforts at enhancing the quality of early childhood education especially in the local context, we carefully mulled over priority topics and areas in the field to arrive at a suitable topic for the inaugural launch of an event. It was during this period of deliberation that ECSE AG was also preparing to launch its Advanced Diploma in Teaching Early Primary Years, the focus of which is to provide further in-service professional development for mainstream teachers teaching in the lower primary years. One key issue addressed within this advanced diploma, and also in the professional development courses the ECSE AG has conducted for the preschool practitioners here in Singapore, is the transition of young children (including children with special needs) as they progress from one educational setting to another, where it is important for children to feel supported in the process so that they will develop a sense of confidence, well-being and belonging in their new environments.

Therefore, it just seemed very timely and appropriate that we selected the topic of transitions in the early years for the inaugural Henry David Hochstadt Early Childhood (HDHEC) Symposium. In addition, with NIE being the national teacher education body in Singapore, including for primary education, we felt that ECSE AG has a critical role to facilitate young children's transitions not only within the

preschool settings, but also between the preschool years and primary education. The fact that we received unanimous support and agreement from our symposium co-organizer, the Association for Early Childhood Educators (Singapore) [AECES], further confirmed our choice of topic. The inaugural symposium, which was held on 19 July 2014 at NIE, hence featured the theme, *"Transition: Building Bridges for Children"*.

The symposium was to serve as a valuable sharing and learning platform for academics, practitioners, families and all with the wellbeing of children at heart. With this in mind, in conceptualizing the content and format of the symposium, we were keen to recognize and tap on our local early childhood professionals who have been practicing exemplary transition practices for young children. We wanted our inaugural symposium to be an event for early childhood practitioners by early childhood practitioners sharing local funds of knowledge and know-how on a topic which hitherto had not received sufficient attention. For this reason, in addition to the keynote addresses by two world renowned experts in the field of early years transition, Professors Bob Perry and Sue Dockett from Charles Sturt University, Australia, we invited experienced local practitioners and professionals to share quality practices on early years transition from their field of work in five different workshops. We would like to take the opportunity to thank AECES for their wonderful partnership in co-labouring with us to put up a successful symposium, and our keynote speakers and invited local presenters for their willingness to share their experiences, knowledge and insights on various topics in early years transitions.

To ensure the sustainability of these local sharing on transition practices and their impact on early childhood practitioners, we also planned for these sharing to be documented and published in a resource package publication. We are glad that this resource package, a product from the inaugural HDHEC Symposium, is now published. It adds to our local body of literature/resources, which we hope we can further contribute to in the coming years, through the HDHEC Endowment Fund.

This resource package entitled *"Early Years Transitions: Building Bridges for Children"* presents: (i) the significance of early years educational transitions, and (ii) write-ups of the content of four of the workshops. The first part underscores the importance of early years transitions as a crucial life period for children which requires the sensitive support of adults. It draws on key philosophies,

conceptualisations and developments of early years transitions from international and local literature, including the HDHEC Symposium's keynote addresses, to bring forth this salient point. The workshop write-ups showcase several narratives of successful transitions, in addition to significant ideas and concepts which were presented by our local practitioners. Therefore we have designated this second segment as "*Stories of Early Years Transitions*" in order to bring out the essence of what transition is about - the unfolding of children's lives as they move into new educational terrains and experiences. Included within this package is a CD-ROM of video recordings of the keynote addresses and workshop presentations.

Both the symposium and this follow-up publication have been made possible by the HDHEC Endowment Fund. The ECSE AG (NIE) is therefore deeply appreciative and extremely grateful to Mr Herman Hochstadt, the eldest son of Mr Henry David Hochstadt and a Pro Chancellor of NTU, for his vision and passion for the early years, and his generous endowment gift to support the development and research for enhancing and sustaining of quality practices for early childhood education, especially within the Singapore context.

As our society becomes increasingly aware of the early years being foundational in and crucial to lifespan development, our efforts to nurture and care for the lives of young children and their futures must be based upon and reflected in practical and effective evidence-based ways and collaborative partnerships. The building of bridges by all involved to scaffold and support the transitions of young children so that they feel safe, secure, confident and happy is very important during this critical period of growth and development. We hope all who have a role to play in this significant life event of children - early childhood practitioners, parents, and other relevant individuals and organisations - will benefit from this resource package publication.

Joanna Tay-Lim and Levan Lim

Part I

Significance

of

Early Years Educational Transitions

Definition of Early Years Educational Transitions



Educational transition is viewed as a process of change which children undergo when they move into new educational experiences from one ecological setting to another. In contrast to horizontal transitions which emphasize movement within the same educational level, vertical transitions occur when children move from one level of educational setting to the next level of educational setting as they grow older (Neuman, 2008). In this regard, educational transitions can be perceived as “landmarks in the process of growing up” (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007, p. 3). In other words, the transition process is conceptualized as a phase of life and not simply an event in children’s educational journey.

Transitions within early childhood educational settings occur in several spheres:

- *From home to early childhood settings*
This transition phase marks younger children’s first contacts with a formal school setting and their encounters with non-familial situations and people as they embark on their first school experiences. Within the Singapore context as well as in many other countries, this transition phase can be from home to infant care, playgroup, pre-nursery or nursery classes.

- *From early childhood settings to primary school*
This transition phase takes place when children leave their preschool settings and commence their primary schooling which entails entering into a bigger and often more structured school environment. In Singapore, this applies to children who complete their kindergarten two education in either a kindergarten or childcare, and enroll into primary one education, usually by the age of seven. There could be children who may not have attended early childhood settings, and hence, they would have to make the transition from home directly to primary school.
- *For children with special needs encountering changes in early educational settings*
In Singapore, there are early intervention programmes for children to facilitate their transition to preschool (horizontal transition), or directly to primary one (vertical transition). Some children with special needs are in the mainstream preschools, and they can have a choice to go to special schools or mainstream primary schools at the end of their preschool education.

Demands of Early Years Educational Transitions



The transition process for young children is a significant life event which places expectations on them in several ways. In transitioning between two settings, they encounter changes in terms of their roles, settings and relations (Dockett, 2014; Fabian & Dunlop, 2008; Kienig, 2008; Perry, 2014). Regarded as a complex phenomenon for children as they deal with multifaceted changes on several fronts of their lives, Perry (2014) aptly remarks that “transition is a time of individual and social change, influenced by communities and contexts, and with those, the relationships, identities, agency and power of all involved”.

Children in transitions are therefore at a crossroad in which they are required to maneuver in an interlocking system comprising of different ecological systems. The adjustments required of children as they move from a familiar to a novel setting impose social, emotional and cognitive demands on them. Hence the transition process can be an intense period for children as they deal with an array of strong and often mixed emotions of excitements and apprehensions.

Griebel & Niesel (2007) elaborate on the changes in ecological demands in terms of three levels of experiences which children would need to grapple with during the transition process:

- (i) The *individual level* addresses qualitative shifts in how children perceive themselves. As they assume their new roles as students in their new schools, the children encounter changes in identities and expectations.
- (ii) The *interactive level* addresses children's need for social integration into their new settings. The children have to let go of some relationships in their former setting, and are required to embark on new relationships with other children and the adults in their new schools. Relationships within the families also undergo changes as both parents/caretakers and the children make adjustments to assume new responsibilities within the family setup in relation to the transition process. For example, the child may want his or her family members to treat him as a 'big' boy or girl who is capable of doing more things independently.
- (iii) The *contextual level* addresses differences in setting requirements (e.g., schedules, curriculum, pedagogical approaches, etc.) between the children's former (home or previous school) and their new educational environments. In particular, children are expected to acquire new academic and functional competencies to cope with the curricular and pedagogical demands of their new schools.

The description above depicts the multi-layered issues embedded within the transition process which children undergoing early years transition need to contend with. However, the issues face by the children may have different emphases within the various transitional phases:

- *From home to early childhood settings*
Very young children transitioning from home to their first school experience will usually be greeted with a different environment and unfamiliar adults. They encounter primarily attachment issues which are intricately linked to their developing sense of trust and security (Dalli, 2008; Kienig, 2008; Ricciardi, 2013). The transition process is therefore

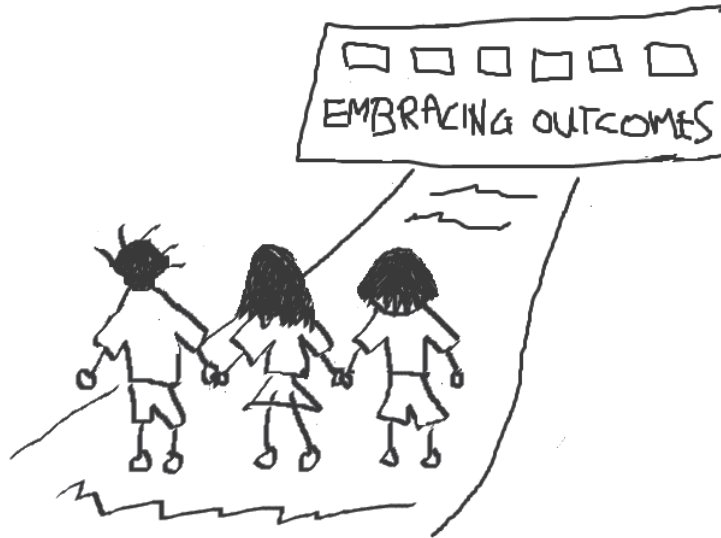
often a period of heightened emotional strain for both the children and parents. The stress of adjustment can be overwhelming, and for some children, this can lead to a disruption of normal routines, and result in inappropriate emotional reactions such as withdrawal from activities and anger tantrums, as well as behavioural consequences such as bed-wetting and sleep problems.

- *From early childhood settings to primary school*
Preschool children transitioning to primary school face challenges in terms of having to 'grow up' in the 'big' schools. They are expected to make adjustments in several areas – adapting to larger class sizes, relating to new peers and teachers, finding their orientations in bigger physical settings, acquiring greater independence in daily routines, grappling with a far more structured learning environment, and coping with greater learning demands (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Yeo & Clark, 2006). The transition from pre- to primary school can therefore be a complex and emotionally-laden event in children's lives. When asked about his thoughts and expectations in moving to the 'big school' (i.e., primary school), one child in a Singapore preschool gave a vivid portrayal of what this could be like – "I will miss my friends in the childcare. I worry that my work will fail. Some students will bully me." (Tay-Lim, 2014).
- *For children with special needs encountering changes in early educational settings*
Children with special needs entering mainstream preschool or primary school environments directly or crossing over from special school environments to mainstream school settings can encounter various adjustment needs (Mark, 2013; McLauchlin, 2013). These include not only coping with mainstream curriculum, but also with typically-developing peers who may not have the competencies to relate to children with special needs as well as mainstream teachers who may not have the requisite understanding of special needs, and hence lacking the ability and/or aptitude to set up inclusive practices.

For young children, early years transition can pose an uphill task given their level of development and competencies at a tender age. Hence, Trodd's (2013) conceptualization of young children's transition as "risky shifts" (p.xxi) is certainly a pertinent description of this life event. While there are broad trends in terms of issues to be dealt with within each phase, it is also important to note that the transition experience is unique for each child as each brings different elements in terms of personality traits, skills and contextual backgrounds into the transition process (Dockett, 2014).

Transition to school is a social process which involves not only the children, but also the adults in the children's lives. Families and teachers are key participants in the children's transition process, and they face adjustment issues as well which can impact on the children's transition adaptation process. When their children enter a new educational phase, family members often have to face a re-organization of roles, routines and responsibilities, and these can be marked by strong emotions (Fabian & Dunlop, 2008). Families who struggle to adjust can add further tension to their children's transition process. Conversely, when family's involvement in the transition process is positive, children are better supported in their adjustments. Teachers receiving children from another educational setting also face challenges in facilitating children's entry into their new school experiences such as dealing with anxious children and parents, and meeting curriculum accountability, particularly for those starting primary school (Dockett & Perry, 2007). These expectations impose additional demands on teachers' skill-sets and competencies.

Impact of Early Years Educational Transitions



In the earlier sections, it is noted that transition is a time of change in many facets of a child's life. Change, however, is not necessarily bad. It can be an opportune time of growth for children when it is dealt with dexterously so that children feel successful in the process. Perry (2014) makes a strong contention for this as well: "Of course it has to be different, but it has to be different in a safe way!" There are important reasons for this:

- Children who are not effectively supported in the transition process can be overwhelmed with a sense of incoherence and bewilderment in the new school environment, resulting in disorientation and an inability to cope with new demands.
- On the other hand, those who have positive transition experiences tend to develop a sense of confidence, well-being and belonging in the new environment.

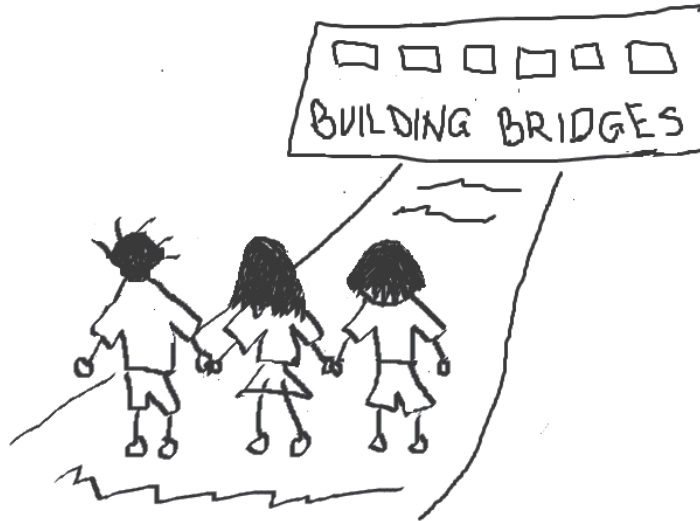
Early years transition therefore represents a significant milestone in children's lives. It is important for them to feel successful during the process of change in order that they experience healthy development and learning as they adjust to the new environments. A successful transition is said to have taken place when the child enjoys school, able to negotiate the daily challenges of the new school life, and shows constant progress in his or her performance (Brostrom, 2008; Monkeviciene, Mishara & Dufour, 2006).

Many scholars and researchers (e.g., Dockett & Perry, 2007; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Kienig, 2008; Margetts, 2002) in the field attest to early years transition being a critical period in children's lives because it can play a determinant role in their eventual success in school. When children are off to a good start, it sets the right tone and builds the momentum for them to continue to engage positively within the environment. A successful transition in the initial months can develop into a nurturing cycle of achievement impacting the children's lives positively as they continue their education in the school. The contrary applies – if the children experience difficulties, a vicious cycle may spiral, adversely affecting their self-esteem which can further dampen their abilities to adjust. Since successful transition is significant in ensuring long term positive school outcomes, it has additionally been seen as a cost effective measure to reduce later dropout rates and other attendant social-emotional and behavioural problems (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007).

Early successful transitions can also have a domino effect on future life transitions. According to Bronfenbrenner (cited in Kienig, 2008), there is a chain reaction to how children navigate their early transition processes, in particular their first entry into school life, as these deep-seated early experiences at bracing changes can become a pattern for how they manage later years transitions. Children who have experienced successful transitions early in life have developed not only useful adaptive skills and mechanisms to cope with different life phases, but also the positive dispositions to face challenges in future transitions with confidence and courage. This is an important point to note because children will have to undergo many educational transitions in different stages of their lives. Dockett (2014) and Perry (2014) utilize the concept of transition capital to refer to this built-up of resilience capacity and strategies to manage future transition challenges.

