

Promoting continuity in the lives of young children

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

# early *Developments*

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**Kindergarten  
Transition**

# Field notes

**S**ENDING YOUR CHILDREN off to preschool programs and to kindergarten can be tough: the first loosening of the apron strings; the first serious strangers in your child's life; and the constant worry your child will tell everyone that you watch soap operas on television.

Evidence shows that this is also a pivotal time in a child's development. For the first time, a child will be expected to use his/her intellectual, social, and physical skills in a formal setting. There are new expectations, new relationships, and new experiences. Successful transition is known to be a component of long-term school success. There are numerous practices and policies in place to ease such transitions for children and their families—meetings with parents, open houses, letters, phone calls, and orientations. We are just now beginning systematic research in documenting how effective these activities are.

In this issue of *Early Developments*, we look at

- a new research study looking at the transition experiences of children with fragile X syndrome,
- a new study by FPG researchers, "Creating Risk and Promise: Children's and Teachers' Constructions in the Cultural World of Kindergarten,"
- initial data and analyses from a major new national survey of kindergarten teachers' perceptions of transition practices by the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL), and
- a spirited three-day research synthesis conference, sponsored by NCEDL, on transitions held last year.

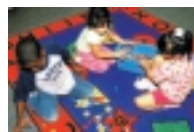
This is fascinating and fertile ground. For example, teachers say a major barrier is that they get class lists, on the average, 15 days before kindergarten starts. Not enough time, they say, to organize meetings with parents before school starts. The bottom line, according to NCEDL researcher Robert Pianta, is that "the nation has a long way to go in ensuring that all children come to school ready to learn, and ensuring that schools make the necessary provisions to reach out to their families."

Successful transitions mean, of course, far more than a handful of practices by teachers. In the larger context, they are a function of the family, the education system, preschool programs, and the community.

—Lloyd Little  
editor



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From the director's office

## Passages

is a nationally recognized child development researcher and head of the Research to Practice Strand of the National Center for Early Development & Learning.

This month's "From The Director's Office" is a guest column by Pam Winton, an investigator with the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center. Pam

**L**AST FALL, OUR YOUNGEST SON TURNED 13, our middle son left home to begin his first year of college, and our oldest son, a college graduate living abroad whom I thought was "emancipated" from the family nest, returned home to live. It was a year of transitions, and our family had to make significant adjustments. Roles, responsibilities and familiar patterns (e.g., Who mows the lawn? Who does the dishes?) had to be renegotiated. You might say we experienced the disequilibrium typical to moving from one phase of the family life cycle into another. That the first two phases were somewhat familiar and expected (we had been parents of a 13-year-old son twice, and had already sent one son off to college) helped, but the third was unexpected and demanded some adjustments on our part.

Transitions like these are, to be sure, a natural part of family growth and development. They create stress because they demand changes in familiar patterns and routines, but they also give rise to complex adaptive responses that strengthen families in unique ways—all of which prepares them for ongoing changes that are an inevitable part of living. I say "complex" because research suggests that the interaction of many factors predicts how an individual family will react to transition events. Examples are numerous: How families define situations, the meaning they attach to events, and a range of past experiences in similar situations, are but a few important ones. The presence of informal resources (such as friends, family, and neighbors) and formal supports (such as professionals or institutions) taken together contribute to the creative process of adaptation.

This issue of *Early Developments* focuses on the role of formal institutions in family adaptations to the critical event of school entry. Our family's fall transition experiences pale in comparison to those that often face families of young children at that juncture.

— Don Bailey, Director, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

We had to relate to only one new educational institution, and, in that case, could count on our son being old enough to create a partnership on his own. We had also negotiated a series of educational transitions in the past that gave us confidence in formal institutions. The articles in this issue describe what we know from research about creating positive experiences that build such confidence for young children and families and focus predominantly on the continuity and supportive connections between educational systems.

Several underlying themes of the research reported emerge upon careful reading. The importance of ensuring successful transitions is first, and paramount. Research on the subject is clear: successful adjustments to school are critical for long-term successes as students and adults. Another emergent theme is that current education policies and practices do not consistently support connections that provide stability to children and families during transitions. There are glaring problems, but most alarming are those findings that suggest the most vulnerable children are the least likely to experience adequate transition planning. A last and vital theme is that focused attention on transitions by teachers, parents, and educational systems can make a positive difference. Research findings reported in this issue point toward promising solutions, such as reduced student-teacher ratios, individualized transition plans that engage parents, schools and communities as partners in preparing for transitions and relationships that ensure children receive all necessary services. The broad gap between proposed solutions and descriptions of current practices means, however, that a lot of work remains to be done.

As a starting point, we might draw some basic conclusions from the available facts. That only 24% of kindergarten teachers surveyed

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NEARLY HALF THE NATION'S TEACHERS are concerned about many of the children entering kindergarten, according to a new national survey by the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL), a

multi-university research center based at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Teachers are most frequently concerned about children's skills in following directions and in academics.

