

Home to School and Pre-school to School Transitions¹

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Robert Myers
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For the past 25 years or more, the education program of the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) has worked assiduously on a set of problems associated with the transition from the learning environment of the home to that of the primary school. It has been motivated to do so by the increasingly accepted understanding that development and learning during the early years affect intellect, personality and behavior over the life course. It has been motivated also by the continuing failure of many children in the Majority World² to enter primary school as well as by the high rates of grade repetition and drop out among those who do attend. (AKF 2010, p. 2)

Support by the Foundation to programs of early childhood development and particularly to preschool education has been a central and consistent part of its strategy to bridge home-school gaps and differences. That support has been provided within an increasingly broad framework that includes attention not only to the availability and quality of preschool programs, but also to the effects on the transition to school of family circumstances, of community contexts and of educational and related policies established by governments. Particular attention has been given as well by AKF to the role that primary schools should be expected to play in achieving a successful transition from home to school or from preschool to primary school. This school readiness-for-children part of the process has too often been disregarded or played down (Ibid.).

Before commenting further on AKF's work in this area, a brief discussion is in order of why this topic is important, of different ways in which the home to school transition has been treated and how this has changed over time.

Early educational transitions and why they are important

“Transition”, according to Webster's New World Dictionary is “a passing from one condition, form, state, activity, place, etc. to another”. In the field of education, the passage that has received a great deal of attention, particularly in the Minority world, is that from pre-school to primary school.³ Associated with this mandated⁴ passage, usually, are changes in physical locations, teachers, friends, educational content, teaching methods, hours and institutional rules and forms of discipline, to mention a few of the most obvious. With the shift also come changes

¹ I am indebted to Kathy Bartlett and Caroline Arnold, indefatigable co-directors of AKF's education program, for providing me with program documents as well as with their own writing on this theme. I am also grateful to Sharon Lynn Kagan for sharing content from the soon-to-be published book, *Transitions in the Early Years: Creating a System of Continuity* which brings together in an extensive review and analysis the latest thinking about transition, seen from a number of perspectives. The responsibility for the interpretation and use of these materials in this article is, however, obviously mine.

² Minority and Majority World will be used to avoid the idea of “developed” vs. “developing” or “first” vs. “third” worlds.

³ In the Minority World where most of the research and evaluation related to this theme has been carried out, the emphasis now appears to be on the transition from preschool to kindergarten which used to be considered preschool but now seems to be considered part of school.

⁴ In Minority World countries, the decision about when to enter preschool and school and the passage through the system in general is controlled by a set of age-related laws that dictate when passages should occur. Children and parents have little say about the timing of this transition.

in expectations (of teachers for children, of children and parents about what they think will be learned) and in “status” (to enter school is to acquire the title of “student” and to begin a new phase in life). The change from preschool to school can signify personal, social and academic development. However, it can also be associated with a sense of uncertainty, separation, longing for the past or disorientation. A major concern is that a “difficult” transition, for whatever reason, can create lasting problems for students, reflected in low educational performance, social or emotional problems and, perhaps, repetition and school leaving at an early age. It can provoke or reinforce a debilitating sense of incompetence and failure. A prime question for both researchers and policy makers has been, “Why do some children make this transition smoothly and others do not, presumably with unfortunate consequences?” Another question is, “What can we do about it?”

Although the emphasis on the perils of moving from preschool to school and what to do about it characterizes transition concerns today in the Minority World where most children already attend preschool, it is the “transition”⁵ directly from home to school that is often the main concern in Majority World countries where the AKF works, countries in which many children do not have the chance to attend a preschool before entering primary school. That passage will be emphasized in this article. When the passage is directly from home to school, worries about discontinuities, adjustment difficulties and effects on learning and life are supposedly magnified because the differences between home and school settings are thought to be much greater than differences between preschool and school environments. Indeed, establishing preschools is seen as a way of getting closer to school and of moderating home-school differences, thereby facilitating the home-to-school transition.

Home, preschool and school learning environments

As suggested above, in most discussions of early educational transitions, whether from home to school or from preschool to school, it is assumed that the learning environments characterizing these settings are different, enough so that a child faces unsettling discontinuities when these shifts occur. Therefore, a great deal of thought and action has been directed toward easing passages by creating greater continuity among settings under the additional assumption that greater continuity will make things easier. But what are these differences? One rendering, of only a few of many possible differences among the learning environments, is set out in Figure 1.

