

Giving parents a voice: Strategies to enhance parent capacity to support transition to school

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In this article, I will broadly examine the existing literature on the role of parents in supporting a child's learning, including the research study I undertook. The educational importance of parental engagement is well established, offering considerable academic and social benefits to children and across the life course. Similarly, there is a wealth of research on the importance of being school-ready and educational transitions. However, while there is no shortage of work in the parent engagement and school readiness fields, what is lacking is rich data regarding the contributions that parents make before their children commence formal learning, and what relationship this might have to a child's success at school.

My mixed-methods project (Graham, 2019) aimed to understand the contributions made by parents in preparing their child for school and relate them to the child's outcomes in the first months of the schooling experience. It was fundamentally grounded in the belief

that children's outcomes are enhanced when parents are engaged in the learning journey. It is reasonably assumed that the earlier this engagement takes place, the better the outcomes for children. Yet, there is limited research in parental practices prior to children starting school, hence the impetus for my research. Some key findings and implications for practice highlight the need for parent voice; transition to school starts well before a child enters the school gate, and if parents are supported early, it sets the trajectory for their engagement and lightens the work of educators and policy architects.

Understanding the place of parents in supporting learning

Children are born ready to learn, and neuroscience provides strong evidence that experiences in the first five years last a lifetime and influence wellbeing, learning, behaviour and social development (Winter, 2010).

The quality of literature in the area of parental engagement varies, with an inconsistency in definitions and effect on outcomes. Broadly conceived, parental engagement promotes shared responsibility for education and relationships between families and schools to promote children's outcomes (Fox & Olsen, 2014).

Transitioning to school is seen as an evolving process, beginning when children prepare for school in the home environment, continuing after starting compulsory schooling, and finishing only when they have adjusted to school (Hirst, Jervis, Visagie, Sojo, & Cavanagh, 2011; Northern Territory Government, 2017).

School readiness, a complex and multi-dimensional construct, encompasses a child's lived experience contributing to their success in school (Northern Territory Government, 2017).

Children do not progress in silos. Educators must consider how children acquire competencies and recognise children's need for opportunities that support and foster their development such as learning and socialisation as facilitated by parents (Hirst et al., 2011). The period before a child starts school provides fundamental opportunity in which to foster a child's development, particularly in regard to interpersonal skills and behavioural regulation.

This transition-to-school period establishes a pattern of parental engagement as home and school contexts come together. The relationship between educators and parents is collaborative as parents are often interested in the academic and behavioural expectations of their child, and how to support the transitioning process (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Hirst et al., 2011). Parents/carers are a child's "first and forever" teacher, and so what they invest alongside the environment they create during these formative years affects the scope and extent to which the school can make a difference. This time is as important as the schooling years.

Children do not leave their before-school experiences at the door when they arrive at school; some children are ready to learn, while others have some work to do before they adjust to the demands of school. So, as service providers, we have a responsibility to leverage parents' knowledge and understand the beliefs or activities to which children have been exposed.

The research

My mixed-methods study was conducted in South Australia and the Northern Territory during 2017 and involved surveys with 120 first-year-of-school parents, 52 matched teacher-parent dyads, and in-depth interviews with 16 parents. Schools were a mix of large, small, metropolitan and country, drawn from lower and higher socio-economic positions. The sample of parents ranged from working full-time and part-time, to stay-at-home parents.

Two distinct components of "parent capacity" were conceptualised: parental preparation behaviours, and the beliefs parents hold. Modelling suggested that school-entry outcomes could be predicted by parental preparation behaviours. The interview process also alluded to other matters that weighed on the minds of parents in relation to their child's school entry. Parents spoke of the personal, environmental, social, familial, cultural, financial and policy/regulatory factors that hindered their preparation or limited their capacity. Some key research findings are presented here to pave the way forward for early childhood services and schools to re-think how best they might harness the voice of parents.