**T**HE TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN is a pivotal time in a child's development. It comes at an age when our culture expects increased independence from children. Children are called upon to employ and coordinate their intellectual, social, and physical skills in a formal setting, often for the first time. Kindergarten offers challenges to the child in literacy, numeracy,



# Making the

## Teachers believe many children have problems in adjusting to kindergarten

self-regulation, and social competence, and research shows that success during this first year may predict later school success. Martha Cox of UNC-Chapel Hill and Robert C. Pianta of the University of Virginia co-directed the Kindergarten Transitions Study with assistance from Diane M. Early and Lorriane C. Taylor, both at UNC-CH, and Sara E. Rimm-Kaufman and Karen M. La Paro from the University of Virginia.

Nearly 3,600 teachers answered the survey, which identified teachers' areas of concern in children's transition into kindergarten and into first grade; looked at what transition practices are and aren't being used; and asked teachers what barriers they see to doing more to facilitate transitions. Teachers report 52 percent of children have a successful entry into kindergarten, while 48 percent have moderate or serious problems.

Teachers report concerns less frequently in suburban and rural than in urban schools, in districts with lower poverty, and in schools with less cultural diversity. Less experienced teachers report higher rates of general and specific transition problems, Pianta said.

The teachers' reports of concerns may reflect a mismatch between the competency of children and teachers' expectations, Pianta said. For example, in culturally diverse schools white teachers perceive higher rates of child difficulty in following directions, social skills, and immaturity, compared to teachers in other ethnic groups. Rimm-Kaufman said, "The teacher's own ethnic status may sensi-

tize them to lack of congruence between children's home culture and school's mainstream culture."

The findings also indicate, said Pianta, that teachers in schools with the greatest needs (higher poverty, more culturally diverse, urban) rely more heavily on group-oriented transition practices that occur after the beginning of school than teachers in other settings. "These lower-intensity practices probably run counter to what the children and families in such schools need in order to connect with the school," he said.

Of 23 transition practices used by teachers for children entering kindergarten listed on the survey, the most common practices are "a talk with parents after school starts," followed, in order, by

- a letter to parents after the beginning of school
- an open house after school starts

# transition

- a flyer or brochure sent after school starts
- read records of child's past experience/status

The least common practice was "home visiting, both before and after the beginning of school." In order, the next least common were

- a call to the child before school starts
- a call to the child after school starts
- a visit to preschools and programs for 4-year olds

## Perceived barriers

Teachers report that a major barrier to their helping more with children's transitions into kindergarten is that class lists are generated too late. Lists are received, on the average, 15 days before the first day of school. "As long as teachers do not know who their students will be, it is impossible for them to begin the transition process while the child is still in their preschool setting. The school is, in effect, requiring that the transition be an abrupt one," said Early.

Although family mobility and late registration prevent many schools from making early classroom assignments for all children, if schools could assign at least some children to kindergarten classrooms earlier, teachers would be more able to create a transition process, rather than a transition event, Pianta said.

These barriers can be placed in four broad categories:

- Administrative—"class lists generated too late," "plan not available in school/district," and "school/district doesn't support"

## On your mark...

Percentages of teachers who say that about half of their class or more enter kindergarten with needs

### Perceived Needs

following directions	46%
academic skills	36%
home environment	35%
working independently	34%
formal preschool experience	31%
working in a group	30%
immaturity	20%
communicating	14%

## Get set...

Percentages of perceived barriers selected by teachers.

(Teachers could check more than one item.)

Class lists generated too late	56%
Summer work not supported by salary	47%
Transition plan not available	43%
Takes too much time	37%
Dangerous to visit homes	33%
Parents don't bring child to registration/open house	32%
Can't reach parents	27%
Parents not interested	25%
Parents can't read letters sent home	21%
No school or district support	20%
Materials not available	19%
I choose not to do it	11%
Preschool teachers not interested	7%
Concern about creating negative expectations	7%
Contacting parents before school starts is discouraged	5%

- Resources—“funds and materials not available,” “requires summer work”
- Family—“parents not interested,” “parents can’t read materials,” and “dangerous to visit homes”
- Teachers—“I choose not to do it,” and “takes too much time”

“Clearly, for the child to experience minimum discontinuity, the various settings must be in communication and some activities to prepare the child for the change must occur while the child is still spending the majority of his/her time in the more familiar preschool setting. Transition practices that occur after the beginning of school restrict the length of the transition period. Likewise, practices that are aimed at the entire class do not address the special needs of individual children and families,” Early said.

“With such short notice, there is little continuity of environments and little opportunity to establish relationships that can help to head off some problems early in a child’s schooling. We wait too long and do too little to connect children and families to school. I think this has consequences down the line,” Pianta said.

Taylor said, “School administrators should consider earlier identification of new students and a formal transition practices plan. Given the importance of this period, teachers need extra assistance and support to facilitate transition. Also, more teachers should receive training in transitions.

“We wait too long and do too little to connect children and families to school.”

“Consideration must be given to how barriers to transition practices are affected by family, school, and community context. A formal method of mapping and tracking teacher transition practices is needed in order to identify barriers and overcome them. Interventions that attend to the ecology of the transitions, and in particular, acknowledge the family’s cultural background, may heighten children’s competencies and improve the teacher-child fit so that children have a better chance to enter school ‘ready to learn,’” Taylor said.

## Other results


The survey also found that:

- 25 percent of membership in kindergarten classrooms changes during the course of the academic year.
- Kindergarten classrooms had an average of 22.2 students, with no significant differences between suburban and urban class sizes. The National Association for the Education of Young Children recommends that kindergartners be in classes no larger than 25 with two teachers. Survey data indicate that most teachers have a paid assistant at least some of the time.