While it is important to consider the longer term impact of successful transition, another compelling reason for addressing children's transition issues is the concern for their emotional well-being in the 'here and now' as they embrace their lives and learning in the new educational setting. Such a perspective encapsulates the notion of the *child as being* which focuses on children's current well-being as they live out their experiences in contrast to the *child as becoming* which places emphasis on their future developments. The well-being argument is anchored strongly in children's right to enjoyment of their childhood (United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Children, 1989). Childhood is espoused as a valued stage of life in itself, and because school constitutes one of children's key life environments, a large part of childhood finds its expression within school life. Therefore, it is important to empower children to traverse the transition journey well so that school life becomes an enjoyable experience, and childhood is preserved and not denigrated as a result of the transition process.

Supporting Early Years Educational Transitions



The previous two sections have drawn attention to the possibilities of children having to deal with an array of transition adjustment needs and also the outcomes, both short- and long-term, associated with how successful children navigate these transitions. Children in transition need the sensitive support of schools, families as well as policy makers to help them adjust well and settle in, and this calls for effective transition strategies to be in place to empower children with the adaptive competencies to cope with the new set of demands.

The transition strategies to support children in coping with the changes can be classified into three key overarching frameworks:

- (i) the concept of school readiness
- (ii) the concept of continuity
- (iii) the concept of co-construction

These are discussed in the following sections.

Preparing Children to be School-Ready

The concept of school readiness highlights specific skills and dispositions children need to develop or acquire in order to succeed in their new educational settings (Einarsdottir, 2003; Margetts, 2002). Underpinning the school readiness approach is the view that educational discontinuities are part of the continuum of life and learning which children encounter in their growing-up process. As a result, the transition process is conceptualised as preparing children for different experiences which they are likely to encounter, and the transition strategies are targeted at equipping the children with the necessary competencies to embrace their future challenges.

From its earliest conceptions, the school readiness approach has focused largely on equipping children with the necessarily functional academic skills. Fabian (2004) however, cautions against this transition model which has a tendency to curb young children's active learning. With a growing cognizance of the multifaceted demands face by children in their educational transition journeys, the field has seen a paradigm shift in the conceptualization of school readiness to include a more holistic approach. Children's behavioural, social-emotional and academic skills have been cited as important factors in children's adjustment process (Brostrom, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Margetts, 2002; Monkeviciene et al., 2006; Yeo & Clarke, 2006). Generally it has been shown that children who display confidence, persistence at challenging tasks, positive behaviours, academic competence and ability to develop peer relationships are more likely to succeed as they take on new roles and meet new expectations.

In particular, children's emotional well-being has been regarded as crucial for their early school success (Cybele, 2003). Within this domain, there is growing awareness of and appreciation for the building of children's resilience to face changes. The resilience element is a major contributory factor to explain why some children have succeeded in transitions while others have struggled through the changes, and hence it has been foregrounded as a critical school-ready factor (Monkeviciene, Mishara, & Dufour, 2006). Seen in this regard, "going through a transition is a learning skill in its own right" (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007, p. 3).

Preparing children for their entry into new ecological environments at the various educational transitional phases do have specific considerations:

- *From home to early childhood settings*

Starting school can be a trying period for these very young children because of the disparities in home and school cultures. This transitional phase represents their first entry into a more formal experience with rules and structures to be met. They become a 'pupil' with expectations placed on them in terms of learning and behaviour. For many of them, this will also be the time when they encounter their first peer circle. To equip children to be school-ready at this tender age requires the sensitive support of the adults to help them with socialization skills, self-help abilities and confidence to approach new situations (Kenig, 2008).

Families in particular can play a critical role in getting the child ready for school by developing strategies to empower their children for change. Role-playing of school scenarios, exposing them to new situations, other children and adults gradually, and teaching them to be more independent in terms of self-help skills are some areas which families can work on with their children.

Preschools could also facilitate children's transition process by taking a child-readiness perspective through the gradual introduction of various school activities, rather than rush children to be inducted into the school's established ways of functioning. An unhurried approach in the settling-in period for these younger children will help them adjust better to their new ecologies.

- *From early childhood settings to primary school*

Preschool is seen as an important preparatory stage to help children transition to primary schooling. The literature evidence base establishes high quality preschool programmes as a major positive factor in supporting children in this transitional phase. Children who attended these preschools generally perform better when they enter school (Brown & Scott-Little, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2007). This can be attributed to the school readiness concept in which children in these

programmes are better equipped holistically to meet challenges with greater confidence and resilience.

Children who have been adequately prepared for the transition through appropriate transition activities are also likely to develop greater adaptive competence (Einarsdottir, 2003; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Lee & Goh, 2012; Margetts, 2002; Yeo & Clark, 2006). These strategies can include developing their thinking and understanding about how their new school operates, participating in firsthand experiences of the new school, talking about their feelings of going to their new school, and introducing some school practices into their current preschool routines.

- *For children with special needs encountering changes in early childhood settings*

It can be more complex to prepare children with special needs to be school-ready because of the additional accommodations required for their disabilities. To foster positive outcomes, a carefully planned transition programme for the individual child is crucial (North & Carruthers, 2008; McLauchlin, 2013; Salend, 2011). The process necessitates the implementation of an individualized programme which is drawn up to assess the child's developmental needs for adapting to the new school setting. Intensive preparation involving the families, the children and service providers is needed to equip the children with the necessary skills and competencies that will help them adjust to the requirements of a mainstream environment.

Another preparatory element can be the incorporation of a transition programme to familiarize the children with the new school settings before the eventual move. These transitional activities can include orientating the children to the new school settings through school visits, and even having them participate in some of the classroom sessions and other school routines on a gradual basis before the scheduled enrollment.

The school readiness transition model is an evidence-based practice approach. For example, a number of large scale public school readiness initiatives have

been implemented by Headstart and other early childhood institutions in the USA to improve the quality of early childhood education as a means of combatting the high risk of school failure encountered by children from lower socio-economic backgrounds (HSIPC, 2007). Many of these used classroom-based programmes to prepare the children in the pre-requisite literacy skills. They also provided other assistance in the areas of health care and parental support. Brown and Scott-Little (2003) conducted a review study on 20 of these programmes and the results indicated moderately positive effects, with children benefiting most in the social-emotional domain. Better school attendance, improved academic results and fewer referrals to special services were also reported.

Another successful school readiness programme is the 'Zippy's Friends' programme. The programme, which operates as a preventive model focusing on developing preschool children's mental well-being to build their resilience and adaptive competence, has been implemented in many countries (e.g., Lithuania, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, England, Iceland, Hong Kong, Norway, Poland, and Singapore). It consists of a 24-week school-based transition initiative to improve children's coping mechanisms in facing everyday adversities. Monkeviciene et al. (2006) compared the adaptive abilities of a control and an experimental group of children in the first grade in Lithuania, and their findings indicated that those who have participated in 'Zippy's Friends' programmes in their kindergartens registered higher behavioural and emotional adaptation in their new schools.

Ensuring Continuity in Children's Experiences

The continuity approach encapsulates the idea of a seamless transition. The emerging picture is a portrayal of children experiencing "an integration of the previous into the present" in their educational transitions (Einarsdottir, 2003, p. 2). The emphasis is shifted from preparing children for the new environment to preparing the new environment for children. The continuity transition model has been conceptualised as a multidimensional framework consisting of administrative, philosophical, curricular, physical and organizational domains. Many scholars and researchers (e.g., Fabian, 2004; Einarsdottir, 2003 & 2004; HSIPC, 2007; Margetts, 2002; Neuman, 2008) are now advocating that the key to

children's effective transition lies in ensuring continuity in core areas of their educational experiences. When the two ecological settings are similar, children can rely on their acquired skills and past experiences to make sense of their new environments. Attempts at establishing continuity seek to promote coherence and stability for children in their learning and development as they progress from one life phase to another.

Supporting the concept of continuity, Brostrom (2008) highlights the notion of a child-ready school as one that takes efforts to prepare an appropriate learning environment to embrace the needs and perspectives of the children coming into its programme. The child-ready school also calls attention to the role of teachers as facilitators and active agents of change to support children in their transition process (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). The development of ongoing communication between relevant adults in the former and new settings to facilitate collaborative planning is seen as a key factor in establishing important linkages to realize a smoother transition experience for children.

For the different transition phases, the idea of continuity takes on the following emphases:

- *From home to early childhood settings*
Since attachment to familiar adults undergirds the very young children's sense of security and trust, this must be sensitively taken into consideration in the initial period of starting school. Ensuring some degree of continuity in the attachment figures in these children's lives is critical in the early stages of adjustment to ensure that they are not engulfed by a world populated with 'strangers'. Hence having a familiar adult with the child for a period of time is a vital factor to take into account for successful transition from home to preschool (Dalli, 2008; Kienig, 2008; Ricciardi, 2013). Children who encounter separation issues with their home primary caregivers need adjustment time before they can develop a trusting relationship with a substitute attachment figure (i.e., the teacher) in the preschool during the settling-in period.

- *From early childhood settings to primary school*

Continuity from the early childhood educational setting to a primary school setting has focused on philosophical, curricular and pedagogical continuities. These can be achieved when preschool and primary school have greater collaboration to ensure children do not have to contend with abrupt or drastic changes in their learning conditions and experiences (Brostrom, 2008). In particular, it is noted that primary one children are still in their early childhood development phase and should not be subjected to developmentally inappropriate practices which deemphasize active learning in favour of a more didactic system with lots of teacher talk and drill-and-practice exercises. Hence, underpinning a transition approach that aims at continuity will be a more child-centered pedagogy which looks into holistic development and active learning at the primary level, and this constitutes a natural progression from what is being advocated in terms of the type of learning taking place at the preschool level.

A further dimension to this is continuity in terms of the nature and character of the teacher-style at the primary entry level (Griebel & Niesel, 2008). The child-ready school places emphasis on having more nurturing teachers who can provide the safe and secure environments reminiscent of the early childhood settings which the incoming children have been accustomed to. Children in the care of understanding and caring teachers are likely to develop a greater sense of confidence in the new setting.

Another factor in supporting children's transition is the continuity in terms of friendship (Brostrom, 2006; Dockett & Perry, 2007). Child-ready schools make attempts to look into the quality of peer relationships as friendship is a critical factor in supporting children adjustments and adaptations to their new social contexts. Having a peer buddy system in place is an example. Children who have friends from their previous preschool or other peer settings are also more likely to have a good start at school and develop more positive transition experiences.

- *For children with special needs encountering changes in early educational settings*

Children with special needs often have unique challenges which require educational accommodations to meet their individual needs. To provide continuity in their educational experiences, a one-size fit all approach will have to be avoided (Marks, 2013). Mainstream schools will be in a better position to provide a greater sense of continuity to these children if they embrace inclusive education, and have mainstream teachers and/or specialist personnel equipped to support the unique needs of these children (Marks, 2013; McLaughlin, 2013; North & Carruthers, 2008; Salend, 2011). A child-ready school environment can be created when mainstream personnel collaborate closely with the child's previous educational settings in order to be adequately informed of the child's strengths and developmental needs, and the intervention strategies used for the child at the point of entry (Salend, 2011). Such collaborations can yield critical information for the design of a more streamlined school support system to help the child make a successful transition to his or her next educational phase.

A number of countries have established transition strategies which are primarily aimed at supporting continuity in children's learning experiences. Fabian and Dunlop (2006) note that in Scotland, some nursery schools have emphasized continuity through the linkage in themes to help children through the transition phase. These nursery schools collaborated with the children's new schools to establish links through joint projects and shared transition themes. Such collaboration was also seen in Denmark where some schools were working closely with 'feeder' nurseries to develop continuity in curriculum. Neuman (2008) cite examples from Australia and Sweden where there are initiatives at promoting curricular continuity through the establishments of educational frameworks with guidelines for "a seamless system of curriculum and services for young children" (p.16).

In Singapore, efforts have been taken to support continuity in children's active learning and holistic development from pre- to primary school. At the preschool level, this is guided by the Ministry of Education (MOE) *Nurturing Early Learners Framework* (MOE, 2012), while at the primary school, the *Primary Education*

Review and Implementation (PERI) initiative was launched to reinforce more active learning and holistic development (MOE, 2009). The primary schools have also facilitated children's curricular adaptations through the 'Learning Support Programmes' which provide intensive English and Math instruction to at-risk children to help them acquire the necessary literacies. These programmes, by and large, employ more active learning to better engage the children.

To further support continuity of learning conditions, MOE has also implemented measures such as reducing class sizes to allow for greater individualized attention, and allowing greater autonomy for primary schools to adopt multimodal assessments of children's progress. A more recent effort was the establishment of MOE kindergartens operating from primary school premises (MOE, 2013). This provides the children with the added advantage of being familiar with the 'big' school settings and its establishments before they even enter primary one. Many primary schools are also cognizant of the friendship and peer factor in supporting children's transitions, and have put in place a 'buddy system' which pairs new students with older school mates.

Co-constructing the Transition Process

Effective transition programmes should include the participation of the key stakeholders because each brings with them a set of beliefs and values which can empower or hinder the transition process. The transition literature strongly advocates a coherent framework which takes into account the perspectives of educators, parents and children in the construction of a coordinated approach to the management of children's transitions (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007, 2008; Griebel & Niesel, 2008).

Both educators and families are key players in children's transition process. Conflicting demands on children from the adults involved in their transition process can further aggravate their vulnerability at this critical moment of their lives. Scholars and researchers (Dalli, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Einarsdottir, 2003; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Kenig, 2008, Marks, 2013) underscore the need for schools and families to build reciprocal, responsive and supportive relationships and structures in a collaborative effort to help children adjust well to their new

schools. Effective relationships have been hailed as playing a central role in realising positive transitions for children (Dockett, 2014).

In particular, the schools need to understand that families also encounter transition issues. Parental inputs and expectations can be additive factors which can impact children positively or adversely. Schools should therefore take the initiative to support parents as well, and to establish greater inter-subjectivity through alignment of values, beliefs, expectations and participation with parents to establish a meaningful partnership in managing their children's transitions. Parents' support of their children's transition process is likely to be more positive and forthcoming when they feel secured, and are well informed and included in the initial stages of their children's transition process by the schools (Dockett, 2014). In Singapore, research has shown that schools which incorporated active parent involvement and training programmes have reaped the benefits of positive parental inputs into the children's adjustment process (Sharpe & Gan, 2000). Noting the importance of effective communication between parents and teachers as a key to children's successful transition, practices carried out in Germany included a process where parents and teachers clarify expectations and work as a team to co-construct the transition process (Griebel & Niesel, 2007).

There is a growing emphasis in recent years on viewing children as co-constructors of transition strategies by including their perspectives into informing the design of relevant practices which are better able to support their needs. Fabian and Dunlop (2007) note that research which seeks children's perspectives and capitalizes on their agency to provide insightful and valuable information on transition matters concerning them is gaining increasing recognition. Brostrom (2008) echoes the same sentiment by highlighting that an absence of children's perspectives can result in a limited understanding of the transition process and lead to the planning of primarily adult-oriented strategies which may not take into account children's realities. Viewing that "children both shape and are shaped by their transition to school experiences", Dockett & Perry (2007) make the strong contention that transition planning for children should not ignore children's experiences and expectations. Children's agency in the transition process therefore should be tapped on for a more targeted approach to supporting them in the process.

The research literature on transitions has revealed that parents were more anxious over their children's academic readiness while children were more concerned about making friends, having caring teachers, following the 'big' school rules, and experiencing a sense of growing up (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Tay-Lim, 2014). By including children's perspectives into the formulation of transition strategies, children's socio-emotional needs, which could otherwise be overlooked by the adults who may have different concerns, are proactively taken into account in the transition planning. A study in Singapore which looks into the views of children in the preschool to primary school transition phase shows that the children perceive discontinuities in their transition experiences due to the different pedagogical approaches they encounter, and different teacher styles (Ebbeck, Saidon, Rajalachime & Teo, 2013). The children would like to see their primary schools as a place in which they work as well as play. The authors comment that while elements of the child-ready school concept are advocated in primary schools due to recent government initiatives, the children would like to experience this sense of continuity more concretely. In other words, more could be done at the ground level to ensure that children encounter less discontinuity in their learning experiences and more positive transition outcomes.