⁵ This is not the place to go into detail about definitional differences. However, I have put “transition” in quotes because, conceptually, at least to me, the notion of a transition means not only moving from one state or condition to another but also, in the passage, leaving behind the previous condition. This works for the passing from preschool to school because preschool is left behind. It does not work so well when talking about the move from home into school because a child does not leave the family behind; rather, the movement is back and forth between two places, each with their own characteristics and demands. Some have preferred to use the terms “horizontal transition” (Kagan 2010) or “border crossing” (Campbell Clark 2000) for such situations. In these conceptualizations, the emphasis is placed on relationship(s) among different learning environments in which a child participates. The question then is not only how a child adjusts to a new environment (school) and how “continuity” may be achieved between them so as to facilitate learning in the new one, but also how the passage may affect development and learning in the parallel and continuing environment (home, but perhaps also the community, the child care center, the church and the media), and how the differential characteristics of each environment might be drawn upon to best advantage in each setting, without creating confusion that drags down the development and learning processes.

Figure 1. Learning Environments: The Home, Early Childhood Programs and the School

Home	Preschool	School
An informal, loving adult-child relationship	An informal, supportive adult-child relationship	A formal, less personal adult-child relationship
Learning through imitation, experience and trial and error	Learning through play and discovery	Learning through didactic teaching, memorization
Contextualized learning	A mix of contextualized and decontextualized learning	Decontextualized learning
Modelling, one-on-one teaching	Numerous children to one adult	Many children to one adult
Adjustments to the interests and needs of the child	Adjustments to interests and needs of the child, in the context of the group	Adjustment of the child to the demands of the school
Emphasis on the concrete	Use of concrete/objects to teach concepts	Use of symbols
Active participation in chores and rituals	Activity-based learning	Passive role in learning and school events
Learning in the mother tongue	Learning in the mother tongue, perhaps with the introduction of a national language	Learning in the national language
Emphasis on process	Emphasis on process	Emphasis on results

It should be clear to most readers from a quick look at Figure 1 that the brief descriptions presented are stereotyped views of what happens in homes, preschools and schools. And yet, these seem to have a familiar ring. For instance, most primary schools, particularly in the Majority World, continue to be rather formal, authoritarian places focused on memorizing and transmitting knowledge about subjects that may or may not be of interest to large groups of passive students. Children must adjust to the inflexible rules and curriculum of the school. The language of instruction is usually the national language, regardless of what language the students speak at home.

At the same time, common sense tells us that these descriptions may or may not hold in particular contexts. Less obvious is the idea that, at least in some contexts and on some dimensions, the home and school contexts may not vary as much as Figure 1 would have us believe. For instance, in some of the cultures in which AKF works, parents tend to be formal and even authoritarian with their children. They probably believe in the rote learning and memorization that still characterizes the school. Children should be taught and told what to do in both settings. The language spoken at home and in the school may be the same. Accordingly, in at least some characteristics and settings, the home and the school may feel very much alike.

I stress the real possibility of similarities between home and school learning environments to suggest that identifying or achieving continuity between home and school is not an end in and of itself; indeed many would argue that if both environments impose learning, are authoritarian and eschew active learning, both need to be changed. This argument may be grounded in research evidence that suggests children learn better if they explore, are motivated, etc. Or, it might be based in a value position stemming, for example, from the Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that children should be seen as subjects, not objects; they deserve to be active participants in their learning. In brief, there is a value dimension to thinking about

transitions that suggests there are better and worse ways to educate, independent of how similar or different home and school may be. There are as well, cross-cutting issues that have to do with equity, quality, respect for diversity and with particular social values and virtues (e.g. valuing autonomy over solidarity) that it is felt learning environments should reflect and promote.

In some characteristics set out in Figure 1, however, there are clear differences between home and school. Homes have a much better adult to child ratio for instance. That may or may not make them better learning environments.⁶ At the same time, we know that very large classes in schools rarely lead to good results. Class size and the child/teacher ratio are variables that educational systems can, in theory, control. In theory, transitions would be aided if class sizes and ratios were reduced. But another variable enters: available resources. One sees quickly how complex issues of transition become and how they move well beyond pedagogy to structural features of institutions, to policy and to finances (Kagan 2010).