These findings show that “we have a long way to go in ensuring that all children come to school ready to learn, and ensuring that schools make the necessary provisions to reach out to their families,” Pianta said.

Cox cautioned that while this particular survey focused on teachers

and classrooms, it is interactions in a larger context that are critical for a child’s success during transition. “In addition to the individual child’s readiness and the kindergarten teacher’s role, the family, the education system, preschool programs, and the community, are all responsible for successful transitions,” she said.

Martha Cox is a senior investigator at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center (FPG), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The National Center for Early Development & Learning is administratively housed at FPG. 



## Go! Moving into 1ST grade

The NCEDL Kindergarten Transitions Survey looked at the transition from kindergarten into first-grade and found that among the 11 transition practices listed, over half of the teachers (57 percent) report meeting regularly with first-grade teachers to discuss continuity in the curriculum between kindergarten and first grade. And over half of the teachers (56 percent) report arranging for their class to visit a first-grade class.

However, less than 25 percent of teachers say they attend meetings to plan general transition activities, send parents information on how placements in first grade are made, attend meetings to plan transitions for individual children, or plan transition activities for children with special needs.

Robert Pianta, co-director of the study, said the findings indicate that traditional child-focused transition practices such as having children visit a first-grade classroom or having a first-grade child visit the kindergarten classroom are used more widely than practices that involve the parents in decisions about who will be their child's first-grade teacher and what the expectations are for first grade. Teachers may be talking to teachers about transition, but teachers are not reaching parents about their children's transition into first grade, he said.

Karen La Paro of the University of Virginia, who helped with the survey analysis, said, "Again, we find this lack of connection between home and school and lack of focus on the individual child's transition to grade one."


Pianta said, "The implications of our findings are that children have little facilitated contact with their future first-grade teacher. Contact is even less frequent in schools with high minority representation and in schools in high poverty areas. The importance of success in first grade is not being realized through the use of kindergarten-to-first grade transition practices."

# Stepping up

## Practices reflect transition training

**T**EACHER EXPERIENCE AND EDUCATION ARE, for the most part, unrelated to transition practice use; however, teachers who have received special transitions training use more transition practices, according to the NCEDL Kindergarten Transitions Survey.

Some 24 percent of teachers reported having had specialized training in transitions to kindergarten. Teachers with this specialized training, as compared with teachers without this training, use more of all types of transition strategies, and apparently see some value in approaching transitions from a variety of angles. Data indicates that more such training may be of value in encouraging more comprehensive transition practices.

"Kindergarten teachers in the United States on average, have many years of teaching experience at the kindergarten level and tend to be well-educated. Many have a master's degree. However, it is striking how few have any formal training or currently receive information about transition practices," said Robert Pianta, co-director of the study. "Our experience shows that when teachers become aware of possible transition activities, and barriers are eliminated, they respond by engaging in a range of transition practices." 

## Teacher characteristics

### Education


- 47 percent of public school kindergarten teachers have a master's degree or higher.
- Significantly fewer teachers in rural areas than in urban or suburban areas hold a master's degree or higher.
- 78% of teachers had an elementary education certification that included kindergarten.

### Experience

- Public school kindergarten teachers have an average of 11.5 years experience teaching kindergarten, an additional 1.1 years teaching below the kindergarten level, and 3.5 years above the kindergarten level.
- Teachers from schools in districts with the least poverty had significantly more kindergarten teaching experience than teachers from schools in middle-level poverty districts.

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reported having any kind of specialized training in transitions to kindergarten suggests that changes need to be made in our professional development systems. That there is little facilitated contact between parents and their child's future first-grade teacher bespeaks the need for changes in school systems and in family-school relationships. That schools serving vulnerable children are the least likely to have supportive transition practices means that directing resources to certain schools and communities is warranted.

The information provided in this issue calls into question our singular focus on the question, "Are young children ready for school?" Equal attention should be paid to the question, "Are schools ready for young children?" In addressing this latter point, our challenge as professionals is to ensure that our educational institutions act as formal supports, not formal obstacles, to a family's critical adaptation to transition events. Furthermore, it is important that all families, at the point of exit from the public school system, believe that educational systems are supportive and valued resources in their communities. Forging that confidence begins in early childhood. 

# Are we ready to teach?

According to some researchers, the question is not whether children are ready to learn, but are we ready to teach them?

*“States commonly use low third-grade reading scores to predict, among other things, how many students will drop out of school and how many will be incarcerated.”*

— Naomi Karp, director  
National Institute on Early Childhood Development & Education

WITH THAT STATEMENT among her comments, Naomi Karp helped open the “Transition to Kindergarten” synthesis conference held last year in Charlottesville, VA, by the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL).

The topic was well suited for its relevance to the first goal among the six “National Education Goals.” As stated in 1991 by the National Education Goals Panel, that goal is “All children in America will start school ready to learn.”

Administrators, policymakers, teachers, parents, and caregivers joined a dozen national transition experts in analyzing nine papers written for the conference. During large group discussions and then during small

synthesis groups, participants examined each paper’s implications for research, practice, personnel preparation, and policy.

