

WORKING TOGETHER FOR CHILDREN: STRENGTHENING TRANSITION PATHWAYS

**Louise Collie, Felicity Willis, Crystal Paine
and Corina Windsor**

Charles Sturt University

4TH YEAR INTERNS BACHELOR OF EDUCATION (EARLY CHILDHOOD) (2006)

BEGINNING THE PROJECT

The *Working Together for Children: Strengthening Transition Pathways* Team has identified that there is a gap between the Early Childhood settings and schools within the Dubbo area. Through meetings with early childhood professionals within Dubbo we have identified that the current landscape of care and education within our community includes some positive relationships between traditional preschools and schools, however a communication barrier does exist between schools and long day care, family day care and community playgroups, as well as in the home.

In identifying our issue we have drawn on the research of Sue Dockett and Bob Perry (2004) which further highlights the need for all professionals as well as children, families and communities to work together to ensure a smooth transition to school experience. In reflecting on the guidelines for effective transition programs as highlighted by Dockett and Perry (2004), we have established that positive relationships between children, families and educators is paramount in facilitating a positive transition to school process for the child. This is further highlighted by Hopps (2004, p. 11) who suggests that there is a "...contradiction between what teachers believe about communicating across the preschool-school boundary and what is actually practised". Through our interaction with both school and prior-to-school professionals, we have noted that whilst both settings claim that preschool-school communication is beneficial it is currently not being done effectively. We have therefore identified our role as strengthening the relationships between these settings. As research has shown, in order for a child to successfully integrate into school, all parties need to work together for the benefit of the child. It is critical that communication exists between the family, prior to school settings and the school in order to best cater for the children and their individual needs.

In addressing the action and advocacy guidelines outlined by Gibbs (2003, p. 28), we have identified that:

- the needs of children, their families and the community are central to our project;

- we have identified that a number of children within the Dubbo community do not attend prior to school settings and may not have older siblings already attending school;
- we will interact with communities that are often 'harder to reach' in order to raise the awareness of the importance of early education and care;
- we will draw on our knowledge gained over the course of our studies;
- we have the knowledge and skills to successfully strengthen the relationships between the early childhood field and schools;
- we have the ability to raise the credibility of the early childhood field by actively strengthening the communication pathways between educators, children and families;
- both the time allocated to the project (ten weeks) and the time of year (term 3-4) is sufficient to successfully begin to raise the awareness of the importance of transition to school, however, we also understand that for our project to make a considerable impact on societies attitudes a significant amount of time will be required. We will address this matter by involving a variety of media to cover and highlight the importance of the transition to school process;
- several resources to assist in the transition process do already exist, however, they are not currently being effectively accessed and utilised. Our participation in this project will therefore provide us with the opportunity to bring this information to the community through the use of our resource kit and play group sessions, as well as incidental conversations with families, carers and educators;
- the ideal outcome of our project is to raise the awareness of the importance of the transition to school process and strengthen the relationships between children, families, early childhood settings, schools and the wider community. This outcome will make a difference as research has shown that a successful transition to school experience with all participants working together results in positive outcomes for the child and family in both the short and long term. (Margetts, 1994; Dockett & Perry, 2006).

In exploring this issue we have undertaken investigation, networking, research and record keeping and have identified one of the major barriers to our project as being the lack of understanding of the importance of education and care prior to school. A further significant barrier that has been identified is the professional misunderstandings that appear to exist between early childhood professionals and schools teachers. Research such as that completed by Meier and Schafran (1999) highlight that whilst both prior to school settings and schools believe that communication should occur this is not often being undertaken. This has been highlighted through comments made by many school leaders that suggest they would be willing to interact and communicate with early childhood professionals if early childhood settings initiated the

contact. Is this simply a misunderstanding or a lack of time or initiative on behalf of these professionals?

STRATEGIC PLAN

Philosophy

In our role as early childhood pre-service teachers, we have an in-depth understanding of the transition to school processes for children and their families, and intend to strengthen the pathways between all participants involved with the transitions.