Changes in approaches to transition research with implications for action

There have been some major shifts in the way transitions from home and preschool to school have been thought about and acted upon over the last 25 years. These include shifts:

1. From developmental psychology focused on the child to an interdisciplinary view. At an early stage, transition work asked whether or not children were mature enough or developmentally “ready” to make the shift into primary school. A psychological or developmental approach looked hard at how the pedagogies of preschool and primary school might be brought closer together to ease the transition. The press for pedagogical articulation bothered many preschool teachers and advocates who expressed their concern about moving the formal didactic orientation of schools downward into preschools instead of moving active learning upward into the early years of primary school. With notable exceptions in the Minority World (Sweden, for example) that does seem to have occurred (kindergarten is now part of “school”). The position within AKF has been that primary schools should be much more attuned to active learning methods in the early years, something made difficult, however, by large numbers of students and sometimes by cultural traditions that give little space to exploration and play.

As anthropologists, sociologists, health and nutritional researchers, political scientists and others have become involved in the study of transitions, greater attention has been given to home, community and broader contexts. For instance, the importance of friends (Corsaro, et.al 2003), absent fathers, child rearing patterns in the home, health and nutritional status, community support (Dockett and Perry 2007), etc. began to appear as factors to be taken more directly into account when considering adjustments to the new educational environment of the primary school. And, as suggested above, the broader view of transition also led beyond pedagogy to analyses of structural limitations within educational systems as well as the articulation of policies across related fields.

⁶ Although the ratio may be much more favorable in the home, adults at home have demands on their time that have little to do directly with a child’s development and learning whereas that is the full time task assigned to teachers.

This broader view has begun to take root. In AKF programming, the family and community context has been ever present. The Foundation's active advocacy role demonstrates its concern for creating supportive policy environments.

2. From preparing the child and family for school to preparing the child and family for school AND preparing the school for the child it will receive. Previously, most if not all emphasis was placed on getting children ready for school. The main responsibility for this lay with families but there were things governments could do to help out including expanding and improving preschools. Nevertheless, when children failed during the early years, the tendency of teachers, parents (and even the children themselves) was to place the blame on the child. Schools were not at fault and schooling was treated as given. Accordingly, early education programs became more and more directed toward correcting that problem, with increasing emphasis on developing specific cognitive skills needed in primary schools rather than on integral development. Indeed, this view continues to dominate thinking.

However, another view has emerged in which all children of a certain age are considered in some sense "ready" for primary school, but with levels and kinds of readiness that differ from child to child and perhaps even group to group. A child may be healthy and intelligent but is not ready to speak in the national language. A child may handle the national language reasonably well but lack certain social skills. Slowly, rather than think that families and preschools should carry the full burden for preparing children, more attention is being given to the idea that primary schools should be more flexible and should be prepared to change what they do during the early years in order to be ready for the diverse children they receive. In writings of the AKF staff and elements of AKF programming, this way of thinking is reflected. Schools should be "welcoming, inclusive, responsive, offer appropriate and relevant learning experiences, and know how to work with differences among the children they receive." (AKF ,) Moreover, the Foundation has taken on an important advocacy role in calling attention to the need to reform and strengthen the early years of primary school. It has argued that governments and international organizations tend to give priority to the later years, failing to provide the resources and policies necessary to improve the early grades. ()

3. From considering the child as an object to viewing the child as a subject. The Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states the importance of treating children as people with specific rights. They are people who, even during the early years, should have the opportunity to offer opinions, including opinions about how their environment might be improved, and to be actively involved in their own development and learning (Lam and Pollard 2006). They should be listened to. Nevertheless, until recently, most of the research on transitions was based on information obtained from adult perceptions of how children adjust to school. Children were not asked. As a result, some topics of particular significance to children, such as peer relationships and bullying, did not necessarily appear as important issues to be dealt with during the transition.