Conclusion – Transition as a Productive Phase



Early years transition can be a complex and an emotionally-laden life event for children because of the multifaceted adjustments they are required to make as they navigate new educational terrains. The early years are foundational years for children's development, and the transition process can impact on this positively or negatively. When children experience a sense of belonging, self-esteem and self-efficacy in the transition process, the transition itself takes on a positive and proactive role for the children's development and growth. Children's emotional well-being, which is central to their learning and development, is at stake if they face their new school lives with heightened stress and a deep sense of discord and disharmonies within them. Negative transition experiences can also have longer-term adverse repercussion for children.

So, transition can serve as either a phase for growth or of threat to wholesome development and learning for a child. Hence early years transition cannot be taken lightly. Transition planning is a determinant factor to ensure positive outcomes for children in transitions. The transition strategies within the various conceptual frameworks outlined in the earlier sections can reinforce one another in a collaborative approach to supporting children's transition, instead of working in isolation.

A crucial feature to effective transition planning is to conceive of early years transitions as a productive phase in children's lives. A good start to school for children in transition begins with a positive mindset and disposition toward what transition can accomplish for children. With regards to this, a useful resource for framing the concept of transition in an aspirational manner is a position statement on transition to school which was developed by a group of renowned scholars on transitions (ETC Research Group, 2011). They have positioned educational transition in a refreshing and productive way by viewing it as characterized by four key domains: in terms of *opportunities* for children to continue their growth and development; in terms of *aspirations* for robust support in the transition process so that children feel valued and assured in the process; in terms of changing *expectations* and the need to be cognizant of these for transition planning; and in terms of *entitlements* which is strongly anchored in social justice to ensure accessibility to high quality education and transition experiences for children, and the necessary resources for adults to make this a reality for children.

Children in early years educational transitions deserve to be fully supported in this significant life phase so that the transition process is reaped as a productive, fruitful and nurturing phase of their lives – one in which they can grow and glow in their new educational environment, and their potential realized and celebrated in the process. Change is inevitable as children make progression in their educational journey; however, the experience of change needs to be safe and affirming to children, and all involved.

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Part II

Stories

of

Early Years Educational Transitions

*From the Inaugural Henry David Hochstadt
Early Childhood Symposium 2014:
"Transitions: Building Bridges for Children"*

“Saying Goodbye: Creating a Smooth Transition from Home to Infant Care”

Write-up on Ms Michelle Ong’s Workshop Presentation

Ms Michelle Ong is the Director of Our Juniors’ Schoolhouse @Choa Chu Kang

Our Juniors’ Schoolhouse embarked on an action research project in their infant care centre in order to strengthen their capacity to support the transition process of infants who were enrolled in their centre. The project consisted of two phases. The first phase focused on the identification of issues which provided the vital information for the brainstorming and planning processes. The second phase involved the design and implementation of changes to address the identified issues in an effort to improve the transition support for the infants in their maiden entry into a formal school setting. The centre also examined the challenges which surfaced during the implementation phase, and explored possibilities for further improvements.

Identification of Issues

A key philosophy underpinning the centre’s practices is the belief that quality interactions are vital in fostering the infants’ development at this tender age; hence the centre embraces responsive and respectful caregiving for infants who are enrolled into their school. However, this curricular objective could be waylaid to some extent if the infant experiences prolonged difficulties in the adjustment process during the transition period, and takes a long time to settle in. In such a scenario, caregivers would have to utilize the bulk of their time to soothing the infant instead of spending more time in engaging in activities with him or her. An effective transition plan therefore needs to be in place to ensure that the infants adapt to the new environment positively.

To work towards an effective transition plan, the centre took the critical first step to evaluate the conditions which could hinder an infant's transition process, and to then proceed to deal with the perceived barriers accordingly. In identifying what could be the obstacles, the centre established the issue of anxieties as the primary barrier to effective transition support for the infants. They noted the strong emotional overtones shrouding the transition process due to the following anxieties relating to separation and attachment problems felt by the infants as well as the significant adults in their lives:

- For infants, the distress could arise from being thrust into a strange world, and having to grapple with strange adults – certainly an anxiety-generated experience for one to encounter at this very young age.
- For parents, the anxieties could stem from having to let go of their infants into the hands of unfamiliar adults. For first time parents, this sense of insecurity could be felt more strongly. Often these overly anxious feelings from parents could add further ongoing tensions to the already struggling infants.
- For centre caregivers, self-efficacy issues were identified – some wondering whether they could create the intimate relationship with the child and parents, and whether parents would feel safe enough to entrust their little ones into their hands.

Implementation of Changes

To address the issue of infants' and adult caregivers' anxieties, and to build trust and bonding between the different caregivers during the transition phase, the centre decided to look into how they can improve on two transition strategies:

- (i) their information gathering system for the transition process
- (ii) the time frame for parents to stay with their infants during the transition period

Changes to the information gathering system

Underscoring the first strategy on the information gathering process is the belief that an information gap about pertinent issues relating to the caregiving of an infant can lead to lack of trust and a less consistent approach to managing the settling-in period for the infant. The alternative holds true – having better knowledge of the infant upon enrollment can empower caregivers to perform their responsibilities more capably and confidently in responding to the unique needs of each infant. This could also result in more intimate sharing between parents and caregivers, thereby strengthening the bond and trust between them.

To steer their investigation, the centre crafted the following research question for this action research initiative: *How would more specific information gathering about an infant lessen anxiety and lead to a smoother transition from home to group care?* From this perspective, the centre staff held brainstorm sessions to arrive at strategies that could facilitate the gathering of more detailed information about the child (e.g., sleeping behaviour, eating behaviour, comfort devices, etc.) during the enrollment period. Table 1 presents the changes that were made and implemented in the centre as a result of this initiative.

The implementation of the changes provided the centre's caregivers with vital information about the unique needs of each infant in the following areas:

- separation issues
- feeding patterns and rituals
- sleeping patterns and rituals
- diapering and bath rituals
- comfort and soothing rituals

Equipped with more intimate knowledge of the infant, caregivers were then better able to support the infant in settling into their new environment. They found it easier to build rapport with parents and to maintain ongoing communication. Parents tended to be more trusting in leaving their infants at the centre now that the caregivers were furnished with the necessary information to look after their infants. The caregivers' group meeting also reaped positive outcomes. It led to more coordinated and informed efforts in meeting the

infants' needs, and less reliance on having to relay messages about the child's needs to one another.

Table 1: New initiatives implemented for the information gathering process

Information gathering Process before the changes	Changes made to the information gathering process
<p>Parents were required to fill in the information form concerning their child on their own. This resulted in limited information about the infant as many parents were unsure of what was required. A 'nil' reply was not an uncommon response.</p>	<p>Interviews were conducted with the parents to help them with the information form. To create the positive emotional climate, parents were giving a choice in the date and time of the interview. As a result, parents were forthcoming with the sharing of more detailed knowledge about their child which enabled the centre to provide more responsive caregiving to the infants. In addition, a day before the start of 'school' for the infants, the centre held a caregivers' group meeting to share and discuss the information they have gathered about the infants</p>

Changes made to time frame for letting-go period

The second major change in the centre's transition strategies to further alleviate the anxieties of parents was the bold move to provide more autonomy to parents to decide on the letting-go period for their infants. In other words, parents were allowed to stay with the infants during the settling-in period until they feel safe and assured to leave them entirely to the centre caregivers.

The centre reckoned that this strategy would help ease the often extreme anxieties felt by parents during the settling-in period when they were given a time-frame restriction to stay with their infants in the centre. It was observed that when parents were less anxious during this crucial transition phase, the infant would also settle in more quickly.

The Next Phase: Recommendation for Follow-up Strategies

Moving forward, the centre reflected critically on the changes they had made and identified the challenges which had surfaced in order to ascertain what else could be done. As a result, the centre identified the following 3 aspects they could work on for their next phase of their transition implementation:

- revision of interview forms
- introduction of a transition booklet
- personalization of the communication book.

Revision of interview forms

Some challenges were identified for the information gathering process which had been implemented. These include some parents not having time for the interview, and parents not having all the information required, especially when there were other caregivers (e.g., grandparents) in the infants' lives. There was also a major drawback in the current form as it utilised only broad categories (e.g., 'sleeping behaviour', 'eating behaviour' and 'comfort devices') which did not provide sufficient guidance to parents and caregivers on the more precise information which would be useful and even crucial for the infants' caregiving. Furthermore, such open-ended categories had led to different sub-questions being asked by different interviewers as well, and this often resulted in inconsistencies in the information being gathered.

To address the challenges and prevent inaccurate and/or gap in the information collected for the infants, the centre has re-designed the interview form to be more concise in the type of information to be collected. Table 2 outlines how the original form, which previously had only broad categories, would now be reinforced with a series of specific questions for each of the categories.

Table 2: Addition of specific questions to the original form

Category	Specific Questions
Sleeping Behaviour:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your child’s sleeping patterns? • What do you want us to know about how you put your child to sleep? • Does your child have a favourite toy or item he or she uses for comfort?
Eating Behaviour:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your child’s feeding and eating patterns? • How do you feed him or her? • Do you have any feeding or mealtime rituals that you want to tell us about?
Comfort Devices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your child’s favourite toy? • How do you comfort your child? • Does your child use a special comforting item (such as blanket, stuffed animal, doll)?

In addition to the above, the centre has also formulated another series of questions targeted at enabling the caregivers to gain a better understanding of how to relate to the child. This is shown in Table 3. The questions to elicit more details about the infant’s communication and interaction patterns can provide crucial information required to facilitate the caregiver-infant bonding, and help the infant overcome the barriers to smooth transitioning due to attachment issues.

Table 3: Questions formulated to elicit the infant's relational patterns

Relating with Others
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What would you like us to call your child?• What do you want us to know about the languages spoken in your home?• If your home language is not the language spoken in our programme, do you want to teach us some key words in your language?• Does your child have any unique ways of communicating with you? Are there particular gestures or sounds that mean something for your child? What could this be?• Is there a favourite book, toy or song that your child is familiar with?• Is there anything in particular that frightens your child?

In the pipeline as well would be a change to the procedure for gathering the information. Instead of gathering the information at the enrollment interview, a two-tiered level information gathering procedure would be proposed. The parents would first be asked to fill up the information form at home so that they can consult other family caregivers (e.g., grandparents or domestic helpers) for additional knowledge on the child. This would be followed with a centre interview to further clarify and build on the information they have furnished in the form.

The additional recommended revisions to the gathering information system are intended to elicit more focused data on the infants. This resonates with the idea that information is power, and with the right information on hand, caregivers can be empowered to provide more effective support to the transition process for the infants.

Introducing a transition booklet

Parents are key stakeholders in their child's transition process. Infants adjust more quickly when parents are equipped with an in-depth understanding of the transition issues and strategies to support their child and work with caregivers. The centre has therefore commenced work on the designing of a transition booklet which would encapsulate good and helpful ideas for parents. The following depicts the key features to be included in their proposed transition booklet in the next phase of their transition project:

- pictures and profiles of staff, and their role descriptions
- tips to help with transition
- books to read to your child
- songs to sing to your child
- questions and answers
- useful websites
- family transition checklist
- important contact details

Personalizing the communication book

Another gap in the information system was identified by the centre. They noted that the basic information about the infant was not always accessible to caregivers or other personnel who might come into the infant care room to help out with the caregiving, especially during the transition period. The information collected in the enrollment process would instead go into the infant personal file which was kept in the office.

To resolve this accessibility issue, the centre engendered the idea of incorporating some of the key personal information about the child in the communication book. The communication book is a formal corporate working document used by caregivers and parents for the relaying of instructions and information regarding the child's needs on a daily basis. With the inclusion of personal details, the communication book could serve the dual purposes of providing baseline information about the child as well as ongoing communication. To further personalize the communication book, the list of

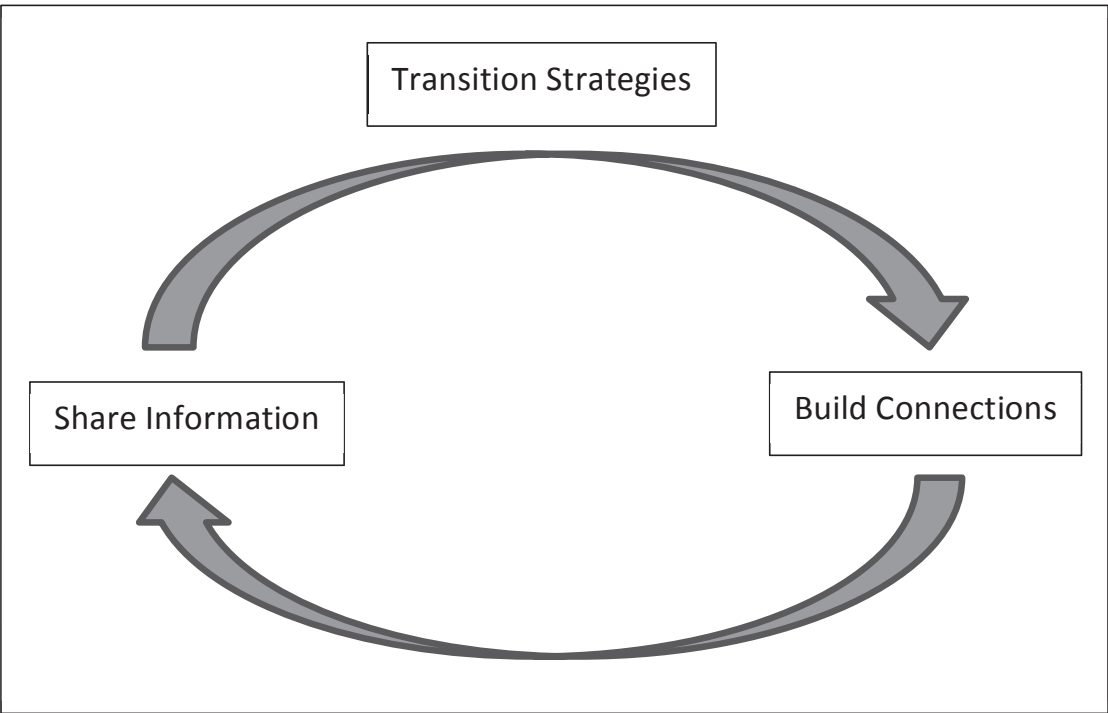
things to be included need not come solely from the school; parents would be encouraged to provide their input as well.

Conclusion

The centre envisages the transition from home to infant care as an information-connections cyclical process. Figure 1 illustrates the centre’s conceptualisation of this framework. The sharing of information is the significant starting point and the lynchpin to the building of bridges with parents. When this initial caregiver-parent bonding is strengthened, and parents become more trusting, they will be forthcoming in wanting to share more intimate knowledge about their child with the centre caregivers. Hence the information-connection process builds on the previous level leading to mutual empowerment for both parents and caregivers.

The strategic idea of this framework is the creation of a big family or community where the adults in the infant’s life trust and work closely with one another to effectively support the child in an individualized and personalized way as the little one embarks on his or her first experience at ‘school’.