Early on, several speakers took issue with the “ready to learn” goal. Craig Ramey, a psychology professor at the University of Alabama and former researcher at FPG, said, “It is a silly statement. It’s a political statement. Whoever wrote it didn’t know anything about child development.”

Picking up the gauntlet, Samuel Meisels of the University of Michigan proposed that readiness is a process that occurs over time and is not complete by the first day of kindergarten. It is more than just knowledge of a few skills. “Readiness must be conceptualized as a broad construct that incorporates all aspects of a child’s life that





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contribute directly to that child's ability to learn. Definitions of readiness must take into account the setting, context, and conditions under which the child acquires skills

and is encouraged to learn. Assessments of readiness must, in consequence, incorporate data from the child, teacher, and the community into an overall evaluation."

Meisels went even further, suggesting that the national readiness goal should be restated this way: "By the year 2000 all children will have an opportunity to enhance their skills, knowledge, and abilities by participating in classrooms that are sensitive to community values, recognize individual differences, reinforce and extend children's strength, and assist them in overcoming their difficulties."

Part of the problem with defining standards and creating assessments is that children enter school from such a wide variety of backgrounds—preschools, child care centers, and homes. Thus, teachers are faced with the challenge of children and their families from a broad range of experiences, skills, dispositions, abilities, and commitments to education. Several speakers pointed out that standards for young children should cover a range of abilities and that teachers should recognize that not all children will reach them at the same pace.

Administrators and some parents seem to want tests, but what kind of tests? Robert Pianta of the University of Virginia and co-organizer of the conference said, "In the next 10 years, there will be increased emphasis on testing, such as minimum competency standards. Can we reliably test kids? Are our existing programs any good? Our notions of

what's good for young children will collide with minimum competency standards by focusing on isolated skills instead of a more broad-based contextualized notion of skill development."

Ramey said he felt it is more important to test change, rather than specific skills. "We need to document children's rate of change, but not performance at a point in time."

But in documenting change, do you document the change of the child over time or the change in a child compared with change in other children? Someone suggested a goal of equal growth rates. But, said Fred Morrison of Loyola University, "Are equal growth rates enough? Don't we really want children to catch up?" Which prompted

*"Regardless of education level, ethnic background, or income level, parents want their children to be successful in school..."*

—Sandra Christenson  
University of Minnesota

Jim Gallagher, NCELD researcher, to ask, "Catch up to whom? The best students in the class? The class average?"

### Role of parents in transition

Sandra Christenson of the University of Minnesota said in her paper that studies show that parents would spend more time in activities with children if educators would give them more guidance. "Regardless of

education level, ethnic background, or income level, parents want their children to be successful in school; however, they do not know how to assist their children," said Christenson.

There should be common goals among families, educators, and students. But not only does this add demands on already overworked teachers, it comes at a time when parents are beginning to relinquish control of their children to outsiders for the first time. This alone can add more anxiety and tension to a situation that is already creating stress for children and their parents, particularly those who are poor, said Martha Cox of the Frank Porter Graham Center and co-organizer of the conference along with Pianta.

Martha Moorehouse of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services raised the question of the purposes of parent involvement. "If parents know why they are involved, they're more likely to be more interested. We need more research about parent involvement during the school year and during the summer."

Doris Entwisle of the Johns Hopkins University said a study by her and Karl Alexander showed that in the summer poor children fall behind, while during the winter they do, on average, as well as their better-off classmates.

Pianta suggested, "Most parents would love to have a list of things that they could work on during the summer with their kids."

### Influences on successful transitions

Ramey put forth his "Transition Conceptual" model with eight spheres of influence closely associated with successful transitions:

- Survival resources are adequate to meet the child's and family's needs.
- Good physical and mental health and health practices prevail.
- Individuals have a sense of security.
- The child and family have a positive

and realistic self-concept.

- Positive motivation, expectations, and values exist to do well in school.
- Individuals have good social support to facilitate the transition to school.
- The child and family have good communication, both among themselves and with those concerned with the transition to school.
- The child and family have those basic skills considered essential to do well, such as everyday living, social-emotional, school and academic, and job-related skills.

Ramey said, “It is vital that individual differences be studied vigorously—so that schools, communities, and families do not adopt a one-size-fits-all strategy when this may not be appropriate.”

Part of the problem, wrote Gary Melton, Susan Limber, and Terri Teague, all of the University of South Carolina, in their paper “Changing Schools for Changing Families,” is that many of the issues that surround the financing of school-linked services are really issues of priorities, authority, and control over resources.

The authors suggested that with some creativity and thoughtfulness, and most importantly, with a strong administrative commitment, many existing funding streams can be redirected to school-based services and other family-school-community partnerships.

However, suppose the money spigot were turned on? “How do state/local boards decide to allocate money? Suppose we got all the resources. Where do we put the money?” questioned Pianta.

At least one speaker was leery of more government bureaucracy. Ramey said, “We have too many layers of bureaucracy. It’s taken the incentives out. We’re losing creativity. We’re losing energy.”

Gallagher reminded speakers that a weak therapeutic dose often does no good and can do more harm in the case of intervention and new programs. “It seems immoral to go along with a piece of cake instead of the whole cake. It’s a non-therapeutic dose. You have an illness, and you are given an insufficient amount of medicine to recover. It’s not the fault of the medicine; it’s that a sufficient dose wasn’t given. And if a program doesn’t work because not enough money was invested, then the whole program can get a bad name.”