4. From seeing transition as a moment in time to seeing it as a continuous process. Much of the transition research and many of the actions suggested as most pertinent for resolving transition problems have focused on the moment of transition to the school or perhaps a brief period before and another just after making the passage. Children and families were provided

with visits and orientations to the school. Administrative procedures were introduced to make sure children's records from preschool followed them into the primary. Occasionally, older children were assigned to younger ones to make sure they had someone to help them navigate the new environment. The first few days or weeks of school was sometimes made to feel much more like a continuation of preschool.

Again, the view has broadened. The passage into school is now recognized as something that is affected by what happens long before the actual move occurs and continues well into the primary school years (Love and Raikes 2007). It is part of a continuous educational passage in which children change teachers and curricula and spaces each year in the school. It is part of a longer term process of working with parents and communities.

All of these shifts in thinking and action have involved moves toward more sophisticated and complicated ways of considering the passage from home and preschool to school. Keeping this broad view in mind, let me turn now to discussing what has been done and what might be done to help children as they shift among learning environments.

How can the “transition” from home to school be facilitated?

The main answer to this question has been, and probably will continue to be, by 1) providing the child with a solid and integral developmental base to take forward into 2) quality primary schools that are welcoming, inclusive and responsive, that offer appropriate integral and relevant learning experiences, and know how to work with differences among the children they receive. The solid developmental base may be provided at home but more often will require 3) complementary attention to children in quality ECE and other programs that complement or compensate for unfavorable conditions in home environments. Along the way, at both preschool and school levels, important efforts are needed to 4) build on and enhance strengths in home learning environments and activities of parents that will enrich the developmental base and support formal educational programs. All of this should be set within a context of 5) supportive communities and policy frameworks. But all of this is easier said than done in the real world.

As the definition of the problem and the way to approach it has broadened, the variety of actions that have been carried out has broadened as well. There are several ways in which these might be classified. One of these is in terms of actions that focus on changes in the respective environments that help to provide greater continuity among them vs. providing “compensatory” programs that do little to change either environment but try to provide children with additional tools to function in primary schools. When the differences between or among learning environments are huge, as is often the case in the Majority World, actions that seek to create greater continuity probably need to be accompanied by what are often called “compensatory” actions. For instance, if a child is malnourished or has a very limited vocabulary it may be necessary to create special programs directed toward these particular shortcomings. However, if nothing is done in the meantime to change the environments that produce the shortcomings, the problem will continue over time.

Another classification of actions to improve transitions might be according to the emphasis actions put on particular actors (children, parents, communities, preschools, primary schools, educational systems, policy makers). Who/what is expected to change? Within each of these categories it is possible to identify actions, often a wide variety, that have been tried out. Again, it is clear that combinations of these will be more effective than actions focused on a single actor.

Kagan (2010) has suggested a new typology of pedagogical, programmatic and policy actions that are needed, emphasizing the need to incorporate much more forcefully and centrally the world of policy.

In this article, rather than elaborate or use any of these I prefer to discuss three basic strategies that seem to have characterized work on transitions.

Strategies for facilitating home to school transitions.⁷

1. Change the child and the home. Here the problem is seen as one of deficiencies in the child and in the home that leave the child poorly prepared for school.⁸ This is the most frequent approach to improving transitions and includes a wide variety of early childhood interventions (preschools among them) originating mainly in education, health and social welfare programs. In its early years of programming, AKF focused heavily on this strategy, with programs to provide children with a preschool experience. Evaluations by AKF of these programs leave little doubt that these have been effective (p.e., Mwaura, Sylva and Malmberg 2008; AKF 2009).

Despite its proven effectiveness in many places, this approach must be viewed as partial and with some related cautions such as:

- Implicitly or explicitly the blame for failure in school is on the child or family, potentially contributing to the culture of failure.
- The strategy may bring with it intended or unintended devaluing of popular or minority cultures. The cross-cutting consideration of respect for diversity comes into play.
- The strategy begins by identifying “deficits” and focuses on how to “compensate” for them rather than by identifying strengths and building out from there.
- Better preparing children for school may involve less attention to skills and abilities crucial to everyday living. Sometimes an integrated view of child development is lost in order to beef up cognitive development.

Limits on the effectiveness of these programs may be related also to the poor quality of programs offered (another of the cross-cutting themes). Moreover, particularly large gaps between what children bring to school and what schools expect from them may make filling

⁷ This section draws on Myers 1997.