Figure 1: The information-connections cyclical process



Biodata of Ms Michelle Ong

Ms Michelle Ong holds a Bachelor of Health Sciences in Physiotherapy from the University of Sydney and had worked for more than 7 years in the healthcare industry. Her first encounter with the early childhood field was when her eldest child was enrolled in a child care centre. Her experiences as a parent in that centre kindled her passion to work with young children and she started working in one of the childcare centres under the G8 group of companies. She has since been working in the early childhood field for more than 5 years, where she plays an important role in coaching and mentoring staff, building rapport with families, managing parents' expectations and encouraging parent-child bonding through activities such as parenting workshops, orientation and events like Sports Day. In particular, she has taken a keen interest in how infants and toddlers develop and learn. This spurred her to take up the Certificate Course in Infants/ Toddlers Care and Development. Michelle strives to improve the quality in infant care services in Singapore and with her staff at Our Juniors' Schoolhouse @ Choa Chu Kang Pte Ltd, she hopes to make inroads that she can share with practitioners and push professional practice to greater heights.

“Collaborative Transition Support from Preschool to Primary School Education for Practitioners”

Write-up on Mrs Chin Wai Peng’s Workshop Presentation

Mrs Chin Wai Peng is the Principal of Xishan Primary School

Mrs Chin Wai Peng’s presentation is an outcome of her brief work attachment with the National Institute of Education (NIE) Early Childhood and Special Needs Education Academic Group. She explored the salient issues of transitions from preschool to primary school through (i) examining the international literature, and (ii) interviewing significant stakeholders (principals, teachers, parents and K2 children) in two preschools in Singapore, as well as personnel from the Early Childhood and Development Agency (ECDA). Through this investigation, and also through the lens of being the principal of a primary school, Mrs Chin conceptualised a child-centric collaborative transition support framework with a strong focus on the perspectives of children and what it entails for them as they embark on this milestone life event. The sections which follow outline the key points of her workshop presentation.

Sharing from Project Findings

The key themes in terms of the transition from preschool to primary school which emerged from the results of the interviews conducted in the two preschools – a childcare and a kindergarten – are presented from both the adults’ and the children’s perspectives, and the implications of the results are discussed.

Adult stakeholders' perspectives

Tables 1 and 2 indicate the perspectives of the preschool parents and educators respectively with regards to their rating in terms of how they define successful transition for their children's debut into the mainstream primary schooling system in Singapore.

Although differences are noted in terms of the parents' and educators' emphases on academic preparedness and social competencies, there is alignment with regards to what both stakeholders perceived to be the most crucial indices for children's successful adjustment to primary schooling, which relates to the aspect of children's emotional well-being – to be happy to want to go to school and learn new things. This is a heartening finding; however, it begs the question of what then constitutes happiness to the child in his or her transition journey.

Table 1: Findings from the interviews with the preschool parents

Very Important	Skills, Attitudes and Behaviour
1st	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Happy and wants to attend school• Happy and wants to learn new things• Expresses himself/herself in class
2nd	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reads simple sentences• Writes simple sentences• Accepts discipline positively
3rd	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Confident to ask teacher for assistance

Hence, a key question which adult stakeholders need to address would be: *What makes the child feel happy and confident to go to primary school?* In learning about the world of children and matters which affect them, a cogent argument to support a more empathetic and insightful understanding of their lived experiences, is for children to make meaning of their own experiences and to tell us about them. In other words, both parents and educators would be better informed to facilitate the transition adjustments for their child by entering the child’s world to understand what it means for him or her to embark upon the world of primary schooling. The next section therefore documents what this transition means and feels to children.

Table 2: Findings from interviews with the preschool educators

Very Important	Skills, Attitudes and Behaviour
1st	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Happy and wants to attend school • Happy and wants to learn new things • Makes new friends • Cooperates with peers in class • Follows teachers’ instructions on work to be done
2nd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shows care for others • Mixes well with peers • Follows school rules and routines • Able to concentrate in class • Works on his or her own independently
3rd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confident to ask teacher for assistance • Confident to ask peers for assistance • Talks about own feelings • Expresses himself/herself in class • Buys food from school canteen • Displays initiative • Displays perseverance

Children's perspectives

Several key considerations emerge in the children's interviews. The children expressed being happy in their preschool environments where learning takes place primarily through play and fun activities. However, when asked on what they envisaged might happen when they go to primary school, here are some of their perceptions:

- *"You got to take the school bus."*
- *"The teachers are very strict."*
- *"You've got a lot of homework to do."*
- *"The school building is very big."*
- *"If you don't obey orders, you are going to be punished."*
- *"You have to carry your school bag."*
- *"If you are still very naughty, you don't listen to the teacher, you will be sent to the principal."*

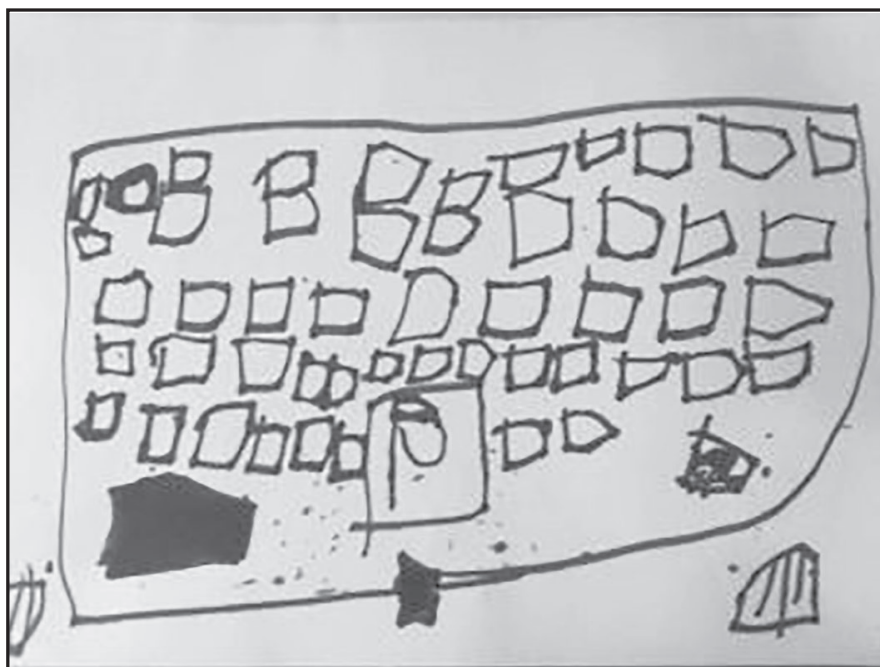
The emerging image is certainly not a positive one as they perceived the primary school as being a bigger, stricter and less joyful place with a more formal learning regime. Figure 1 which depicts the primary school as a much BIGGER environment for them to navigate, and Figure 2 which features the more formalized and institutional setting of a primary classroom, are typical examples of drawings from the children.

Hence, according to the children's thinking and feelings, the transition process from preschool to primary school appears to be an ominous journey, and this could impact on their sense of confidence even before they enter primary one.

Figure 1: Conceptualizing the primary school building



Figure 2: Conceptualizing the primary school classroom



So what do children hope their primary school to be like? Figures 3 and 4 are two examples of typical responses from the children.

Figure 3: A preschool child's visualization of her future primary school

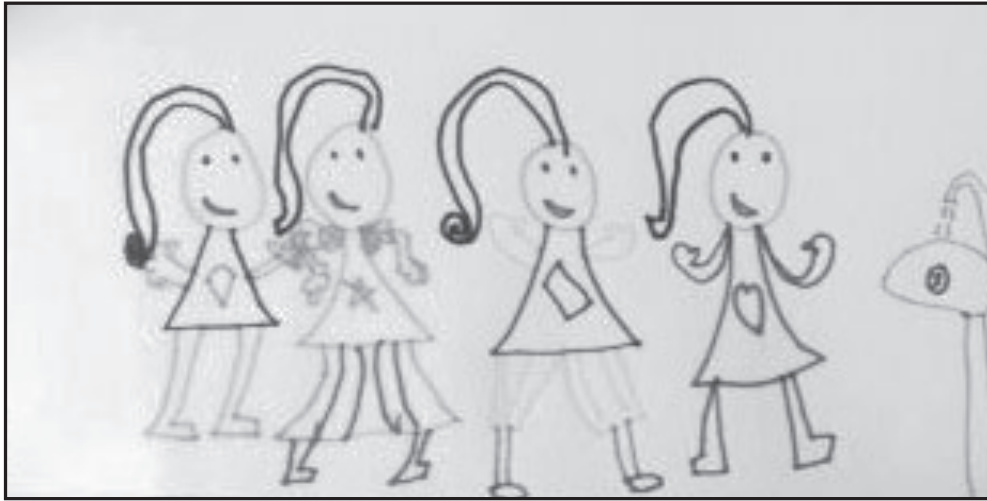
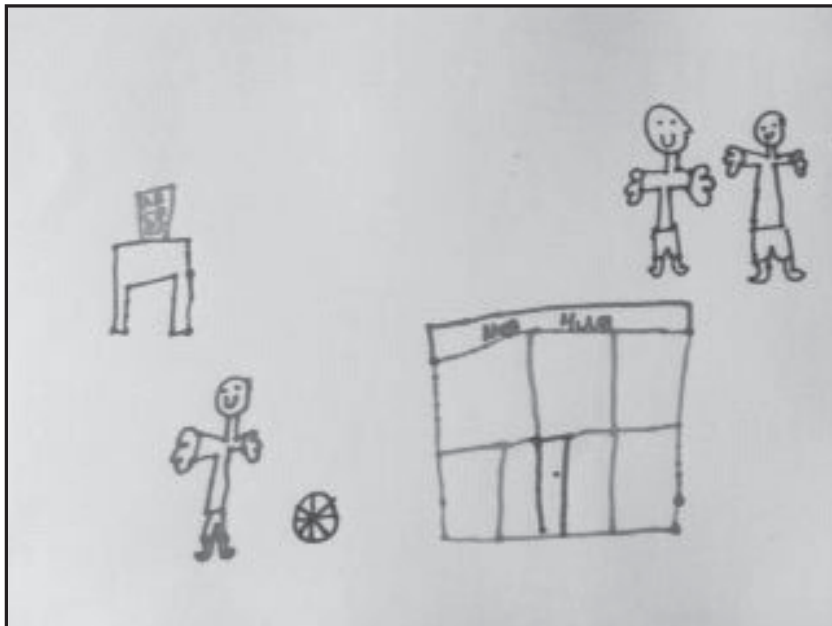


Figure 4: A preschool child's visualization of his future primary school



The child in Figure 3 indicated that she would like to be with her friends, and remarked, *"I think we will all be very happy in the toilet. We will all be lining up and we will wash our hands before we go for recess"*. In Figure 4, the child explained that he is the figure on the left, and exclaimed, *"I am the one that is red and we are playing in the playground. There are a lot of things to play and I will have many friends"*.

Friendship and play feature as key considerations in their perceptions of what would make them happy when they go to primary school, and these qualities of school life are a reflection of what they were experiencing in their preschools. In other words, to the children, the concept of continuity of school experiences constitutes their 'transition model' – a smooth and happy transition for them to the 'big' school would mean not having to make a big leap into the more formal type of education but one which would take into account their needs for a friendlier and less threatening school environment.

Transition strategies conducted by the preschool and the primary school

There were existing transition programmes at both the two preschools and also at Xishan Primary School. The transition strategies which have been implemented in the two preschools included:

- having a preparatory week in which the preschool children were introduced to a simulated primary school environment
- conducting parent talk sessions
- organizing visits to primary schools

At Xishan Primary School, the following transition activities were in place:

- a buddy system to help the children adjust to their new environments
- a familiarization/orientation week and parent workshop sessions
- more active and fun learning to cater to children starting mainstream primary schooling

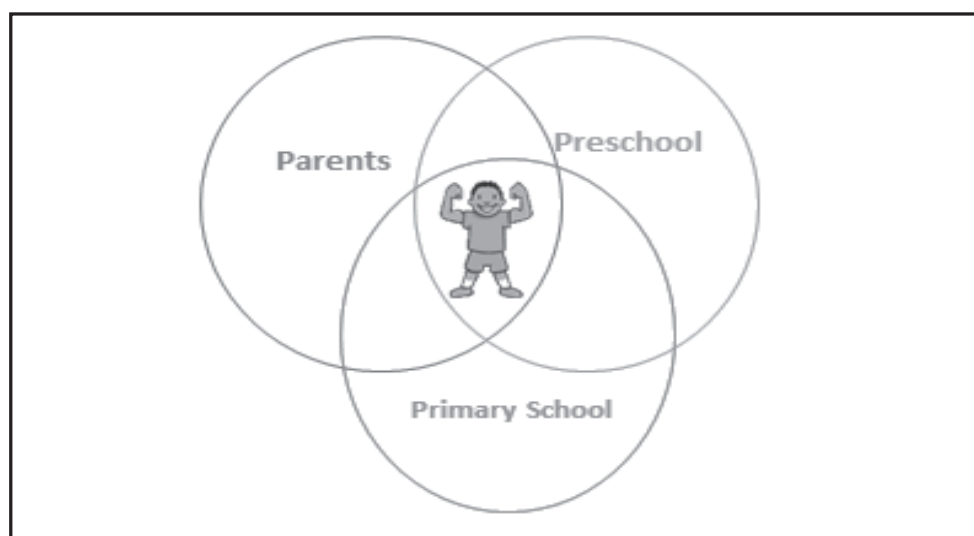
However, despite having transition planning at both pre- and primary schools, the interviews with the children did not demonstrate that they developed a positive disposition towards transitioning from pre- to primary school. In fact,

there seems to be a disconnect between children’s perceptions and what both the preschool and the primary school were trying to achieve in their transition strategies.

A Proposed Collaborative Framework – Placing the Child at the Core of Transition Planning and Increasing Our Common Space

In building the transition bridges to smoothen the transition process, there is therefore a need to re-think how transition planning should be carried out. For transition strategies to empower children for the next phase of their educational journey, it is imperative for the adults to enter into their worlds in order to understand their apprehensions and their unique needs as they undertake this journey. Figure 5 illustrates the child-centric collaborative transition support that was proposed by Mrs Chin as an outcome of the transition project. It is centered on having a more intimate knowledge of how the child feels and thinks about transition, and how this can inform transition planning and strengthen the collaboration of parents, preschool and primary school in their transition support for the child.

Figure 5: A suggested model for collaborative transition support



Placing the child at the core of transition planning

“This is their world! If we want to talk about transitions, we need to think about their world.”

“There is a need to center our thinking and our perception, and the whole concept of transition back on the child.”