Some speakers raised questions about the appropriateness of “advocacy.” Ramey’s answer was, “If we can’t make public policy recommendations a legitimate part of our



work, then we are part of the problem. We have become part of a conspiracy when we don’t ask for enough money to provide sufficiently broad and in-depth programs.”

### Other themes and questions raised during the conference

- Teachers are facing tremendous pressures from parents, administrators, the calendar, and unruly students. Barbara Bowman of the Erikson Institute said, “The most frequent complaint I hear from teachers is that a class may have 4 or 5 children with problems and the teacher spends the entire time trying to control those 4 or 5.”
- Questions were raised about the effectiveness of half-day child care pro-


grams versus whole-day programs. Several speakers said the research isn’t conclusive, although they suggested that whole-day programs would minimize transitions during the day and let teachers get better acquainted with children and their families.

- One synthesis group suggested that college loans be forgiven for teachers who work in high-poverty areas.
- Another synthesis group suggested that professional development for teachers, administrators, and other school employees should include more information about the issue of transition.

● Moorehouse offered several avenues of research: “What does harm at the classroom level? We need to know more about curricula-based approaches and other approaches.”

● Don Bailey, director of both FPG and NCEDL, said more understanding of the meaning and usefulness of the term ‘risk’ is needed. “Perhaps, we need broader categories of risk. More diversity? For example, does a poor quality preschool program create a risk factor?

Should or can risk be assessed earlier? Is the transition itself the risk? Should we look at what it is about the transition that is the risk? For example, poor transitions can create risks for children in at least two ways: Children are at risk for perceiving that school is not a good place to be, and they are at risk for perceiving that one’s self is not successful at school. Then, one question would be: How do we go about preventing risks in transitions?”

Papers prepared for this synthesis conference are being rewritten based on discussions at the conference, and additional synthesis information is being prepared for a book to be published by Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company. 

# Distilling the essence

Summaries of selected papers presented at the Kindergarten Transitions Synthesis Conference in Charlottesville, VA by NCEDL in early 1998.

## Critical Issues for Families and Schools: Rights, Responsibilities, Resources, and Relationship

by Sandra L. Christenson (University of Minnesota)

- Families, educators, and students must think of their relationships differently, moving from thinking in terms of service delivery (“provider” and “client” or “professionals” and “target populations”) to thinking of complementary efforts toward common goals.
- The clear demarcation between early intervention and K-12 education defies the notion of constructing sustaining relationships between families and schools to enhance children’s development and learning. Not only is there evidence that children need to be prepared for school learning, but also K-12 education could benefit from aligning with the family support principles so characteristic of early intervention practices.
- A constructive, sustained relationship between families and schools is one way to increase social capital for children and youth, provided issues related to rights, responsibilities, and resources are understood.

## Classroom Practices (Curriculum and Management)

by Barbara T. Bowman (Erikson Institute for Advanced Study in Child Development)

Bowman said that her interpretation of some research is that:

- Development is holistic and cannot be separated into independently formed and functioning domains.
- Children’s inner-feeling states are as important as their behavior in determining social/emotional status.
- Normal development encompasses a broad range of behavior and the younger the child the broader the normal range.
- Early caretaking relationships presage later social/emotional status.
- Culture plays an important role in parents’ election of child-rearing strategies, which in turn affect children’s feeling states and social behavior.
- Adjustment or maturity is achieved through synchrony between the capabilities of the child and the demands of his social world.

Bowman offered five general comments on some efforts to improve young children’s school achievement:

- Too much weight is placed on “risk factors” in making programmatic decisions.
- Too little weight is placed on understanding cultural differences and engaging parents and communities in the process of setting standards and determining school practices.
- Not enough attention has been directed to supporting children’s emotional/social health, particularly in their relationships with their parents and teachers.
- Teachers need a great deal more training and support if they are to respond to the diversity of need pervasive among low-income families and communities.
- Society needs to make a greater commitment of resources to the education of low-income children.

## The Role of Kindergarten in Promoting Educational Equity and Excellence

by Nicholas Zill (Westat, Inc.)

- 55% of kindergarten children attend part-day programs (National Household Education Surveys [NHES], 1996)
- Most US parents with children in kindergarten believe the schools attended by their children are doing a reasonably good job of communicating with parents and providing opportunities for parental involvement in school. (NHES)
- In general, public kindergartens could communicate more with parents and involve them more in school activities, compared to private kindergartens. (NHES)
- The most frequently reported complaint from teachers is the child’s attention span and ability to focus on schoolwork (i.e., “doesn’t concentrate, doesn’t pay attention for long”). This is reported for nearly one child in every four. (NHES)
- Two other teacher criticisms that are common but slightly less frequent have to do with the child’s approach to learning new skills and his or her academic progress. About 1 kindergarten child in 7 is said to “lack confidence in learning new things or taking part in new activities.” An equivalent portion is described as “not learning up to his or her capabilities.” (NHES)
- Children from single-parent families get more negative reports from their kindergarten teachers than children from families in which both birth parents are present in the household. (NHES)

## Early Schooling and Social Stratification

by Doris R. Entwisle and Karl Alexander (Johns Hopkins University)

- Poor children in the Beginning School Study (BSS by Entwisle and Alexander), on average, did as well or better than their economically better-off classmates when schools were open. Only during summer recess did poor children fall behind.
- First-grade children in the “low socioeconomic status” (SES) schools, even though they gained as many points on standardized tests as better-off children, were given lower marks, held back more often, and in other ways rated less favorably by teachers than the high SES children. (BSS)
- The early school placements of children that reflect social structure in the larger society (attending high- or low-SES elementary school, retention, special education) have long-term consequences.
- Elementary schools are typically organized along lines of family and neighborhood SES, with the consequence that the socioeconomic status of elementary children differs markedly between schools.

