

# Early Years Transitions Action Research Project

## “Guiding the Journey”

(Can using transitions story guides support parents and children in understanding their transition journeys?)

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### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this action research project was to investigate the use of transitions story guides to support parents and children in their understanding of their transitions journeys into a sessional, term time early years setting and on to reception classes in a mainstream primary school. The project also formed part of a local authority Early Years Transition Action Research Project which utilised the “Five bridges of transition” (Galton et al. 1999, Barber 1999) to encourage early years settings (including reception classes in schools) to reflect and develop upon existing practice and children’s engagement and achievement in order to sustain children’s progress towards good EYFS profile outcomes.

The project used action research principles to reflect on the setting’s existing transitions practice predominantly within the remit of the Five Bridges Personal and Social Bridge (Galton et al. 1999, Barber 1999) and in the development of new practices strategies and sought to determine the efficacy of using a transition story guide as a complementary teaching strategy to those already in use by asking the following question:

Can using transitions story guides support parents and children in understanding their transition journeys?

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It isn't the changes that do you in, it's the transitions. They aren't the same thing. *Change* is situational: the move to a new site, the retirement of the founder, the reorganization of the roles on the team, the revisions to the pension plan. *Transition*, on the other hand, is psychological; it is a three-phase process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about. (Bridges 2009, p3)

According to Bridges (2009) transitions are processes that start with an ending and end with a beginning. Moreover he suggests that managing transitions involves helping individuals pass through three transitional phases; the ending phase, the “neutral zone” (Bridges 2009, p5), and the third and final phase of new beginnings which Bridges (2009) suggests enables individuals begin to develop their new identities, discover a new sense of purpose and energy and being to make the change work.

The term transitions is generally associated with change and readjustment and can relate to many key periods and/or specific events that happen during the course of a person’s life. Transitions can be both horizontal and vertical. Johansson (2007) believes that for today’s children horizontal transitions are a part of everyday life involving the changes and adjustments that children make when, for example, going from home to nursery, from

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nursery to swimming lessons or gym club and then from these recreational activities back to home.

Within the early years care and education sector however the term transition is frequently used to mark those occasions when children begin accessing or transferring between non home based childcare settings such as nurseries, pre-schools or schools.

Vogler et al. (2008) suggests that within a predominantly Western culture children’s chronological age is used as a powerful delineator of childhood stages. This is particularly true in the context of the transitions into and out of the setting which are determined by the conditions of the setting’s registration which means that children join the setting aged between 2 and 3 years old and the local authority policy of providing mainstream reception classes that children join in the September following their 4th birthday.

### **FIVE BRIDGES**

The “Five bridges of transition” are based on the five pivotal issues identified in respect of transitions and transfers by Galton et al. (1999) and expanded on by Barber (1999) who likened the divide between Primary and Secondary schools as a muddy river. Barber (1999) suggested that schools to build bridges to enable a smooth crossing. He referred to the five headings as used by Galton et al. (1999) (bureaucratic, personal and social, curriculum, pedagogic and management of learning) as ‘the Five Bridges’ and considered the development of these bridges to be essential to ensuring children’s smooth transition or transfer.

### **REFLECTIONS ON EXISTING PRACTICES SUMMARY**

Research shows that parental involvement in a child’s early education and care experiences has significant long term benefits and can ultimately improve a child’s educational and developmental outcomes (Department for Education and Skills (DFES) 2002, DFES 2003b, Sylva et al. 2004, DFES 2005, Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) 2007).

Reflections in respect of the setting’s current practices suggested that there were many opportunities for parents to participate in the more administrative aspects of their children’s transitions; however it was recognised that there were limited opportunities for parents to engage with their children in helping them prepare for their transitions either into the setting or on to mainstream school.

It was also recognised that whilst most children attend setting visits and settling-in sessions they were not given many opportunities to actively participate in their transition journeys or prepare for transitions either into the setting or on to mainstream schools.

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Moreover children’s preparation for transition was also significantly disadvantaged by the term time nature of the setting and mainstream schools.

Whilst the setting’s practice of providing pre-autumn term settling-in sessions immediately prior to the beginning of the autumn term had gone some way to negate the impact of the six week summer break between the summer and autumn terms there was still a significant time period that could be used to help children prepare for their transition into the setting.

It was also identified that for children transiting to mainstream school the six week summer break was often more problematic, especially given that there is currently no single common transition induction method for children entering mainstream schools. Each primary school within the setting’s local authority has its own induction processes including some familiarisation or ‘priming events’ (Corsaro and Molinari (2005 cited Vogler et al. 2008), usually in July. Following these there is then a six week (or longer) period during which children have little to no contact with their primary schools before they start on either a part or full time basis in the September.

It could be considered questionable whether these ‘priming events’ (Corsaro and Molinari (2005 cited Vogler et al. 2008) held so far in advance of children actually transiting to mainstream school make it possible for children to be active contributors to their experiences of change in the way Vogler et al. (2008) suggest.