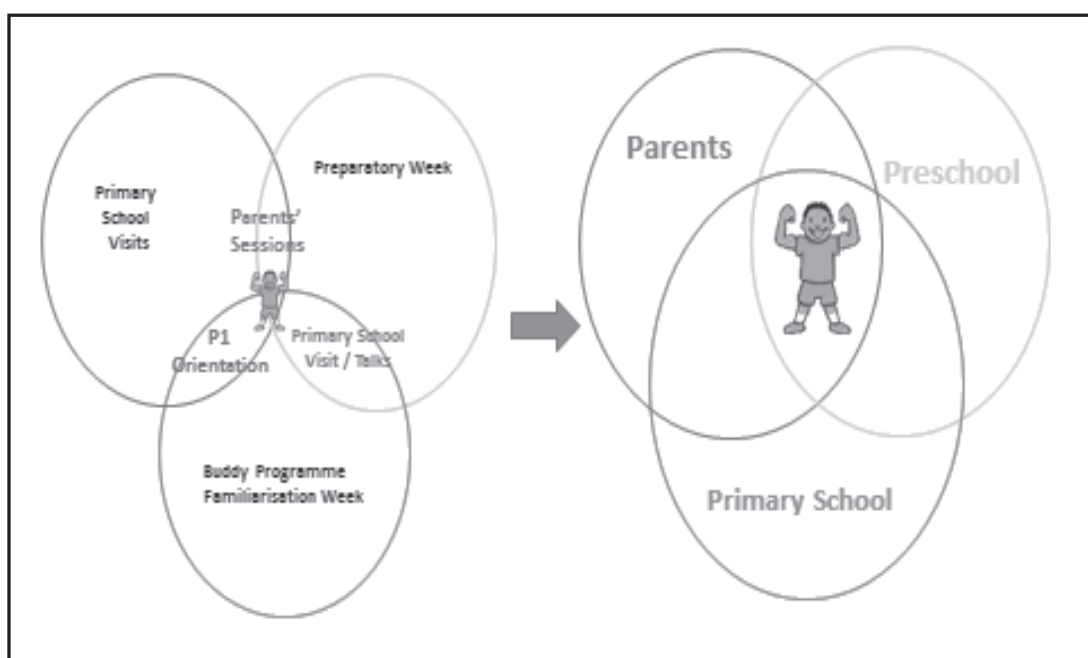
The above statements articulated by Mrs Chin in her presentation capture the essence of her model in which understanding the child’s world is strategically placed at the core of any transition programme. It is about taking efforts to understand the child’s perspectives and to support his or her unique needs accordingly. In particular, in order to create positive experiences for the child, the adult stakeholders need to ensure that transitions are not just about programmes and initiatives, but that it centers on the emotional well-being of the child. What this means is that the focus should not primarily be on the child’s academic performance at school as this would add to his or her anxieties; instead the focus should be on how the child feels in the new school environment, and whether he or she is coping well emotionally in the adjustment period. Echoing the same sentiment, Mrs Fong Yoon Fah, the Deputy Director of Quality Assurance of the Early Childhood Development Agency (who was interviewed for the project), urged preschools to go beyond requirements on transition strategies stipulated in the Singapore Pre-school Accreditation Framework (SPARK), to strengthening the psychological well-being of children. Primary schools also need to place priority in the creation of a safe and conducive environment for children to thrive emotionally as the continuity of the positive experiences of children in preschools is regarded by the children as a significant support factor in their transition process.

Increasing the common space for collaboration

The other key feature of this proposed model is to increase the common space between the various pairs of significant stakeholders in order to bridge any disconnect between the child and stakeholders, between parents and schools, and between preschool and primary school.

Figure 6 shows the transition strategies that were taking place at the pre- and primary school levels when the project was undertaken, and indicates a move towards increasing the common collaborative 'space' between each pair of stakeholders which can further support the child.

Figure 6: Increasing the common collaborative space



The following outlines some suggestions on how these pair of common spaces can be reinforced to further strengthen the transition support for children from pre- to primary school:

- (i) *Increasing the common space between parents and preschool (Figure 7)*
 To deepen the mutual knowledge of the child between parents and the preschools, a transition statement that captures the child's view of starting school could be formulated. This could function as a formalized document drawn up by the preschool in collaboration with each of the parent. In this manner, the unique needs of each child would be taken into account in a more deliberate way in preparing the child for primary

one. Figure 8 presents an example from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Department, Victoria State Government of what could be included in this proposed transition statement for the individual child.

Figure 7

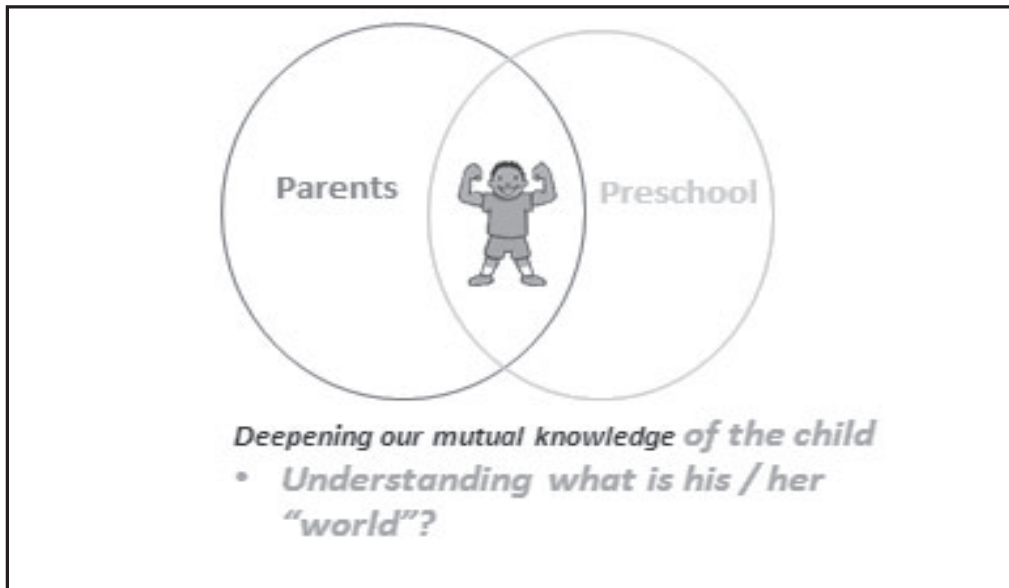


Figure 8: An example of a transition statement for each child

**Transition Learning and Development Statement
by Parent / Early Childhood Educator**

*Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
Victoria State Government
Australia*

Your child's views about starting school

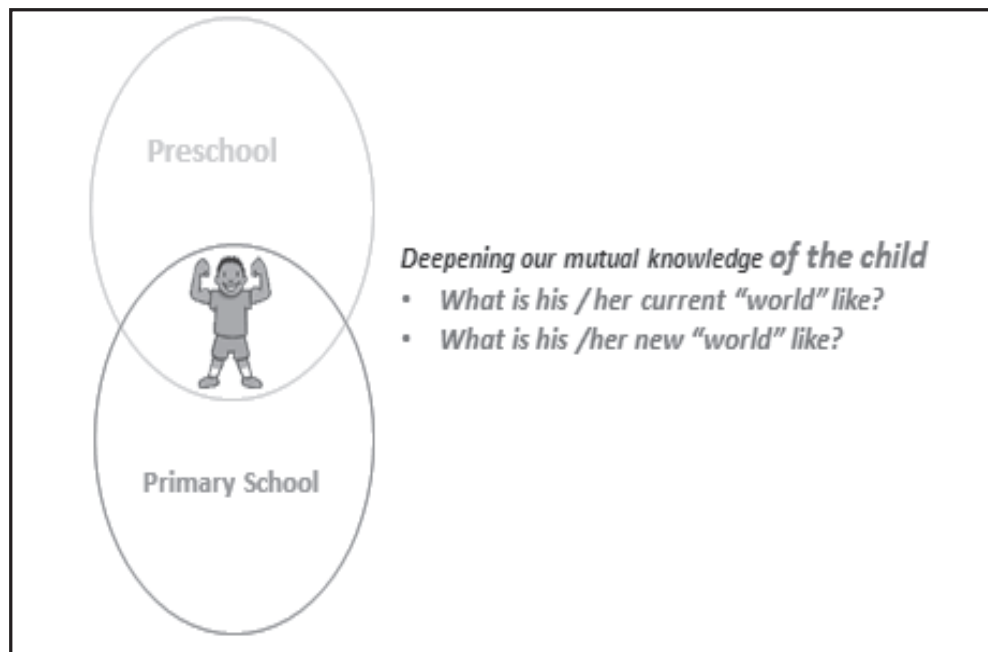
- *What your child likes/what makes them happy*
- *What your child is looking forward to*
- *What your child wants to know about their school*
- *What your child wants their prep teacher to know about them*

(ii) Increasing the common space between preschool and primary school (Figure 9)

Primary schools can be better positioned to facilitate a child's transition process if they receive more intimate knowledge of the child from the preschool. Although the primary schools can find out more about the child in due time, having the critical information about the child upfront will enhance the capacity of the primary school teachers to help the child settle in faster.

Another proposal for expanding this common space between the preschool and the primary school is for both parties to consider having a collaborative or professional development project. When feedback was obtained from the parents and the preschool educators with regards to their understanding of the primary school context, the interview results revealed that there was limited understanding of prevailing programmes which have been implemented to ease the transition from pre- to primary school. Primary schools on the other hand might also not have an adequate understanding of early childhood curriculum and pedagogy. This lack of mutual understanding constitutes another strand of disconnect in terms of transition planning for the children. In the interview with Mdm Ng Puey Koon (Principal Early Child Development at the Early Childhood Development Agency), she also emphasized the need for transition support to be made explicit to all stakeholders in order to enhance mutual understanding for all concerned. Having a joint project would have the potential of deepening the mutual understanding and strengthening cooperative efforts. Such a project calls for going beyond strategies such as school visits to a more in-depth collaborative project which would be useful not only in narrowing the knowledge gap, but also providing the professional platform to co-construct a transition programme which takes into account the children's needs in both the pre- and primary schools.

Figure 9

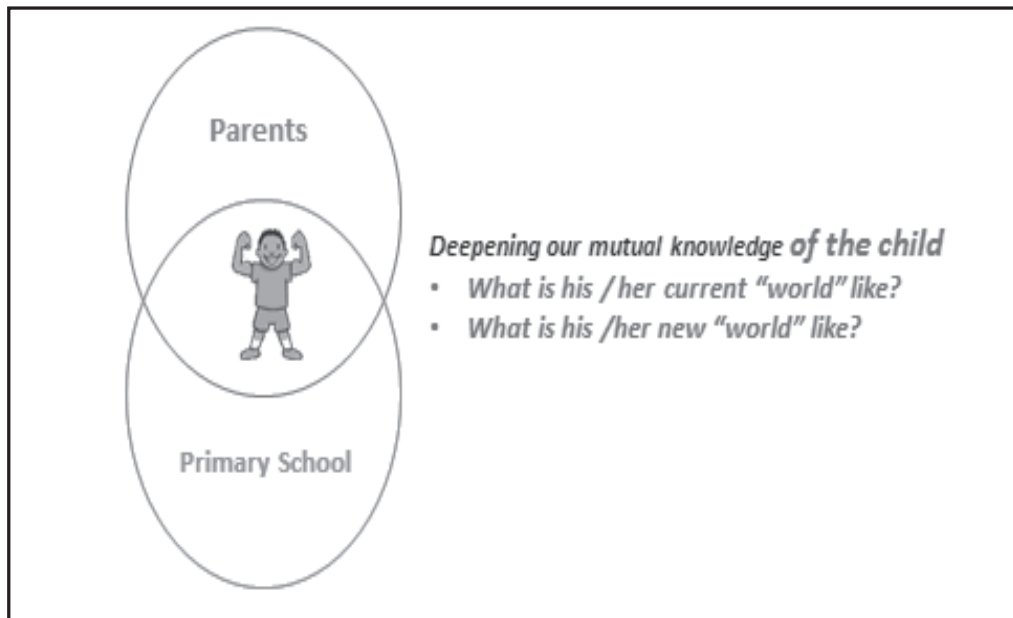


(iii) Increasing the common space between parents and primary school (Figure 10)

Parents can be effective supporters of their child's adjustment challenges when they are active participants together with their child in the transition process in a more wholesome manner – especially when they veer away from having a skewed focus on the academic competencies which could add to the child's tensions, to a focus which places centrality on the well-being of the child. The parental interviews conducted for the project, however pointed to a lack of awareness of the primary school setting and some of the recent initiatives to help children transition into primary one. In order that parents have a more insightful appreciation of their child's world when he or she starts primary schooling, this gap in the parental perceptions of the primary school context has to be addressed.

In an effort to equip parents with a more informed grasp of their child's learning process and the school environment, and to develop greater mutual understanding between the primary schools and the parents, primary schools have been organizing parental workshops during the year-end primary one orientation before the child starts school. In Xishan Primary School, there are also ongoing workshops after the start of the school term. The observation however has been that these workshops have not been very well-attended. To gain a better discernment into what it means for their child to start school at primary one, parents need to make it a prerogative to attend and contribute to these parental sessions so that, together with their child's teachers, they could better support their child's adjustment to the primary school environment.

Figure 10



Conclusion

The proposed child-centric collaborative transition support is very much centered on the child's world, how the significant stakeholders can work collaboratively to better understand the child's world, and to leverage on this understanding to inform practices. The focus of the proposed framework is on supporting the child's emotional well-being in this significant shift in their educational experiences, and it envisages successful transition in terms of an empowered and happy child – one who is confident, curious and collaborative in his or her new environment.

Biodata of Mrs Chin Wai Peng

Mrs Chin Wai Peng has more than 30 years of experience in public education, serving at different levels from primary school to junior college, since receiving her Post Graduate Diploma in Education. She has held the post of Principal of Corporation Primary School and Xishan Primary School since 2003. She was awarded the Long Service Medal and Public Administration Medal (Bronze) in 2007 and 2010 respectively. Mrs Chin shares a special interest in the development of early childhood education and the transition between preschool and primary school learning. During her work attachment with the Early Childhood and Special Needs Academic Group at the National Institute of Education in 2014, she focused her study on strengthening transition practices from the kindergarten to primary one, from the practitioner's perspective.

“From Preschool to Primary School: Building Mental Wellbeing of Children to Manage Change and Transition”

Write-up on Ms Tan Shu Hui’s Workshop Presentation

Ms Tan Shu Hui is a Senior Executive with the Singapore Health Promotion Board

Ms Tan Shu Hui introduced the concept of mental wellbeing and its role in supporting children’s transition from preschool to primary school. She presented the Zippy’s Friends programme, an international mental wellbeing programme to empower children in managing change and transition, which the Health Promotion Board has brought into Singapore. Several preschools here have successfully adopted this transition support programme to prepare their children for primary school. The following sections elaborate on the key points of her workshop presentation.

Mental Wellbeing – What does it mean for children?

Types of stressors and anxieties in transition

When children transition from preschool to primary school, they will experience changes at several levels:

- change in the school structure – size of school, subjects, school rules, etc.
- change in the classroom structure – size of class, seating arrangement, teaching methods, etc.
- change in relationships – teachers, peers, greater competition, etc.

The changes, which represent challenges they will encounter in their new primary school environment, are potential stressors for children. These stressors impose demands on children to have the skills and competencies to negotiate the differences between the former and the new school settings.

Defining mental wellbeing

Good mental wellbeing is a key factor in supporting children in their transition process. Children with good mental wellbeing are likely to be able to navigate their new surroundings with greater ease, and hence adjust better and faster to the new school setting. A successful transition occurs when the child feels happy, is able to relate well to others, and is confident and secure in his or her new school. So what is mental wellbeing?

Mental wellbeing is represented as a continuum, and demonstrates a person's state of emotional and social wellbeing. A child is said to have good mental wellbeing when he or she is able to cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and believe in his or her own and others' worth.

Figure 1 shows the conceptualization of mental wellbeing in terms of 3 key domains. Positive functioning relates to believing and valuing oneself, and being an effective problem solver when faced with challenges. Social intelligence refers to the competency to build and maintain relationships with new peers and adults. Emotional intelligence concerns the ability to identify, express and manage one's own feelings.

The factors which impact a child's mental wellbeing can be classified as protective or risk factors. Protective factors are the positive factors which build a child's mental wellbeing, while risk factors reduce the capabilities of the child to cope with the challenges of school transitions. Table 1 provides some examples of protective and risk factors which can influence a child's mental wellbeing and affect his or her ability to cope with transition dynamics and issues.