# National Center for Early Development & Learning



Children in the “low socioeconomic status” schools, even though they gained as many points on standardized tests as better-off children, were given lower marks

## Assessing Readiness

by Samuel J. Meisels (University of Michigan)

When readiness is defined as an interaction reflecting a joint focus on the child’s status and the characteristics of the educational setting, two conditions are critical for its assessment. There must be sustained opportunities for the interactions between teacher and child to occur. And these interactions must occur over time, rather than on a single occasion. Meisels said performance assessments (assessments of a child’s ability to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and interpret facts and ideas) should:

- Be integrative, bringing together various skills into visible displays and demonstrations of behavior that occur during the context of instruction.
- Emphasize top-level competence by asking children to show what they can do. Teachers should work with students to help them achieve their best possible work.
- Encourage meta-cognition and the capacity to articulate as well as reflect on performance. Children should evaluate their own work, and reflect on their own progress rather than being passive recipients of instruction or compliant occupants of the classroom.
- Be guided by developmental standards, embedded in the longitudinal character of the children’s work and captured by the continuous program format of curriculum-embedded performance assessments.

Fundamental to the attainment of children’s mastery and competence at the outset of school is the development of a sense of self that can only be developed over time and in interaction with trustworthy, caring adults.



Fundamental to the attainment of children's mastery...is the development of a sense of self



### Changing Schools for Changing Families

by Gary B. Melton, Susan P. Limber, and Terri Teague of the Institute for Families in Society (University of South Carolina)

- “Parents and educators frequently seem like islands in the lives of children, surrounded by competing agendas, often without visible connections to one another.” (Norman & Smith, 1997)
- The Institute for Families in Society envisions a transformation of schools, both as communities in themselves and as centers of the broader community. Guiding principals are these:
  - Help should be built into natural settings in the community. The service system should be such that families need not define themselves as clients or patients to obtain help.
  - Fundamental community institutions (including but not limited to the schools) should be human environments for children and families, who themselves should feel they have a say in the programs of which they are part. They should be treated with respect.
  - Personal attention has particular significance at times of developmental transition. A “welcome wagon” for children and families who have recently moved into the attendance area—or simply have entered kindergarten — ought to be a feature of every elementary school.
- When teachers and administrators wait until a child in early grades misbehaves before contacting parents and then assume that parents have the skills to respond effectively or the abilities to maneuver through the service system to get assistance, they are often disappointed. Preschool interventions that focus on skill building for parents and attempt to connect parents with help are critically important.
- Schools cannot keep violence out by constructing higher walls or using sophisticated monitoring/alarm systems. They must build relationships among community members that promote peaceful interactions, mutual respect, and investment in the good of the community.

### Children with Disabilities in Early Elementary Schools: Transitions and Practice Issues

by Mark Wolery (Frank Porter Graham Center)

- The transition from preschool programs to early elementary schools includes a number of challenges that can be addressed by
  - establishing interagency transition teams and policies,
  - addressing the staff needs of both the sending and receiving programs,
  - responding to families’ concerns about the transition through a variety of strategies, and
  - preparing children for the receiving program.
- Issues related to teaching students with disabilities in early elementary classes include identification of legitimate outcomes—here F.F. Billingsley’s (1977) three-part framework (promoting membership, social relationships, and competence) appears to be useful.
- Another issue focuses on parents of students with disabilities, and two points seem pertinent.
  - Despite available processes and procedures, parents do not appear to be integral parts of the Individualized Educational Plan.
  - Parents on average do not perceive being in a positive partnership with the schools.
- Understanding how to promote adoption of different practices and how to sustain positive family-school relationships are clear research priorities.
- Some evidence speaks to the supports teachers need in providing instruction to students with disabilities.



# Helping parents choose

## Transitions for fragile X children pose challenges for both families and schools

**T**HE TRANSITION OF CHILDREN with disabilities into preschool and kindergarten poses many problems, and studies by FPG researchers are throwing a new light on issues facing children with fragile X syndrome. Fragile X syndrome is the most common inherited cause of developmental disability, affecting as many as one in 2,500 people. It is caused by a gene mutation on the X chromosome. Since 1993, FPG has been following selected young children with fragile X syndrome in Virginia and the Carolinas. Children in these two studies are now moving into kindergarten and first grade. Researchers Don Bailey and Deborah Hatton say that while most parents are pleased with the transition from preschool programs to kindergarten and from kindergarten to first grade, such transitions can create anxiety.

Hatton said, “The transition into kindergarten, particularly, can be an intense experience because many times the parents have not had much experience with school services for children with disabilities. If they have, it may have been years ago when special education services were very different than today. Parents are really concerned about labels their children will receive, their placement options, what support services are available, and opportunities for inclusion. “Our early findings show that placement in classes is driven more by the resources that school systems have, rather than the goals in the Individualized Education Plans,” she said.