Recognise the shared role of parents and teachers

Research emphasises that seeing education as a shared responsibility is most effective for enhancing children's outcomes and parent engagement in education (Fox & Olsen, 2014; Pushor, 2015). Parents must be perceived as co-educators, and it is crucial to develop parental social capital. Parent knowledge is defined by Pushor (2015) as the unique knowledge arising from the lived experiences of being a parent. She perceives parents as being central to the educative process and considers both kinds of knowledge held by teachers and parents equally important to a child's learning and wellbeing. Educators need to support parent participation in education and consider them as integral to a child's learning process, not peripheral to it.

In the study, parents were mostly confident in their role as parents and accepted that this involved helping their child learn. In the sample, 93% of parents saw this role as a shared responsibility between them and teachers. How parents see their role as well as their confidence in their ability to make a difference to a child's achievement are key drivers of parent engagement (Fox & Olsen, 2014).

There is a strong and growing evidence base, nationally and internationally, that indicates high-quality early childhood care and education experiences help to facilitate a successful transition into school and future success (Page, 2016; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). It has also been recommended by Page (2016) and Tayler (2016) that children with additional disadvantage attend high-quality preschool programs for longer to help them start school on a more equal footing with their peers.

Some parents noted in the interviews that formal early learning programs provide children with all the skills they need and are essential aspects of a complete transitioning process.

There may be a need for affirmation by parents, an implicit desire for professional advice and reassurance that their child is on track and progressing according to developmental milestones. Many parents felt that in the preschool year, kindergarten staff were unwilling to investigate difficulties or referred them on with no follow-up. These parents felt that the system left them on their own without support, which limited parental knowledge of the best way to support their child at home.

The E4Kids study, "Assessing the Effectiveness of Australian Early Childhood Education and Care Programs", found that young children benefit from both consistency and high quality at home and in ECEC settings (Tayler, 2016). If the home environment has not provided a climate for readiness prior to school entry, some might argue that additional attention and resources are required to bring these children up to an appropriate level. This provides an even greater impetus to improve the standards of early learning, especially if parents, rightly or wrongly, are relying on services to upskill and prepare their children for school.

In my research, statistically significant differences existed between the behavioural preparation that parents undertook, depending on whether their children had attended childcare or not. The 22 parents who did not enrol their children in childcare/early learning before school exhibited higher levels of behavioural preparation, relative to the 97 parents who used these services. This finding was supported by interview data, in which parents said that being able to be present was the strongest facilitator of their behavioural engagement.

Supportive transitioning processes that include parents

It was evident that the transitioning process encompassed greater change and preparation for some families than others, based on whether it was their first child, whether the child had attended childcare/early learning, the quality and quantity of support available, and parental beliefs about what this change entailed. Parent value upon agency and empowerment was a salient issue that emerged from interview data. This points to parent frustration and lack of understanding of policy and structural decisions, rather than being able to modify the resources and capital they have as parents to support their child's learning. Being given agency for decisions and a voice in discussions about their child's education help to mitigate feelings of marginalisation, stress and fear of being overlooked.

It also emerged from the interviews that some activities parents really valued as supporting children's readiness for school were not parent-led. Collaborating with education providers, by way of transition visits, meetings and school-led programs, was very important to many parents. Some parents expressed a need for support in preparing their child for school. Parents were concerned about ensuring their child was well supported in the transition to school, and the results of the present study support the value of school-led transitioning programs. When such initiatives were used, or opportunities offered to become familiar with the school or to practise school routines, parents reported feeling positive about the process of transition. Where such opportunities were not made available, hesitations and concerns prevailed. The alacrity with which parents engaged in these programs and opportunities, when available, and their high level of praise for them is indicative of the value placed upon them.

School-based transitioning programs have been shown to encourage improved academic and developmental outcomes (Northern Territory Government, 2017), and support children in navigating lifelong transitions. Information sharing between early childhood and school services is important as it supports continuity of learning prior to a child arriving at school (Sayers, West, Lorains, Laidlaw, & Robinson, 2012).