Figure 1: Conceptualization of mental wellbeing

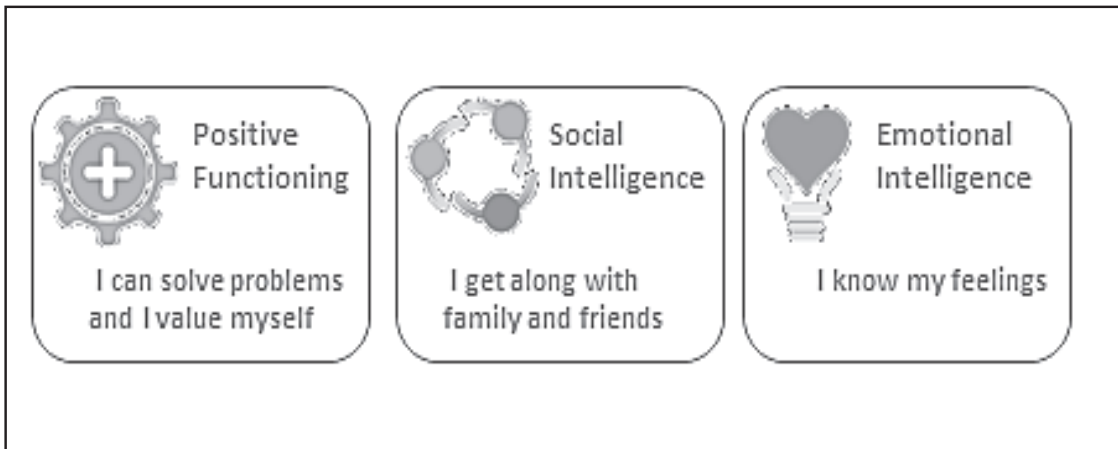


Table 1: Protective and risk factors

	Protective Factors	Risk Factors
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive sense of self • Good coping skills • Good social and communication skills • Able to express and manage emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low self-esteem • Low self-efficacy • Poor coping skills • Negative personality and temperament
Family/School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive family and teachers • Positive relationship with peers • Positive school experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sudden change in the family • Problems with schoolmates • Poor academic performance

Mental wellbeing resonates with the school readiness concept as it develops children's resilience and empowers them with the emotional and social capability to embrace their new school environments. In other words, school readiness for children should be conceived beyond the academic sphere, to include preparing children to be confident, socially adept, persistent at tasks, and emotionally well-adjusted.

Developing children's coping skills

A core component of building children's mental wellbeing which facilitates their transition from preschool to primary school is to equip them with a repertoire of coping skills to take on challenges. Undergirding this approach is the rationale that it is impossible to teach a child to solve every single problem he or she may encounter, and hence it is far more practical and productive to teach children coping skills which they can tap on in times of need. Two types of coping skills have been identified for this purpose:

- emotion-based coping – things which a child can do to make himself or herself feel better
- problem-based coping – things a child can do to address the source of stress and develop strategies to overcome them

Table 2 provides some strategies for developing various coping skills. Both emotion-based and problem-based coping skills are important, and they complement each other. For example, when a child is faced with heightened emotions as a result of a problem, he or she will not be a good problem solver until the strong emotions are dealt with. The employment of emotion-based coping is critical at this stage to help the child calm down. When the child feels less stressful, he or she will then be in a better position to consider engaging in problem-based coping, and this is best done with the support of an adult.

Table 2: Different ways of coping

Emotion-based coping	Problem-based coping	Unhelpful strategies
Playing games	Confronting the root of the problem	Avoiding
Eating my favorite food	Planning and preparation	Bottling up
Sleeping	Being disciplined	
Watching television		
Hugging favorite toy		

By empowering the child with the competence to evaluate and engage the different ways he or she can cope when faced with a challenge or problem, we are in fact providing the child with the guiding tools which he or she can utilize across different situations. Coping skills which are robust and useful meet the following criteria:

- it makes the child feel better
- it does not hurt the child or anyone else
- it improves the situation

Children who have a larger repertoire of coping strategies experience fewer negative consequences after experiencing difficult life events, and their ability to evaluate which coping strategy works better in a situation is related to successful adaptations at each stage of their life.

Introducing the Zippy's Friends Programme

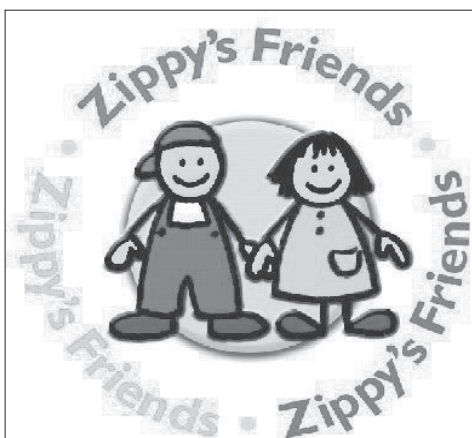
An evidence-based transition programme

The Zippy's Friends programme is an international school-based mental wellbeing programme for young children from 5 to 7 years old. It is an evidence-based programme developed by the Partnership for Children (UK) to promote the mental health and emotional wellbeing of children. Currently implemented in more than 30 countries, Zippy's Friends is a proven transition programme. Research conducted with children transitioning from kindergarten to primary school has demonstrated conclusively that those children who have undergone the programme developed greater adaptation skills when compared to a control group who did not experience the programme. These 'Zippy' children demonstrated better adjustments, both behaviourally and emotionally, in their new setting.

Since it has been found to be suitable for the Asian context as well, having been used in countries places as Hong Kong and Shanghai, the Health Promotion Board has brought it in as a transition programme for children moving from preschool to the primary school setting. The programme has made inroads in several preschools here in Singapore as an effective transition strategy to help preschool children achieve a smoother transition to primary one. Local research conducted for this programme has demonstrated positive results in the children in the following areas:

- significant improvement in the children's mental wellbeing from pre- to post-programme implementation
- improvement in the children's emotional awareness
- increase in diversity in the children's coping strategies

The Zippy's Friends curriculum



Zippy refers to a stick insect owned by two of the children in a series of stories. However the main characters in the story are the children – Zippy's friends. The stories narrate the everyday problems that these children encounter, and how they should respond to each of the situation.

Image from

<http://www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk/zippy-s-friends.html>

The aim of the Zippy's Friends programme is to equip children with a repertoire of coping strategies to meet challenges in change. Utilising child-friendly pedagogies such as role-playing, story-based scenarios, puppetries and games, children learn how to cope with everyday difficulties, identify and talk about their feelings, explore ways of dealing with them, and even learn how to encourage others. In the programme, the children will consider many diverse ways of dealing with different situations, and to evaluate for themselves what may happen if they cope in different ways. When children succeeded in overcoming a difficult situation with the appropriate coping skill, it improves their self-esteem, and contributes to feelings of competence and wellbeing. It also enables them to develop the confidence and ability to adapt to future situations.

Table 3 provides an outline of the Zippy's Friends curriculum. The program comprises of 6 modules which are delivered over 24 sessions. The modules should be taught as an ensemble. They can also be easily incorporated within a school's curriculum time.

Table 3: The Zippy's Friends Curriculum

Module	Topics	Objectives
Module 1: Feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling sad • Feeling angry or annoyed • Feeling jealous • Feeling nervous 	To improve children's abilities to recognize difficult feelings and to identify coping strategies to deal with those feelings
Module 2: Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving communication • Listening • Who can help us? • Saying what you want to say 	To improve children's abilities to communicate their feelings
Module 3: Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to keep a friend • Dealing with loneliness & rejection • How to resolve conflicts with friends • How to make friends 	To improve children's abilities to make friends, and to cope with rejection and loneliness
Module 4: Conflict resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to recognize good solutions • Bullying • Solving problem • Helping others resolve conflicts 	To improve children's abilities to resolve conflicts
Module 5: Dealing with change and loss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change and loss are part of life • Coping with death • Visit to the graveyard (this can be change to something more acceptable to our culture) • Learning from change and loss 	To improve children's abilities to cope with change and loss
Module 6: Coping strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different ways to cope • How to help others • Adapting to new situations • Celebrating together 	To improve children's abilities to use a variety of coping strategies

Biodata of Ms Tan Shu Hui

Ms Tan Shu Hui (B.Soc.Sci.(Hons) in Psychology) is a Senior Executive with the Health Promotion Board (HPB). Shu Hui focuses on planning, developing and implementing mental wellbeing programmes and educational resources for children, youth and stakeholders. These include contributing to HPB's key mental wellbeing initiatives, such as the "Colours of the Mind", to build the mental wellbeing of children and youth to promote positive outcomes in life.

“Children with Special Needs Encountering Change: Shared Commitments”

Write-up on the Panel Workshop Presentation

The Panel comprised of

Ms Rachel Goo (EIPIC Staff of Rainbow Centre);

Ms Sheela Krishnan (EIPIC Staff);

Ms Pauline Chan (Home-based Support Tutor);

Ms Nirmala Balakrishnan (Allied Educator [Learning & Behavioural Support],

Greenwood Primary School); and

A Parent of a Child with Special Needs

Children with special needs encountering change are in a most vulnerable position. If they are not effectively supported in the process, the discontinuities they face can further compound their life situations. The panelists, comprising of personnel who have worked with young children with special needs, shared their personal experiences on how these children facing key life transitions require crucial support to help them develop confidence and adaptive competence. There are five sections to this panel presentation, and four of these are documented in the following sections.

Section 1: Panel Presentation by Ms Rachel Goo From Home to School: Transition Support for a Child with Down Syndrome

In this first panel presentation, Ms Rachel Goo elaborated on of how she had supported a boy with Down Syndrome transition from home to an Early Intervention for Infants and Children (EIPIC) centre. From this case study, she outlined significant principles underpinning the support of children with special needs who struggle in making their first entry to a school environment.

Identification of transition issues and goals

Roy was enrolled in an EIPIC centre when he was 2 years and 10 months old. At enrollment, he displayed limited mobility as he could only crawl or walk with the aid of a walker, as well as limited communication mode as he resorted only to the use of non-verbal gestural signs and/or visual cue cards. When Roy arrived in school initially, it was a challenge for all involved. Roy would struggle and would refuse to walk, often time throwing tantrums, and would sometimes be wailing away. As a result, his teachers (i.e., Ms Goo and the assistant teacher) would end up having to carry him to the classroom.

Roy's difficulties in having a smooth transition to the EIPIC school environment was most likely due to separation anxieties, seen in Roy's refusal to let go of his mother upon arrival at the school. This could be due to insecurity as Roy encountered unfamiliar adults. Because his attendance had been irregular due to his medical problem in the digestive system, the attachment to other adults in school had not taken place easily, and this further aggravated the adaptation process. His resistance to walking was also regarded as a significant barrier factor to adjustment as it interfered with his assimilation process into the school activities.


To establish an effective transition support programme for Roy, Ms Goo undertook a literature search on children with Down Syndrome, conducted interviews with Roy's mother and his physiotherapist, and carried out observations using checklists. Here are her findings:

- *The results of the literature search*
 - children with Down Syndrome have low muscle tones and this could contribute to physical challenges
 - children with Down Syndrome would feel more secure and motivated in coming to school through the establishment of a positive environment, capitalization on play, and the utilization of a right motivator

- *The results of the interviews*
 - Roy's physiotherapist confirmed that Roy has weak muscles tones as well as legs with uneven lengths. Hence, Roy could encounter difficulties in stability and mobility activities.
 - Roy's mother however revealed that Roy could walk up to 2 metres at home by holding on to adults or some immovable objects for support. This demonstrated that Roy was more willing to walk in a familiar setting.

- *The results of the observations*
 - Table 1 shows the target distance, and the actual walking distance accomplished by Roy. The results indicate that Roy could achieve a total walking distance of 24 metres when he is motivated. For the walking required from the lobby to the classroom, and from classroom to the swimming pool, only visual cues were required. However, for the journey from the classroom to the soft play room, a visual card and a motivator were used as the visual cues. For Roy, the concrete motivator used was a ball because of his interests in playing with ball.

Table 1: How far can Roy walk?

Baseline: Distance 		
Location	Target	Baseline
Lobby to classroom	13.5m	4m
Classroom to Soft Play room	24m	24m*
Classroom to swimming pool	28m	10m

As a result of her investigation, 2 goals were established as key transition strategies for Roy:

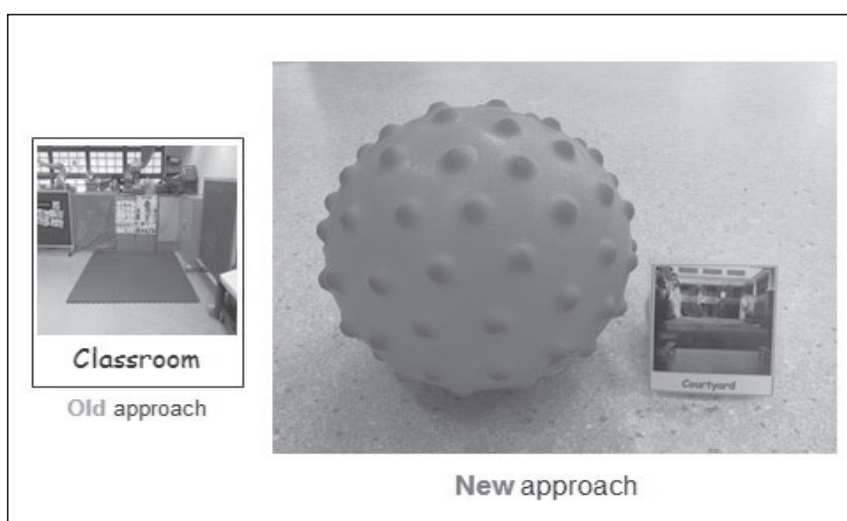
- (i) to create a positive environment upon his arrival in order to provide him with the sense of security to overcome his attachment issues
- (ii) to improve his walking mobility in order to promote independence and strengthen his overall physical health

Implementation of transition strategies

Several strategies were implemented to meet the 2 goals which had been established:

- The first was to change the cue system. The use of the visual card with the motivator, which had been identified as a ball, had shown to be effective, and therefore this was adopted. Upon his arrival, the ball would be introduced to him through play, in order to create a pleasant and positive experience for him. Figure 1 below shows the 'old' and the 'new' approach used in the cue system.
- The second was to change the class schedule so that Roy would start the first day of the week with an emphasis on his gross motor skills in terms of walking. In other words, the class would move straight to the courtyard instead of going directly to class. Previously, the first period of the week was the music and movement session.
- The third was to change the logistics arrangement to accommodate the new schedule. The waiting area was re-directed from the lift lobby to another area in which the walker could be parked immediately and the route to the courtyard be undertaken without the use of the walker.

Figure 1 – Using the ball as the motivator



Results of the transition support strategies

On the first trial, Roy was greeted with the ball play, and this was successful in calming him down and providing him with a pleasurable experience. When the class started walking to the courtyard, the ball continued to serve as the motivator as the class kicked the ball and played with the ball as they made their way to the destination. The target distance for this first trial was 19.5 metres which was the route from the waiting area to the courtyard. However, the result of this first trial showed Roy achieving beyond the target. He accomplished a total walking distance of 53.5 metres from the waiting area to the courtyard, and from the courtyard to the class without any fussing. Figure 2 shows the routes he took for this first trial.

The second trial was conducted more than 2 weeks later because of school absenteeism due to medical issues. The target was to repeat the achievement of the first trial, i.e., to walk 53.5 metres. However, a pleasant unforeseen incident took place. Instead of taking the usual route back to the classroom, one of the classmates turned the other way and took the longer route instead. Everyone, including Roy followed without making any fuss. As shown in Figure 3, this unexpected route was 90 metres long, and Roy was successful in achieving this longer route independently. The same feat was repeated in a third trial.