Bailey said, “One of the questions we asked parents was, ‘Did your children go into a special class and, if so, what kind?’ This turned out to be very interesting. Some parents shop around and look at classes that they think their child would best fit in, and then they try to get the child labeled for whatever it takes to get their child into that class. For example, parents might look at a class for autism and say, ‘I think this would be best for our child,’ and so then they work to get their child labeled autistic.”

Because children with fragile X exhibit a number of problems and because fragile X is not an eligibility category for receiving services, such children are given different labels, depending in part on the resources of the schools and in part on the desires of the parents.

Bailey said, “One fascinating thing we’re finding is that there can be a number of kids with the same disorder and yet they are labeled differently. Fragile X syndrome is not an eligibility category for schools. You have to fit into a more general category, such as mentally retarded or autistic.”

Hatton said, “Most of these children were served in early intervention programs at the preschool level with the label of developmental delay. A very few had the label of mental retardation. But then when they get to kindergarten and first grade, these labels start diverging a lot. And this can lead to problems. With fragile X syndrome, the majority may be mentally retarded, but if you’re teaching them, that is the least of your problems. For a teacher, the problems are attention issues and hyperactivity disorders.”

Bailey said another major issue coming to light in these early findings is inclusion. “There is the question of whether the parents want their child to be with normal children or in special services. While many parents want inclusion, there are characteristics of regular classes that make these classes very distractible for children with fragile X—noise, lots of activity, lots of choices. This is a very difficult setting for many children with fragile X. The environment is a challenge. As it turns out, a majority of parents end up choosing self-contained classrooms.”

Hatton said, “We’re finding out that even parents who want inclusion see that while it might work in preschool and kindergarten, it gets more difficult by the first grade. And by the second grade, virtually all the parents are requesting specialized services, even those

who had been very adamant about inclusion.” State and local schools’ rules and traditions also make a difference. Bailey said, “An autism class in Virginia may be very different from an autism class in NC. Thus, a child labeled autistic in Fayetteville, NC, might receive different services in Roanoke, VA. In some schools, you don’t have to be labeled autistic, for example, to be served in a class for autistic children.”

Bailey and Hatton say they expect policy implications to emerge from these studies. “If our findings continue supporting these early indications, there will be a need for a re-examination of how we describe children, how we determine eligibility, and how we allocate services. We need to answer questions about how school systems label children and how these labels correspond to services. Labels often don’t give you any idea of what ought to be done in the classroom.”

The researchers are also collecting some data from practitioners. “How to structure the classroom and school environment will be of help to practitioners,” said Bailey.

Overall, the early data indicate that most parents were very pleased with the transition

*“For a teacher, the problems are attention issues and hyperactivity disorders.”*

from infant intervention programs to preschool. “It seems like there is a lot of support during this transition period. Basically, parents said the transition went well and that they were pleased with the services and the assessments. We asked, ‘What would you have changed?’ and the most common answer was ‘more therapies as part of the support services,’” said Hatton.

Parents are being interviewed at least once a year and the researchers are also examining school records and individualized family plans to ascertain services received, what children are labeled, and so forth. Both studies are financed by the U.S. Department of Education.

# Recent publications

by researchers at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

## **Family outcomes in early intervention: A framework for program evaluation and efficacy research**

D. Bailey Jr., R. McWilliam, L. Darkes, K. Hebbler, R. Simeonsson, D. Spiker, & M. Wagner. (1998). *Exceptional Children*, 64, 313–328.

## **Inclusion in the context of competing values in early childhood education**

D. Bailey Jr., R. McWilliam, V. Buysse, & P. Wesley. (1998). *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 13 (1), 27–47.

## **Development of speech and language**

J. Roberts, I. Wallace, & D. Brackett. (1998). In K. Grundfast & A. Lalwane (Eds.), *Pediatrics otology and neurotology*, (pp. 39–48). Philadelphia: Lippincott-Ravens.

## **Social and family risk factors for infant development at one year: An application of the cumulative risk model**

S. Hooper, M. Burchinal, J. Roberts, S. Zeisel, & E. Neebe. (1998). *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 19(1), 85–96.

## **Creating risk and promise: Children's and teachers' co-constructions in the cultural world of kindergarten**

D. Skinner, D. Bryant, J. Coffman, & F. Campbell. (1998). *Elementary School Journal*, 98(4), 297–310.

## **Selves in time and place: Identities, experience, and history in Nepal**

D. Skinner, A. Pach III, & D. Holland (Eds.). (1998). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

## **Implementing early childhood inclusion: Barrier and support factors**

V. Buysse, P. Wesley, & L. Keyes. (1998). *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 13(1), 169–184.

## **Planning for young children with disabilities and their families: The evidence from IFSP/IEPs**

J. Gallagher. (1998). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, Early Childhood Research Institute on Service Utilization.

