The transition to primary school is a critical period for children and their families. In 2020, national lockdown, closure of educational settings and social distancing measures, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, meant that transition practices were severely disrupted. Support for the transition of young children from nursery to school was inevitably affected. Our research reports key challenges and facilitating factors in planning for transition in 2020 and highlights recommendations for good practice.

What we did

In July-August 2020
An online questionnaire invited Early Years Leads/Reception teachers from Primary Schools and Early Years Professionals from Early Years Settings in Bristol to report on transition practices they typically engage with, how these had been affected to date by Covid-19 and how they planned to tailor these for the entry of the new cohort of children. 33 practitioners from Primary Schools and 23 practitioners from pre-school settings contributed.

In October/November 2020
In semi-structured interviews, ten Early Years Leads from Primary Schools reported their experiences of transition and reflected on adapted transition practices, how children had adjusted to formal schooling and the impact of Covid-19 on children’s development.

What we found
The following pages show the main findings of the study:

The Six Key Challenges

The Eight Key Facilitators

The Impact of Covid on Children, Families and Early Years Practitioners

The Six Conclusions and Recommendations
The Key Challenges

- Lack of face-to-face contact with children and families and concern that this would affect building relationships.
- Reduced opportunities for children and their families to visit the school or the class and familiarise themselves with the environment, meet their teacher and peers.
- Lack of easy contact with parents/carers made it more difficult to explain, inform, reassure, dispel anxiety, gain cooperation and encourage parental engagement.
- Not being able to visit or have contact between settings. Much private provision was closed or staff were furloughed.
- Shortcomings of government guidance generally, and lack of specific guidance on early years transition. Lack of clarity, late arrival of advice, constant changes in guidance were all mentioned as a challenge.
- For children with SEND, the difficulties in planning transition were magnified: not being able to observe children in their preschool setting; no access to keyworkers and information or to specialist face-to-face for building important relationships was considered a key challenge.

The Key Facilitators

- Technology and moving online (when this worked). Three-quarters of participants reported: making videos, holding virtual meetings with families, and with other professionals.
- Having accurate and available contact lists between settings.
- Working together and the value of teamwork within settings.
- A longer induction period, extending staggered entry arrangements, having children join in smaller groups. For children with SEND, ability to be flexible, arrange extra online meetings with families and external agencies.
- Committed, flexible, creative and experienced early years professionals.
- Supportive Early Years Managers in Early Years Settings and Head Teachers/Senior Leadership Team in Primary Schools who ‘get’ early years education and understand the importance of positive transition to school.
- Finding ways to work collaboratively with parents/carers.
- Support from local government (Bristol Early Years Team) and support networks.
Impacts of Covid-19 on Children, Families and Early Years Practitioners

Impact on Children
Removal of or disruption in pre-school provision was reported as having an impact on: Language development and communication; social development; emotional wellbeing, risk taking and resilience; independence skills; physical development, especially fine and gross motor skills; early learning skills.

The negative impact of the pandemic on children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with SEND has been much greater.

Impact on families
Food poverty and food insecurity were highlighted in some responses. Feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, stress were mentioned in relation to the emotional wellbeing of parents.

Impact on early years practitioners
Some teachers had felt unprepared and unskilled to respond to the new technical and digital demands made on them. The learning curve was steep. The most significant impact related to teachers emotional wellbeing. Our interviewees talked about feeling stressed, overworked and incredibly concerned about the children and families they work with. Emotional stress derived from the fact that teachers were trying to minimise the impact of the pandemic on children and support them as best as they could.

Conclusions and Recommendations
1. Early years transition as revealed in this study was varied, albeit with several commonly shared practices. However, planning and execution appeared to be largely reliant on individual professionals’ initiatives and actions. These are invariably grounded in a shared belief that successful transitions provide children with the foundation for later school success. There was, however, little evidence of a clearly articulated, consistent and systematic approach to transition across all settings. Clearer expectations in relation to key components of transition to school are needed to ensure all settings can support smooth and positive transitions to school.

2. The importance of building strong relationships between schools and early years settings was evident in our study. Our data suggest that systems and established practices of effective communication across settings are not always in place. Communication that does exist, is again reliant on individuals’ energy and willingness to make links and build relations with professionals working in other settings. All settings should develop and establish agreed methods and systems of communication so that transition can be jointly considered and planned. Local Authority leadership and support could ensure this is effected.

3. The most common transition activities reported related to achieving productive
relationships with families. These results support a growing base of evidence highlighting the importance of parental engagement in promoting school success among children. Uses of online/digital communication, although seen as less desirable than face-to-face interactions were very effective in achieving engagement, sometimes more effective for families. Evaluating the effectiveness of online/digital communication and incorporating successful aspects in future planning for transition could be useful.

4. Planning transition for children with SEND was particularly challenging. An early and targeted focus on planning for transition of children with SEND is needed.

5. In relation to the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on children’s first year of schooling, there was a noticeable ‘regression’ of skills. This impact was greater for children with SEND and children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Careful assessment of need and provision of support will be required during Reception and into Year 1. More research is needed on the impact of the pandemic on children’s first year at school.

6. Our findings highlight the importance of support networks for early years professionals, alongside a supportive school system, that can promote reflection and evaluation of good practice in relation to transition as well as emotional support in times of need. Leadership in schools should be informed about the best early years practice and supportive of processes which encourage reflection, evaluation and teacher wellbeing.

If you are interested in hearing more about our new research project, ‘The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Children’s First Year at School’, please contact Ioanna.

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