Figure 2: Achieving a distance of 53.5 m on the first trial

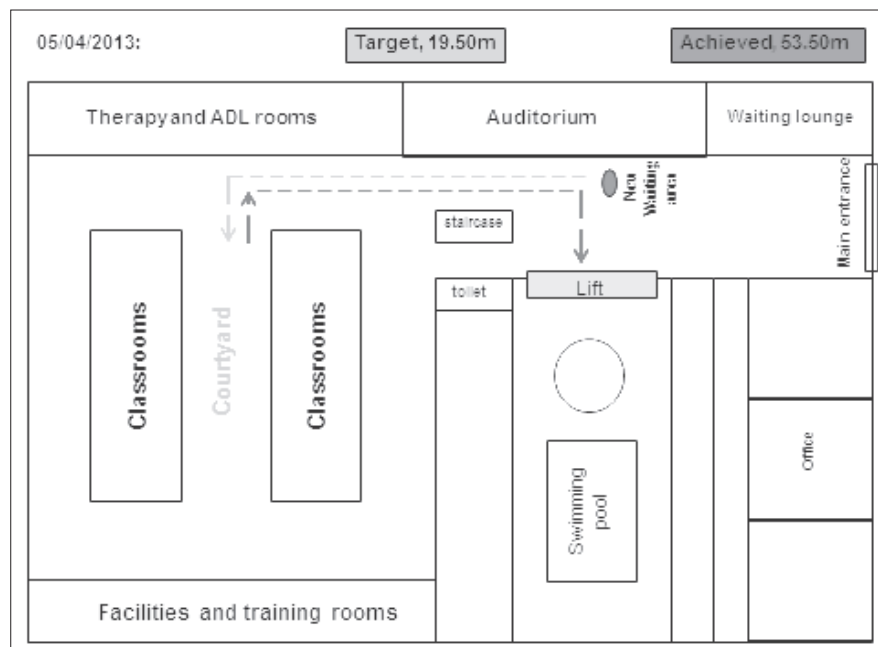
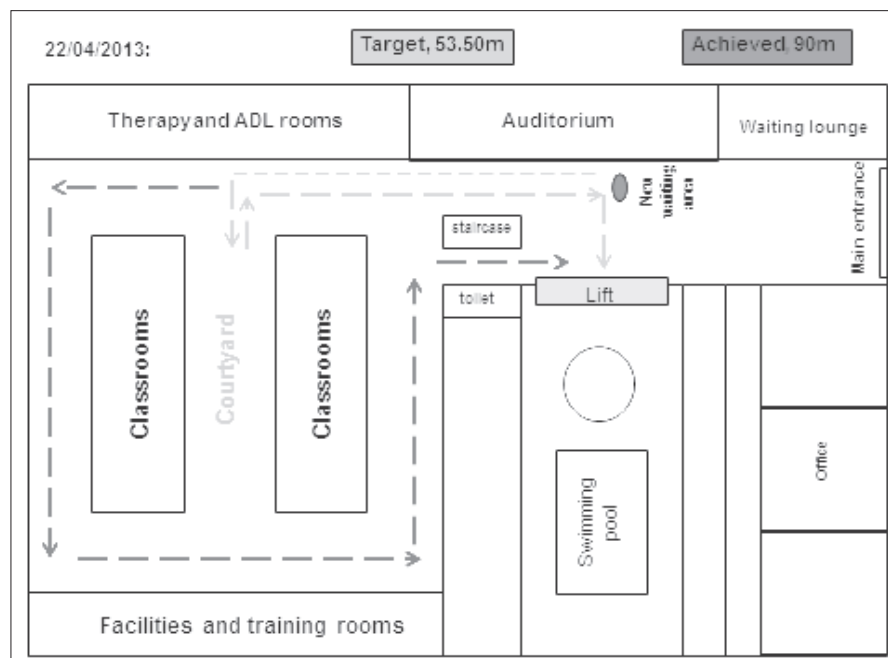


Figure 3: Achieving a distance of 90 m on the second trial



Conclusion

The transition strategies implemented was successful in helping Roy adapt more readily to the school environment and achieved beyond the targeted mobility goal which was set for him. Underpinning this successful case study are several key principles which an educator can draw upon when planning transition support for a child with special needs. A significant starting point is to observe the child's interest and tapping on this to choose a right motivator to establish the positive transition experience for the child. Understanding the child needs is also crucial in order to create opportunities for learning for him or her. The case study of Roy has also shown that it is important to help realise a child's potential through effective transition strategies that engage his attention and motivation.

Biodata of Ms Rachel Goo

Ms Rachel Goo began her career working with children with special needs in 2009. Previous to this, she was working in the building management industry for 10 years. After making her career switch to being a special needs education teacher, she felt a sense of fulfillment working with young children in the early intervention programme. Hence she has been working with the younger children from 2 to 6 years old with moderate to severe needs. Her scope of work includes lesson planning and the development of resources, as well as home visitations to empower and en-skill the parents to work with their children in a more familiar setting. She liaises closely with the therapists and parents to cater to the individual needs of the students. Ms Goo is also involved in the 'My Pals' project which is an exchange programme to enhance the acceptance and integration of persons with special needs into the community.

Section 2: Panel Presentation by Ms Sheela Krishnan

Transition for Children with Developmental Concerns: A Partnership

In this second panel presentation, Ms Sheela Krishnan focused on the critical role of partnerships as she reflected on her collaboration with significant stakeholders in facilitating a child with developmental needs transition from an Early Intervention for Infants and Children (EIPIC) centre to a mainstream preschool for part of the day. She also drew on her vast experiences to give us a vivid portrayal of the challenging journey that such a child and his family would

have to navigate as they weave through multiple transitions, first to the EIPIC setting, and then to the mainstream preschool setting.

Beginning the journey at the EIPIC centre

When a child with developmental needs first enrolled in an EIPIC centre, changes are encountered on multiple fronts for the child and his family, and these often translate into a complex set of struggles and challenges for both the child and his family. The following delineates some of the changes that could arise at this juncture of the child's and family's journey:

- *Changes that could be encountered by the child*
As the child enters for the first time a formal school setting, he or she would have to adapt to expectations concerning appropriate behaviour in a setting that is quite different from home. The child now assumes a new role as a student and has to begin to include 'strange' adults and other children into his or her life. In addition, the shift from a flexible home schedule to a school schedule which is far more structured could further affect the child's behaviours and his or her transition process. Changes in learning would also have to take place. The EIPIC journey for the child specifies new skills which he or she would have to acquire for his or her growth and development, and this could even include the skill of learning how to learn.
- *Changes that could be encountered by the family*
Family behaviours are also affected as they confront the fact that their child may not be able to fit into mainstream schooling, and commence on an emotional journey to make adjustments in expectations while still clinging to the aspiration that their child would make it to mainstream schooling one day. The family may be required to change their roles as some EIPIC centres make it mandatory for parents to stay with their child in school so that they can be empowered to help their child at home. For EIPIC centres, families are seen as valued partners as they know their child best, and they could be taught to embed learning for the child in the everyday routine activities at home. This means that the family would have to make the necessary adjustment in their work and other

schedules to accommodate this requirement, and also to acquire a new set of skills in order to provide the additional support for their child at home.

Once the child has settled into the EIPIC centre, the transition support to prepare his or her inroad into a mainstream environment will begin. The readiness for school transition model is applied here. Readiness training for mainstream educational environments looks into the functional skills that would enable the child to integrate into a mainstream preschool within the Singapore context. These skills may include the following: sitting in a large group; attending to a teacher in front; performing self-help skills such as toileting and eating independently; and playing with other children.

In addition to skills empowerment, the transition support for the child and family needs to be conceptualised as a journey of HOPE, as captured by these words of Ms Sheela in her presentation:

“Of course we also tell the parents that the child is not there yet; however, we will never know until we give the child the opportunity, and that is why we use the word, ‘YET’”.

The family needs to be provided with the hope and the aspiration, that their child might make it to mainstream education one day. This ‘day’ can come as early as 6 months into the EIPIC training or can take several years before the child is deemed suitable to enter mainstream schooling. Thriving on this sense of hope is a critical part of the entire transition support programme for the child and his family.

Moving into the mainstream setting – A PARTNERSHIP journey

When the child is ready to make the move from an EIPIC centre to a mainstream preschool setting, he or she will face a new set of changes along similar trends – changes in behaviour, routines, relationships, learning, expectations and roles. And the cycle begins all over again, with one key difference – another partner, the preschool, enters the scene, and this brings the role of partnership into a higher profile within the transition planning network.

Establishing strong partnerships is a crucial factor in helping a child transition successfully from an EIPIC centre to a mainstream preschool. It is important for the EIPIC team, the family and the preschool to come together as a unified team with clearly defined goals for the child and for each partner in order that the child be given the consistent support that would empower him or her to function effectively in a mainstream school environment. To expound on the value of partnerships, a case study was presented to illustrate how an EIPIC team, the family and a preschool collaborated on the transition support for a child.

Irfan, who was diagnosed with autism, was enrolled in an EIPIC centre when he was 2 ½ years old. When he first enrolled, he had lots of rigidity, and was displaying tantrums for any small changes that took place. He was also a fussy eater. He had difficulties coping with the challenges because he could not manage the change of environment. With the EIPIC training and family support, Irfan did well enough to be considered for mainstream schooling two years later. As a result, when he was 5 years old, the decision was made by his family in consultation with relevant personnel to let him try a mainstream preschool while still attending an EIPIC centre. Ramakrishna Mission Sarada Kindergarten opened their doors to Irfan, and to a partnership journey together with Irfan's family and his EIPIC centre.

Extensive preparation was undertaken to ensure that Irfan experienced a successful transition, and this involved all the partners making the time and putting in the efforts to come together to discuss and plan clear and realistic transition goals, as well as to build relationship, understanding and mutual trust in order to work well with one another. The process also entailed placing Irfan in the preschool setting to observe how he reacted to the new environment, and to ascertain the school-readiness skills he would require to make good adaptations in the mainstream environment. Intervention strategies were then drawn up to teach Irfan these readiness skills. Family partnership was vital at this point in ensuring consistent training to help Irfan attain the necessary readiness skills. The family was seen as a capable and critical partner in giving the required support and training for their child, and it is imperative to elicit their input during the transition process. Various transition strategies, such as employing a buddy system, were also put in place in the kindergarten to help Irfan adapt to the different setting.

The partnership took 18 months to develop, but this was considered necessary in order to build an effective support system for Irfan in this important stage of his life journey. Here are some key principles that underpin the successful development of the partnership that had evolved as a collaborative journey through shared vision and coordinated hard work:

- Everyone in this partnership saw the child with commitment, hope and belief.
- The partners placed priority in developing mutual understanding and open communications, and emphasized the need to be respectful of different cultures, expertise and views.
- There was an understanding that the transition plans were not cast in stones, and that unforeseen circumstances could arise. The partners were willing to respond flexibly to changes that needed to be made and to help each other tackle unexpected challenges that arose in an objective and coordinated manner.
- The partners believed that relationship building is the key, and they were willing to put in extensive time and effort to work towards this common cause in supporting Irfan in his transition journey.

The extensive planning and the development of a trusting and capable partnership comprising the EIPIC team, the family and preschool paid off. The impact on Irfan's transition process was heartening. In a video presented in the workshop, Irfan was seen settling well into the kindergarten, even though this was only his fourth visit to the kindergarten. The kindergarten peers were helpful to him, he listened to the teachers' instructions, he completed a given task on his own, he demonstrated independent skills, and he took on challenges like trying food he previously would not want to eat. It was undeniable that Irfan adjusted well to the kindergarten environment and that he had developed a sense of belonging and confidence in the mainstream environment.

Biodata of Ms Sheela Krishnan

Ms Sheela Krishnan holds a Certificate in Special Education from the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore and a Bachelor in Education (Special Education) from Flinders University, Australia. She has 20 years of experience working with children with special needs. For the first few years, Ms Sheela worked in a special school teaching children from aged 7 to 12 years with moderate to severe special needs after which she moved on to early intervention work with children from birth to six years. She has been in the early intervention field for 12 years now, and her job scope involves teaching, training (internal and external), coaching and mentoring staff, empowering families, and supporting and collaborating with preschools on integration. Ms Sheila has also participated in various projects with organisations which support the development of children with special needs.

**Section 3: Panel Presentation by Ms Pauline Chan
From Preschool to Primary School: Transition Preparation**

In this third panel presentation, Ms Pauline Chan shared how she provided home-based support for children with special needs transitioning from preschool to primary school, and outlined how the process of transition preparation would require identifying learning needs in the child's developments, prioritizing the areas/skills for intervention, optimizing on the child's strengths and interests to motivate and empower him or her in the learning, and applying the learning across different contexts.

Addressing the areas and skills for intervention

In identifying the skills and knowledge which a child with special needs would require for adapting to a mainstream school environment, there are three areas for consideration: (i) academic skills and knowledge, (ii) classroom readiness skills, and (iii) social skills. For each child however, the areas of focus for intervention will be different because of his or her unique needs. Hence it is necessary to know the child's current emerging skills, and assess these against prerequisites skills and knowledge required upon entry to primary one. The identification of the child's learning and developmental needs constitutes the critical first step to an effective transition support programme for him or her.

Prioritizing the areas of intervention is required in circumstances when there are numerous needs to attend to. This is to ensure that the child is not overwhelmed by too many demands on him or her. Underpinning the decision on what to teach the child is the principle of impact – to deliberate on the question on what skills and knowledge the child would need that would have the most impact on easing him or her into the primary school setting.

Some examples of the more significant areas and skills which probably need to be prioritized for teaching in the transition planning could include the following:

- whether the child is able to follow the class lessons and listen to teacher's instructions
- whether the child is able to take reference, operate in a group setting, and handle the variety of writing implements and materials
- whether the child is able to perform expected behaviours, and observe the rules and procedures in different contexts

Addressing the methods for intervention

The transition support intervention will be most effective when it is based on early childhood principles, and utilizes the child's strengths and interests. It is about making the areas to be taught accessible to the child by taking into account the child's developmental premises and leveraging on the affective domains. In terms of the developmental level, it is important to take note that young children at the preschool level have short attention span and are concrete learners, and therefore require pedagogical approaches which engages the child actively in the learning. Using hands-on activities and role plays are some examples on how a young child can participate in the learning more meaningfully. When the teaching is anchored on the child's strength, for example the use of visual cues for children with autism, and the child's interests, such as basing the activities on his or her favourite cartoon characters, it would further help the child make better connections with the learning.

Consistency and generalization of the learning are crucial processes in the transition preparation. Children with special needs often require lots of drill and practice, and positive reinforcement to help and encourage them to learn skills. Once the child has consistently attained a reasonable level of competency in a particular skill, the next process to look into is generalization – transferring the utilization of the skills to different contexts, activities, people and environments. This process could be easily integrated into the child’s life routines. Table 1 specifies some goals which can be comfortably embedded within the communication opportunities of a child’s daily activities.

Table 1: Ideas for embedding goals in routines

Activity	Embedded Goals
Disruption of routine (e.g. missing items, faulty items, limited items)	Express, recall and share details ; ask questions; seek help; negotiate and resolve conflict
Outing trips	Express, recall and share details; ask and answer questions; initiate and maintain conversations; seek help; build on vocabulary and general knowledge
Story time/TV time	Reading skills; express, recall and share details and events with others; ask and answer questions
Shopping list, schedules	Seek help; complete writing task in shorter time

A case study – Josh

Josh was diagnosed with autism when he was 3 years old, and had been attending an educational centre for children with special needs and developmental concerns. He is currently 6 years old and has already enrolled into a mainstream primary school. In other words, Josh will be attending primary one the following year.