A positive, stress-free start to school can shape a child's impression of education for many years to come. For educators, understanding the contributions of parents assists in developing effective transitioning processes. Finding out what parents value, what kinds of preparation they have undertaken with the child, and the cultural context to which the child belongs, enable schools to plan better for inclusive, successful and targeted teaching practices. Developing this shared understanding must be the aim of transitioning practices.

Connect, communicate and collaborate

While policy reforms of the last 10-15 years have aimed to strengthen linkages between education- and care-focussed services, more needs to be done to ensure integration for children moving between preschool and school. It is disappointing that a disconnect between services still exists and has been found to be one of the most stressful aspects of the transition to school. It illustrates the need for greater *connection*, more frequent and effective *communication* and *collaboration* - or perhaps what we could refer to as the 3Cs - to assist in the development of shared understandings and more clearly articulated goals.

This disconnect was evident both in the previous literature and this project, with a lack of communication and common expectations identified as major impediments to adequately preparing a child for school (PACEY, 2013). Dockett and Perry (2001) found that anxieties and hesitations were expressed by parents when relationships were not well developed between the two settings. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recommended that

early childhood services and primary schools adopt a more unified approach towards families to minimise the stress associated with the transitioning process (OECD, 2006). This requires equal respect for both systems and what they bring to a child's educational journey, rather than trying to "schoolify" the early childhood system (PACEY, 2013). Thus, there is an onus on prior-to-school settings to forge links between parents and their child's learning and improve the cohesion for families.

Share knowledge with parents

Helping parents understand their role as critical in the learning journey will almost certainly lead to improving their levels of engagement and development of positive beliefs. Where contributions are validated by schools, parental efforts can be transformed by feelings of being valued and perceptions of being a "good parent", which then leads to motivating even greater engagement. It is, therefore, important that schools promote collaboration and incorporate strategies that work with parents in a supportive way (Hirst et al., 2011).

These strategies need not be complex or costly, and could include sharing knowledge about simple and low-cost activities that parents can undertake to support a child's learning, particularly to encourage early language, literacy and numeracy as well as social and self-help skill development prior to school entry. They can also reinforce simple key messages to parents about (a) the key milestones of child development, (b) the importance of play in learning, and (c) the critical role parents have in supporting their child to succeed. For communication to be effective though, multiple modes need to be considered to ensure its appropriateness for diverse cultural backgrounds and families' individual circumstances (Northern Territory Government, 2017).

By providing parents with the knowledge and skills to support their children's preparation for school, it might increase their capacity. Parental knowledge of child development has been understood as a factor related to improved cognitive outcomes for, and fewer behaviour problems in, children, and is indicative of a higher level of parenting skills. More information about a child's progress would help parents see how and where their home support might fit in and thereby complement their child's learning.

What are the challenges?

For a child to fully reach their potential, a partnership with families is a must. However, complex challenges exist in the area of enhancing parent capacity.

Not all parents fully understand how critical the early years are in child development. Further, some parents have not experienced positive examples themselves and may not know where to start. It is recognised that it is far easier to engage those who are already willing to engage. It may be unreasonable to expect gains if families continue to face chronic, structural stressors that impact upon children's overall development. In cases where families have additional needs, disadvantage or vulnerabilities, it will be more challenging, yet arguably more important, to support parents to engage.

Schools would do well to recognise that some students perhaps come to school unable to do many school-related activities simply because they were not encouraged to practise these skills in the home environment. While of course important, compromised early learning experiences are not irredeemable. Therefore, it is important not to stigmatise those children who might be less ready early on in their educational journey, as it could lead to underestimating the progress students can make.



It is important that all kinds and levels of parent engagement are recognised and valued. This is particularly true for parents who are alienated from schools and marginalised by poverty, culture, language or other barriers. Any starting point must be acknowledged and appreciated as just as valuable as the highest level of engagement from another parent.

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