⁸ To be prepared a child should be: physically healthy and well nourished; able to handle basic cognitive concepts; able to communicate in everyday transactions and in the language of school; able to relate to others; psychologically self-assured, with a good self concept; able to work independently; and motivated to learn.

those gaps impossible before arrival at school. In many settings these are related to poverty, suggesting the need to place them in a broader policy context reaching well beyond education.

2. Changing the school. As mentioned earlier, in recent years more attention has been given to changing the school to be more receptive to incoming students. This is happening in a variety of ways that include:

- a. Adding special programs within the primary school to help children. These might be special courses given just before children enter but run by the primary schools, arranging tutorials for students who need them and beefing up health and nutritional elements in programs.
- b. Changing the curriculum and pedagogical practices. Some schools have created a special period during the first months of the first year of primary in which the curriculum is more exploratory and play-based. This does not necessarily mean a new commitment to a new way of teaching but, rather, is intended to provide a space for adjustment on arrival.
- c. Change the teacher. Sylva and Blatchford (1994) suggest several strategies to improve teaching in the early grades. First, train teachers differently for lower and upper primary grades. Second, place the most able and highly qualified teachers in the lower grades. This may require introducing special incentives. Third, include in teacher training guidance on young children's learning needs, language and bi-lingual development as well as on appropriate active learning pedagogy. Fourth, develop career structures for teachers to increase motivation and commitment and provide on-going training. (Unfortunately, much of the present on-the-job training occurs through short course and with no follow-up so teachers do not change their classroom behavior.)
- d. Change the administration, organization and rules. Perhaps reductions in the number of children per teacher fall into this category. In another vein, New Zealand has experimented with entrance on an individual basis when a child turns five, regardless of when that occurs during the year. The argument is that this assures more individual attention to children.

3. Seeking smoother transitions by building linkages: education as a shared experience. This third approach stresses strengthening the relationships among diverse people and institutions that influence a child's early development. This strategy will include actions that seek to smooth the transition by making a child's various environments look more alike. In looking at the move from pre-school to school, for instance, it might involve: providing greater continuity in the curricula of the two, a common core curriculum in teacher training institutions for preschool and primary school teachers for some period of their training, allowing a teacher to move with her/his students as they make the passage from preschool to the first year or two of primary, and building collaborative relationships between preschool and primary teachers through regular meetings, joint on-going training.

To help home and school relate the usual approach is to work to "educate" parents so they will change the home learning environment. What this strategy seldom takes into account is that parents have positive practices that can be reinforced, some of which teach children entirely different things than they will learn in school. The strategy seldom sees parents as resources for

the school beyond their providing funds or helping with maintenance. They are often kept at the door and not allowed to become involved in the school, something that can increase the understanding and communication for both parties.

If one thinks of relationships between health or social welfare systems and the school, another set of actions to strengthen common cause is required.

Perhaps the essential point associated with this strategy is that, even while making some helpful adjustments in the home or the school that may “smooth the transition” it is also valuable to: 1) find ways to respect the unique and positive points of each environment; 2) anticipate and provide orientation for changes that will be faced by children and parents; 3) develop broad coping skills in children (rather than try to mold them to one environment or another); foster continuing communication among the adults in the child’s life; and find means of supporting each child in his or her particular passages. (Myers 2007).

In closing

In closing, I would like to emphasize that AKF has taken on an extremely important role in calling attention to the importance of working on transition to primary school in the Majority World. As indicated earlier, most of the work on this topic and most of the publicity given to it has been carried out in the Minority World until very recently. AKF has called attention to the topic by example, supporting specific programs in a variety of countries. These programs have not only benefitted the local populations but have fed into an international literature as the results of evaluations have been published. It has called attention by carrying out research reviews and sharing the results. It has participated in both academic meetings and international agency meetings where strong advocacy positions have been presented based on solid information from concrete experiences as well as on a general view of the field. Of particular significance has been the relatively recent advocacy work directed toward putting the “readiness of schools for children” on the international agenda and toward identifying how the first years of primary school might be strengthened so as to improve the progress and performance of students throughout primary and beyond. All of this work merits continuing and even strengthening.

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