The first step in the transition planning for Josh was to assess his current competencies and identify the possible areas and skills to be considered for further intervention. Table 2 details the results of this process. The second step was to prioritize the areas for intervention. After gathering the prerequisite information, a decision was made to focus on the following aspects which would be most useful for Josh in adapting to the primary one setting here in Singapore:

- academic skills and knowledge – reading skills; express, recall and share details with others; answer when, why, and how questions
- classroom readiness skills – seek help; attend to peers; complete writing in shorter time
- social skill – initiations and maintenance of conversations; strategies to resolve conflicts

Josh is a visual learner, and he likes to move around and participate in hands-on activities. In particular, he enjoys role-play, musical activities and racing. He shows interests in puppets, animals, story books, food and cars. In planning the intervention activities, Josh's strengths and interests were taken into account as far as possible in order to motivate and empower him in the learning process. Making learning a positive experience is a significant factor in contributing to the effectiveness of the intervention activities.

Table 2: Identification of areas and skills for further development

Academic Skills and Knowledge	
<p>Able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Count items; identify and read numerals, colours, shapes, sizes • Comprehend and follow simple story and events • Answer and ask who, what, where, when (day) questions • Make simple request and comments 	<p>Requiring further development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty in reading, limited general knowledge and vocabulary • Difficulty in expressing, recalling and sharing details and event with others • Difficulty with when, why and how questions
Classroom Readiness Skills	
<p>Able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually follow teacher’s instructions • Compliant, and willing to work and share with others • Use variety of stationeries; display legible handwriting • Compare similarities and differences; know cause and effect; make simple prediction; can imaging and pretend 	<p>Requiring further development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only seek help at times • Attend to peers occasionally during class discussion • Take a long time to complete writing tasks
Social Skills	
<p>Able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow most class and activity rules • Usually gentle with peers • Sometimes seek playmates and ask peers to play • Usually accept transition and changes 	<p>Requiring further development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only seek help at times • Few strategies to resolve conflicts • Few initiations and maintenance of conversations

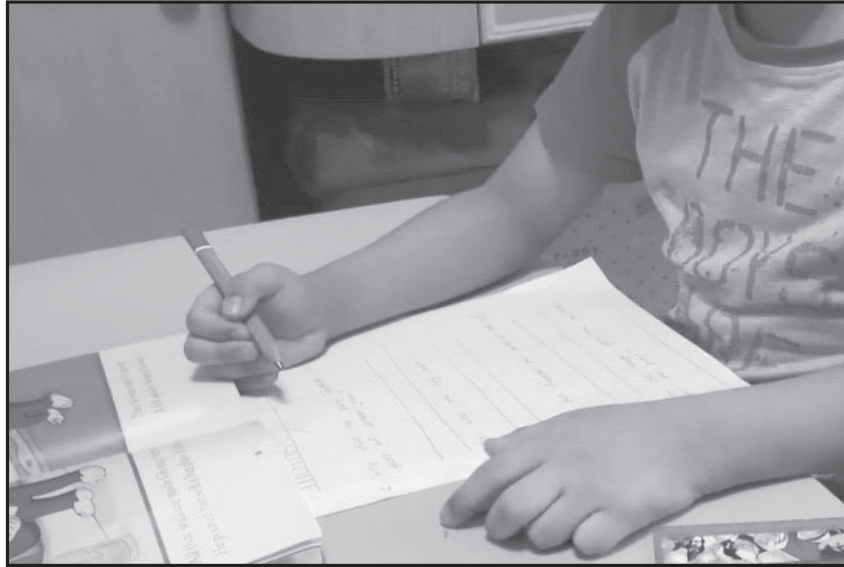
An example of one of the transition preparation sessions that was conducted for Josh was featured in a video-clip segment during the workshop presentation. First, a schedule was set up together with the rules so that Josh would understand what was expected of him during the session. This activity also provided the opportunities to embed several other goals such as writing (see Figure 1), expressing and sharing information, and asking questions.

Figure 1: Writing the schedule



Next, capitalizing on Josh's interest, a story-book was utilized to set up activities for reading, attending to peers, answering 'why' and 'how' questions, and building of vocabulary and general knowledge. This was followed by a role-play depicting scenarios from the story book. Role-play was chosen to further engage Josh because this was an area of his interests. Goals which were targeted for the role-play activity included negotiating and resolving conflict, expressing, recalling and sharing details, and attending to peers. The wrapping up session (see Figure 2) comprised of a comprehension activity to reinforce learning in these areas - reading skills, answering of open-ended questions and completing writing tasks.

Figure 2: Working on the comprehension activity



What was seen in this particular activity demonstrated the progress that Josh had made since he embarked on the transition preparation with Ms Pauline Chan. Initially, Josh was quite resistant to writing; but with consistent practice and optimizing on his interests and strengths, Josh showed improvement and greater willingness to do the writing activities. He was also more forthcoming in employing a range of communication skills such as asking and responding questions.

Biodata of Ms Pauline Chan

Ms Pauline Chan graduated from the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore with a Diploma in Special Education and a Master in Education (Early Childhood). She has been in the field of special education for twelve years. In the first 8 years, she was a teacher in a special school working with children from aged six to thirteen, with moderate to severe special needs. For the past four years, she has been providing home-based interventions on a one-to-one basis for young children with special needs. Her intervention involves supporting these children in their transition from EIPIC centre to preschool, as well as from preschool/EIPIC centre to primary school. Ms Chan has also volunteered in preschool classes where she worked with teachers to implement interventions for children with special needs and developmental concerns to facilitate their integration into mainstream classes.

Section 4: Panel Presentation by Ms Nirmala Balakrishnan

Transition Support: Building a Bridge with Love, Care and Concern

In this fourth panel presentation, Ms Nirmala Balakrishnan expounded on how transition planning was carried out in Greenwood Primary School for children with special needs as they embarked on their primary education in a mainstream environment. In detailing the processes and partnerships involved in the transition support, she demonstrated how these were undergirded by a set of key principles which provided the critical framework when working with children with special needs. To elucidate the importance of careful and thoughtful planning, Ms Nirmala provided some examples of transition strategies that have supported these children in making adaptations to their new educational setting.

Guiding principles for supporting the transition of children with special needs

The formulation of transition strategies for children with special needs is guided by the following four key principles:

- child-focused support - it is necessary to customize the transition strategies in order to meet the unique needs of each child
- dynamic and ongoing support – transition support for children with special needs is not a one-off event but one that requires consistent intervention
- many sources of support – it is essential to work with different stakeholders in order to establish an effective support network for the child
- monitoring and evaluation – to ensure that the child is adjusting well, a system needs to be in place to appraise the progress of the child

Importance of transition planning for children with special needs entering Primary One

Children with special needs may have additional challenges compared to typically developing children when they embark on their primary education. If there is no transition support established for them, their journey into mainstream primary schooling can be far more onerous as they try to cope not only with new peers who may not understand them and new demands in the terms of schoolwork, but also with teachers who may be unaware of their needs or unsure of how to accommodate them accordingly. For these children, the feelings of alienation and inability to handle the new demands are often intensified in an environment which does not make special provisions for their individual uniqueness and difference.

On the other hand, for children with special needs who have been effectively supported in their maiden entry into primary one, there is a greater likelihood that they would enjoy school and would demonstrate a steady progress in their academic and socio-emotional needs. This can occur when key elements have been put in place to ensure the following:

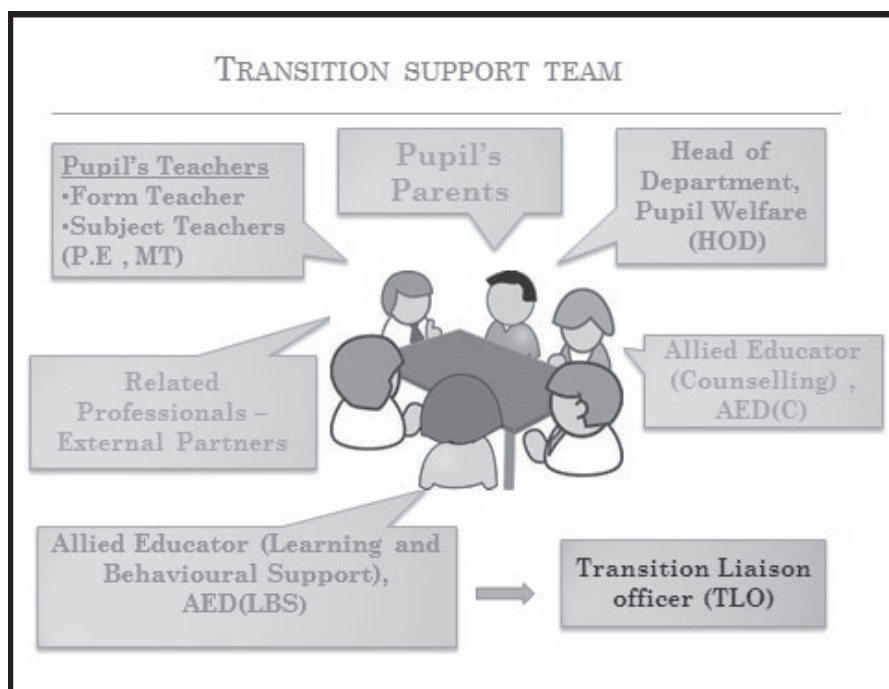
- teachers and peers are empowered to accommodate the child's needs
- the classroom environment is inclusive and instills a sense of belonging
- parents and other key stakeholders are positively involved in the child's adaptation process

Building the bridge – the transition support team

The formation of a transition support team is the dynamic element in this bridge metaphor. It specifies the collaboration needed to support the child in his or her adjustment to the primary school. The conceptualization of such a team underscores the importance of a collaborative approach to supporting children with special needs undergoing change. The membership for this team is a diverse group, but each holding a crucial piece of the jigsaw required for the effective

planning of the transition process for the child. Figure 1 shows the relevant personnel in the transition support team.

Figure 1: Members of the transition support team



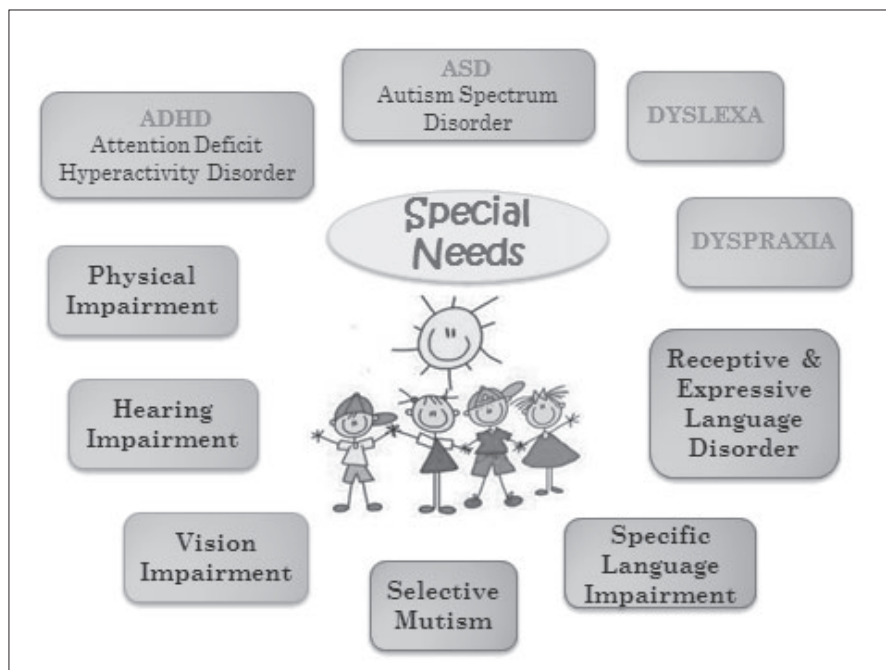
The transition support team is based on a partnership model in which each partner is seen as an expert in a particular area of the child, and each expertise is valued for what it could bring to the planning and support system. Spearheading the team is the transition liaison officer, and this is usually the Allied Educator (Learning and Behavioural Support) [AED (LBS)] of the primary school. The AED (LBS) works with the various other personnel to build up a coherent picture of the child's needs in order to establish a cohesive support system for the child. In the transition planning for each child with special needs, the team works in collaboration to develop an individualised plan for each child, establish shared commitments to be undertaken by each personnel, and create a supportive network for communication and collaboration.

Timing is another crucial element to be considered in the process. It is ideal for the transition support planning to take place the year before the child's entry into the primary school. Parents could approach the school concerning their child's needs during the primary one registration so that the transition support system which has been outlined can be operationalized as soon as possible. This will ensure that when the child begins his or her first day in the school, there is an existing transition support system planned for him or her, thereby easing the child's transition to the new environment.

Examples of transition strategies for children with special needs

Figure 2 shows the wide range of children with special needs who were enrolled in Greenwood Primary School for primary one in the year 2014. Before the year commenced, the AED (LBS) had set up the transition support meeting for every child with special needs entering the school, and through these collaborative sessions, drawn up an individualized transition plan for each of them.

Figure 2: Children with special needs in mainstream schooling



Here are examples of specific accommodations that were drawn up to ease the transition of three of these children with special needs coming into the school:

- *For a child with partial visual impairment*
 - to sit the child to the right side of the teacher
 - to take note of the reflective board
 - to have large print on board for visual clarity
 - to be mindful of child's spatial awareness issues during physical activities
 - to assign a buddy to assist the child in maneuvering areas such as staircases
 - to ensure that the child wears his spectacles at all time
 - to give a smaller book which enables reading at a closer proximity during lessons such as big book time in class
 - to take note of child's sensitivity to loud noises

- *For a child with hearing impairment*
 - to sit child at the better hearing side towards the teacher
 - to place the child away from distracting noises which will interfere with the hearing aids, for example, child should be seated away from fans to reduce interfering noise
 - to place the child nearer the front, for example, the second row, so that the child can clearly see the teacher and lip read to aid better understanding
 - to check with the child if he or she can hear the teacher

- *For a child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder*
 - to sit the child away from possible distractions such as corridors, windows, near air-conditioning or passageways
 - to sit the child in front so that the child has direct view of the teacher
 - to assign a mature and responsible buddy to remind him of his work such as copying of homework
 - to frequently check for his understanding using questioning, for example, so that the child stays focused
 - to prompt the child's attention by tapping on his table for example

In addition to the planning and collaboration work with the transition support team, the AED (LBS) also conducted a series of activities with the children even before their first day of school. These activities were crafted to build positive rapport with the children; hence when the child began school, they already had a familiar adult whom they can connect with. Creating a sense of security for the child is a significant factor in undergirding children's successful transition from the preschool or early intervention centres to the 'BIG' school. Successful transition for children with special needs is ultimately about establishing a safe, positive and nurturing environment for them to thrive amidst changes.

Biodata of Ms Nirmala Balakrishan

Ms Nirmala Balakrishnan was previously an early childhood educator. She entered the field of special needs education in 2008 when she graduated from the National Institute of Education (Nanyang Technological University) with a Diploma in Special Education. As an Allied Educator (Learning & Behavioural Support) in a mainstream primary school, she works with different stakeholders to cater to the needs of the pupils with special educational needs. With her experiences and training in both early childhood and special needs education, Ms Nirmala is in a unique position to effectively support children with special needs transition from preschool to the 'big' school.

‘Early Years Transitions: Building Bridges for Children’ reinforces the importance of early years transitions for all children. It brings together research and practice in a way that will support effective transition programs in Singapore.

*Professor Bob Perry and Professor Sue Dockett
Charles Sturt University, Australia*

The Henry David Hochstadt Early Childhood (HDHEC) Education Endowment Fund, which resides with the Early Childhood and Special Needs Education Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, is a gift from Mr Herman Hochstadt, the eldest son of Mr Henry David Hochstadt and a Pro Chancellor of the Nanyang Technological University. The fund has been up to support development, and research for the enhancement and sustainability of quality practices for early childhood education, especially within the Singapore context. The inaugural HDHEC symposium which was held on 19 July 2014 at the National Institute of Education, and this follow-up resource package publication constitute the firsts of a series of developments for the field of early childhood education made possible by the endowment fund.

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