Whilst transition to school programs currently exist, research has shown that the fostering of relationships between the communities allows for a smoother and more supportive transition process. (We believe that the notion of transition extends beyond the current orientation programs available and should encompass the years leading up to and including the kindergarten year (Margetts, 1994).

As some children have no, or limited access, to early childhood services we believe, as members of the *Working Together for Children* Team, that all children and families should have opportunities to access support within the transition process to achieve best possible outcomes. In order to do this effectively, we believe in developing respectful relationships between ourselves and other professionals within the early childhood field.

***Note: For the purpose of this project, the term 'family' will refer to everybody that has a significant relationship with that child.

Aims

As part of our work in this project we aim to:

- Strengthen the relationships between all participants;
- Encourage and develop new relationships between all participants;
- Provide support to families, caregivers and children;
- Focus primarily on 'the child';
- Provide 'voices' for children by enabling them to explore their feelings around issues of transition;
- Inform other students and community members of the opportunities which exist after the completion of Bachelor Education (Early Childhood) Course;
- Develop our own skills and broaden our understandings of the Early Childhood field;
- To develop an awareness of current transition to school programs provided by other early childhood services in the local area;
- We aim to immerse our philosophy and goals into every aspect of our project.

Goals

- Develop a professionally finished resource kit providing information on effective transition to school for children, families and caregivers;
- Raise the awareness of transition to school amongst community members through participating in the Research in Early Childhood Conference day at the university;
- Make concrete links between early childhood settings and schools by providing the children opportunities to make contact with their future teachers;
- To collaborate with other professionals who also have a vested interest in the transition process;
- To create a display at the Macquarie Regional Library to promote our project focus;
- To create and publicise our initial Media Release;
- Attend playgroups and day care centres to conduct our own transition sessions with children of the Dubbo community;
- Attend Cultural Awareness training.

Procedures

- Gather relevant information to include within our resource bag. This will include a contact list of all government and non-government schools and early childhood services within Dubbo, starting school age information, dates for Dubbo schools orientations programs, tips for starting school, NSW Health pamphlets, and several activities for children;
- Promote awareness of our project within the Dubbo community;
- Create permission letters for families to complete allowing us to use photographs and artworks of their children;
- Make contact with facilitating partners in order to create links to our project;
- Continue to update our 'strategic plan' as our project develops;
- Work towards creating a completed, professionally designed resource kit for later use by other families and professionals;
- Frequently communicate with Tracey Simpson (mentor) as part of our professional development;
- Negotiate our involvement with other community projects running within Dubbo;
- Keep up to date with new information, and relevant resources in newspapers, magazines, text books, journals and internet searches;
- Engage in discussions within our own group in order to debrief appropriately and remain fully informed about developments;
- Create play session including relevant activities for children beginning school and which allow children to express their feelings towards this.

Action Plan

- Update strategic plan;
- Meet with key early childhood personnel in various agencies;
- Approach Directors of local child care centres about conducting sessions with their children relating to transition to school;
- Confirm dates and times for play sessions with children at centres, playgroups, library, etc;
- Approach Principals and Assistant Principals of local schools about our project and resource kits;
- Collect relevant media releases relating to early childhood matters;
- Establish costs for our resource kit and its contents;
- Decide on exact resources and develop plans to be used within our sessions with children;
- Conduct play session entitled '*Ready, Set, School!*' with children at Dubbo child care centres, library, schools as community centres, etc.;
- Continue to reflect on the play sessions and make adjustments where necessary;
- Develop and send newsletters to Principals of government and non-government schools in Dubbo;
- Distribute 200 resource bags to children beginning school in 2007 and their families within the Dubbo community;
- Provide feedback sheets to all services following our session on the effectiveness of the project;
- Continue to develop our contacts list;
- Contact local media outlets within Dubbo to aid in the promotion of our project;
- Continually reflect on our work and document progression throughout our journey;
- During the final week complete final report, thank you letters to associated partners, and work reports with our mentor.

IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTION PLAN

The implementation of this project has required extensive communication with all schools, early childhood settings, government agencies and community groups within Dubbo. We plan to continue our communication with these professional bodies by distributing a newsletter regularly via preferred correspondence.

Our first step in this process was to decide on an appropriate name for our project team and design a suitable logo that visually represented our philosophy. Within the following stage of the project we focused on creating our resource kit and presenting it to the community which involved sourcing and applying for funding, compiling and creating resources and seeking suppliers of calico bags. We also approached printing companies to reproduce

our logo onto the bags and launched our resource kit at the Macquarie Regional Library.

The project team has also initiated extensive communication with both the various early childhood services and the principals of schools in the Dubbo area. Meetings have been undertaken with all principals individually, in both Department of Education and Private schools, to inform them about our project and how we anticipate involving them. The Macquarie Regional Library, Schools as Community Centres, Family Day Care and the long day care services and preschools have all been approached about our project. For each of these settings, we offered them the opportunity to arrange with us to implement our fun and interactive '*Ready, Set, School!*' session with their preschool aged children. This was completed at 16 child care centres, 2 Schools as Community Centres, 1 Community Based Preschool and the Macquarie Regional Library.

The planning and implementation of playgroup sessions based on transition to school was influenced by our understanding that we need to focus on preschool aged children who may not currently attend an early childhood service, as well children who may attend a centre that does not currently run an effective transition to school program.

***Note: Details of our extensive communication and correspondence is available within our project folder.

REVIEWING ACTION

Our involvement in this project has enabled us to develop professional relationships within the community that we may not have had the opportunity to develop until working as beginning teachers. The professional partners that have been involved in our project are:

- Communities for Children
- Families First
- Department of Education
- Early Childhood Australia
- Dubbo Family Day Care
- Dubbo City Council
- All long day care centres within Dubbo
- West Dubbo Preschool
- Dubbo and District Preschool
- Greater Western Area Health Service
- Orana Early Childhood Intervention
- Charles Sturt University, Dubbo
- Ms Tracey Simpson, Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education
- CSU Media Office
- Daily Liberal
- Win Television

- Prime Television
- ABC Radio
- 2DU Radio
- Schools as Community Centres
- All schools within the Dubbo community
- Macquarie Regional Library

Our initial contact with these partners was made through arranging and attending meetings, phone conversations, emails and faxes. In order to maintain our communication with these professionals we have continued to utilise these forms of communication.

In developing this group project, our initial strengths were the culmination of our skills and knowledge gained over the course of our studies, as well as the professional contacts that our mentor was able to share with us in order for us to get our project off the ground. In addition to this, our strengths now include the acknowledgment within our profession of the importance of transition to school. A further strength is the awareness we have created, and the opportunities we have been presented with, to build awareness within the community as a result of our media campaign. The creation of our newsletter for schools is a further strength as it has provided a consistent opportunity to interact with schools and highlight the progress of our project.

Over the course of the internship period, the dynamics of our team has developed and allowed us to begin achieving the initial goals. A strength of our group is our ability to collaborate and draw upon the individual skills of each project participant, including organisation, creativity, time management, flexibility, effective communication, delegation, negotiation, leadership, problem solving, relationship building and computer knowledge.

In contrast to the strengths of our project, there have also been a number of obstacles faced during the first five weeks of our project. These include:

- Sourcing funding – This process required us to develop a project proposal to be presented to a committee who decide on its suitability for funding.
- General community attitudes – An objective of our group has been to raise the profile of our community based internship as an initiative of CSU Dubbo, as well as develop the understanding of the necessity of supporting transition to school in contrast to the orientation programs that currently exist within schools.
- Professional's attitudes – Over the first five weeks of the internship we spoke to numerous professionals and found a number of them hesitant to embrace our project. In attempting to build these relationships further, we created a newsletter to provide consistent communication with these professionals.