## **The public policy legacy of Samuel A. Kirk**

J. Gallagher. (1998). *Learning Disabilities Research and Practices*, 13(1), 11–14.

## **Beyond Parallel Play**

R. Clifford. (1998). *Young Children*, 53:1, 2.

## **A transition in leadership**

R. Clifford. (1998). *Young Children*, 53:2, 2.

## **Who's in charge?**

R. Clifford. (1998). *Young Children*, 53:3, 2.

## **Early childhood environment rating scale: Revised edition**

T. Harms, R. Clifford, & D. Cryer. (1998). New York: Teachers College Press.

## **Resources within reason: Materials for supporting the communication development of young children**

C. Catlett, P. Winton, J. Bisantz, D. Hoge, & J. Cripe. (1998). *Young Exceptional Children*, 1(3), 27.

## **Resources within reason: Transitions**

C. Catlett, P. Winton, S. Fowler, A. Hains, N. Livesay, S. Rosenkoetter, & B. Rous. (1998). *Young Exceptional Children*, 1(2), 28.

## **Preserving childhood for children in shelters**

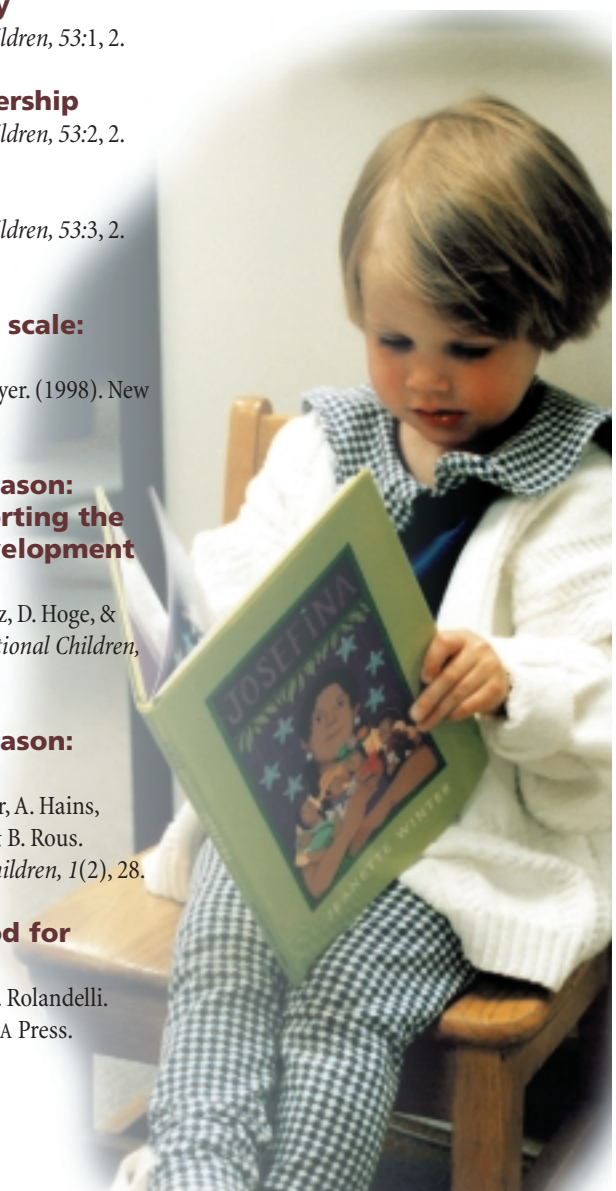
T. Harms, R. Richardson, & P. Rolandelli. (1998). Washington, DC: CWLA Press.

## **Inclusion of young children with special needs in early childhood education: The research base**

S. Odom & K. Diamond. (1998). *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 13(1), 3–26.

## **Improving quality in early childhood environments through on-site consultation**

S. Palsha & P. Wesley. (1998). *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 18(4), 243–253.



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# Research spotlight

Recent findings at FPG

## Creating Risk and Promise: Children's and Teachers' Co-constructions in the Cultural World of Kindergarten

Debra Skinner, Donna Bryant, Jennifer Coffman, & Frances Campbell. (1998).  
*The Elementary School Journal*, 98(4), pp. 297–310.

**T**HE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY was to try to understand how kindergarten teachers begin to view and interact with students from low-income families as these children first enter kindergarten. How do some children come to be identified as “at-risk” and others as having promise? How do teachers’ language and classroom practices affect the child and what behaviors of the children most influence the teachers’ beliefs and practices?

This work fits into a larger body of research on “cultural production.” Cultural production theory, as applied to school achievement, views students as affected by their homes, the society in which they are being raised, and their teachers, but also views

students as actively shaping teachers’ notions about themselves and their own school success or failure. Relationships were studied by observing 21 former Head Start children in their kindergarten year in 14 different classrooms. Researchers collected extensive information about each child and each classroom.

They found many examples of positive interactions between students and teachers, but also observed some practices that could contribute to early school failure. Teacher practices that worked best for minority children from low-income families included communicating high expectations, emphasizing what children could do rather than what they couldn’t, praising children fre-

quently, redirecting inappropriate behavior, and conveying a caring attitude. These behaviors undoubtedly help children from all walks of life, although the focus in this study was on children from poor families.

The study showed that ideas like competence, readiness, risk, and promise are not characteristics inherent in the child, but are notions created in and across a variety of contexts, including home, school, and the larger society. The points at which schools contribute to the children’s understandings of themselves as good or bad students and the ways in which school practices work to foster success or failure are areas that need to be examined to create promise instead of risk.