In conducting our project, we used many strategies and tools to promote ourselves:

- Media – One of the most effective strategies we have implemented has been that of our media approach to promote our project. The initial step within this process was to contact the CSU Media Office and create a media release highlighting the goals and objectives of our group. This was then picked up by various forms of media including Win TV, Prime TV, ABC Radio, and the Daily Liberal.
- Talking – We have used this form of communication to inform various members of the community of our project, as well as to collaborate within our group.
- Writing – Throughout this experience we have continued to document our progress. Writing has formed the basis of our concrete evidence of our progress and communication.

We believe that the impact of our project has been considerable, factoring the amount of time for implementation. The project progressed beyond our expectations of what we believed could be achieved within this authentic learning experience. We have had feedback suggesting that our project has encouraged discussion on the topic of transition to school within centres and schools who may not have necessarily addressed this issue to this degree at this time of year. The majority of schools have stated that their orientation programs do not occur until November and so we believe that promoting discussion now has enhanced future actions they will take concerning transition.

In reflecting on the goals that were originally developed, we have been able to achieve the majority of them. We constantly revised and re-evaluated our progress and have worked together closely in order to achieve our goals and objectives which we identified at the beginning of our internship.

REFLECTION

Reflection has been a key element in our project. We have undertaken this process daily and have found that it contributes to our depth of knowledge and as reflective practitioners provides us with a point of reference for future developments. In reflecting on this experience, we have found this community based placement to provide us with an opportunity to utilise all the knowledge and skills we have developed over the course of our four years of study. We have drawn on our knowledge of child development, health, leadership and management, programming and planning, action research, diversity of families and cultures and working with and for the community. These areas of knowledge can be encompassed into three main categories, including leadership, teaching and learning.

Leadership

In reflecting on our project, we believe that this opportunity has enabled us to utilise leadership skills in a way that no other practicum experience has. The opportunities which have presented themselves throughout this project have allowed us to implement the five faces of leadership (Kagan and Bowman, 1997) and, in particular, advocacy and administration. Our role in advocating for children has been strengthened through this community based placement. We can now see how even a small project can have an impact on the community.

Teaching

Our initial hesitation concerning the lack of opportunity to utilise our teaching skills has been overcome by the varied opportunities that have been presented to us through the project. This internship experience has given us the opportunity to utilise our teaching skills in a non-traditional way. We have found that we have been teachers to other professionals in the field through advocating for both our project, and the children and families within the Dubbo community. In regards to more traditional 'teaching' roles, we also designed and implemented transition to school sessions with preschool aged children. Our "*Ready, Set, School!*" sessions were created to provide children with the opportunity to express their feelings about beginning school. This was achieved through the use of story books, songs, puppet show and discussion about school with realistic images as visual cues.

Learning

Our learning has been undertaken within an authentic experience which has further opened our eyes to the broad nature of the early childhood field. We have constantly learnt to effectively use the skills we have obtained through our studies and have personally experienced that learning is a life long journey. Through this experience we have learnt, above all, the importance of relationships and the way in which they can be created to benefit all involved. We have come to the conclusion that relationships will form the foundation of our future teaching. Through developing positive relationships with people within the community we will help to ensure the best possible outcomes for children and their families.

EVALUATION OF PROJECT

Our project can be evaluated in several key areas. These include the play session, resource bag, community based internship placements and media.

Play Session

Over the 12 week period the play session developed and evolved into a presentation that was informative and stimulated discussion about the children's feelings about beginning school. We were able to create this session so that it was flexible, adaptable and individualised. In being able to do this, all settings and children's needs were catered for.

Through the creation of feedback sheets which were completed by the room leaders after each session, we were able to use this information to refine the session and improve aspects of it as were seen necessary.

The children related very well to the Harry and the Dinosaurs story book and we found that the most successful part of our play session was encouraging the children to interact through songs and also with the puppets.

Resource Bag

The resource bag in which we created as a part of the project was very successful. Everyone we spoke to was very impressed with the contents of the bag and felt it was something that needed to be continued in years to come.

Principals of Dubbo schools who we spoke to commented that the postcards as a form of communication between preschool aged children and the schools was a great idea and was useful in creating a link between these two settings.

A number of child care settings have commented that they have utilised a number of different aspects of the bag within their own services including the brochures for families, the postcards and the art templates.

We were pleased to also received positive comments from the families we have had interactions with. Some of the comments included that the bag had provoked conversations within the home about beginning school and provided children with the opportunity to discuss their feelings about the transition to school experience.

The resources, including the bag and it's contents as well as those used within the 'Ready, Set, School' session were all considered for there cultural, educational and informative value and we have been pleased to see that the bags have been received well by all and utilised in a productive way.

Community Based Internship Placements

Undertaking this type of placement has provided our team with the opportunity to gain a broader perspective of the early childhood profession. The nature of this type of internship has enabled us to make connections with a wide range of professionals working in the field of early childhood education

and care, and has therefore provided us with valuable relationships as we enter the workforce.

The project has been unique in that it has enabled us to utilise skills in leadership such as advocacy, administrative, pedagogical, community and conceptual in a manner that has also resulted in us being able to productively assist the children and families of the Dubbo community with transition to school. Being placed within the community has required us to develop the confidence to work with community members and professionals in order for the project to be effective.

Media

The media played a major role in the success of our project. It was not only a means of getting the information out to families, and the community, but also to promote our play session as well as highlight this community based placement as a CSU, Dubbo initiative.

We have learnt how to take the appropriate measures in order to gain media attention and support. Radio, television and print media were all utilised effectively throughout the course of this project.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Recommendations we have identified for the future also relate to the play session and resource bag, as well as general comments.

Play Session

- Involve a greater focus on topics such as healthy eating, transport to school, and sun safe practises.
- To ensure that it remains adaptable and caters for all needs and ages.
- Endeavour to find more suitable texts to read with the children which relate specifically to starting school within the Australian contexts and incorporates our diverse multicultural society.

Resource Bag

- Provide information for name label companies to ensure that all children's belongings are easily identifiable.
- Seek sponsorship from companies such as Sanitarium, Kellogs, etc. (i.e. seek samples of breakfast cereals, to stimulate conversation about healthy eating.)
- Include information on sun safe practises and gain samples of sunscreen/hats for inclusion of the bag.
- Include orientation details from all school settings within the resource bag

- Endeavour to provide every child starting school in the Dubbo community with a resource bag.

General

- Finding alternative means to reach those children who do not attend prior to school settings, such as shopping centres, community events and public venues.
- Provide early childhood settings with ideas for experiences within their service such as utilising the home corner for dramatic play about school and include school uniforms for the children.
- Work towards encouraging a standardised orientation to school program to eliminate the current discontinuity, which sees a large variance from only one half day through to an eight week program.
- Continue to encourage communication between schools and prior to school settings.
- That every child beginning school attends an orientation program prior to beginning school.
- Gain appropriate funding to support the project and enhance it further. This kind of support could result in the inclusion of art supplies for use within the play session, as well as further contents within the bag.
- Endeavour to decrease the misconceptions which exist surrounding the early childhood education field.

REFERENCES

- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2004). *Beginning school together: Sharing strengths*. NSW: Australian Early Childhood Incorporated.
- Gibbs, L (2003). *Action, advocacy and activism*. NSW: Community child care co-operative Ltd.
- Hopps, K. (2004). *Teacher communication across the preschool-school boundary*. Vol. 29, No.1, Early Childhood Australia Incorporated.
- Kagan, S. L., & Bowman, B. T. (1997). *Leadership in early care and education*, Washington, DC: National Association for the education of young children.
- Margetts, K. (1994). *Starting school matters: supporting children's transition to school*, Early Childhood Matters Conference, Melbourne: Department of Human Services.
- Meier, D. & Schafran, A. (1999). *Strengthening the preschool-to-kindergarten transition: A community collaborates*, Vol. 54, No 3. National Association for the Education of Young Children.