#### **PRACTICE CHANGES**

In terms of transition, this six week summer holiday between the summer and autumn terms could be considered to be the “neutral zone” or phase two (the phase whereby the old is gone but the new is not yet operational) of Bridges’ (2009) transition model. This period between terms could therefore be used as a time during which children and their families could be provided with a resource that could potentially help support psychological realignment and enable repatterning to take place in preparation for Bridges’ (2009) third phase of new beginnings.

The practice change researched was therefore to provide children and their families with resources which would take the form of transition story guides in booklet and DVD format. Guides were produced for the setting and a partner mainstream school. To research whether this approach would support children’s transitions the guides were supplied to a small research group. The first guide, a guide to the setting, was given to the research group in July 2011, prior to their entry to the setting. The second guide, a guide to the partner mainstream school, was given to the research group in July 2012 when they left the setting prior to their entry to the partner mainstream school in the September 2012.

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The guides took the form of transition “walk through” picture guides with simple explanatory texts outlining what it would be like to come to the setting or the partner mainstream school. The DVDs comprised a simple PowerPoint© of the same information. It was hoped that providing the guides in two formats would encourage children and their families to utilise the resources using the medium they favoured most. It would also enable the researcher to determine the optimum format.

### **METHOD**

The study base for the project comprised six children and their families who joined the setting in the autumn term commencing September 2011. The children and families were selected on the basis that they would have the optimum chance (according to local authority catchment criteria) of being offered a reception place at the partner mainstream school in the autumn term commencing September 2012. They lived within the partner school’s catchment area and in three cases had siblings already attending the school. The researcher also selected a 50/50 split of boys and girls to obtain gender balance. In September 2011 when the children started at the setting the average age of the project cohort was 3 years and 2 months and was 4 years and 2 months when the children started at the partner mainstream school. None of the children were considered to have any additional needs.

Questionnaires were used to obtain the perceptions of parents and children and analysed to determine the efficacy of using transitions story guides to enable children to participate in their transitions journeys, parents to support their children during times of transition and help prepare them for and familiarise them with the changes that they will soon encounter. Observations of the study cohort children at their settling-in sessions and during the first few weeks of the autumn term were also undertaken by setting practitioners.

### **PARENTAL QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS ON SETTING ENTRY – SUMMARY**

Prior to starting at the setting the study cohort had mixed experiences in respect of their attendance/non-attendance of other early years settings and their parents had very different concerns and perceptions of how their children would settle in at the setting. Moreover, where children had prior early years setting experiences the majority of parents did not express any concerns about how their children would settle at the setting. For one of the children however parents were very anxious about how their child would settle as this would be their child’s first experience of an early years setting.

However all parents of the study cohort children considered that the use of a transitions guide booklet had been advantageous in supporting their child’s transition into the setting.

These responses would suggest that, in line with Bridges’ (2009) transition model the guide helped children through the first and second phases of their transition giving parents

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and children opportunities to come to terms with and adjust to their changes and new beginnings. The guides also made it possible for children to be ‘primed’ (Corsaro and Molinari (2005 cited Vogler et al. 2008) for transition throughout the summer break and enabled children to be active contributors to their experiences of change more in line with Vogler et al.’s (2008) suggestion.

Responses would also suggest that insofar as the Personal and Social Bridge of the “Five bridges of transition” (Galton et al. 1999, Barber 1999) is concerned the transition guide was perceived as a useful tool in helping children become familiar with their new setting and to become accustomed to and confident with changes in teaching personnel, setting routines and new surroundings.

Findings suggest that the guide also further supports the setting’s work with parents in respect of developing the caring triangle (Brooker 2008) and supports children in working towards the Every Child Matters outcomes (DFES 2003a).

Responses also suggest that supporting children and parents through their transition into the setting using a guide was a positive strategy for developing positive relationships between the setting, their parents and the children, one of the principles of the EYFS (DFE 2012, Early Education 2012).

Questionnaire responses suggested that the effectiveness, content and layout of the guide were suitable for both parents and children and enabled parents to support their children in their transitions journey. Responses also suggested that for some children the guide had been empowering in helping them manage their personal transition journeys, thereby meeting one of the aims of the research project in changing setting practices in order to give children more opportunities to actively prepare for and participate in their transition journey into the setting.

Whilst the paper version of the guide was the most popular format there was some parental support for the PowerPoint DVD version, however there were also issues in respect of the technology used and ICT compatibility issues.

Additional comments made by parents suggested that some of children had benefitted from this settling-in strategy, had settled in well at the setting and were enjoying their early years care and education experience with the setting. In one case however, parents highlighted the unique nature of each child’s transition journey, even within families

### **SETTING OBSERVATION ANALYSES ON SETTING ENTRY - SUMMARY**

Observations were undertaken of the study cohort children at their settling-in sessions and during the first few weeks of the autumn term.

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The study cohort children had varying attendance patterns pre-selected by their parents. As all six children (initially) settled in smoothly it would suggest that the attendance patterns of the children did not necessarily present as an indicator of whether a child's transition into the setting would be a smooth transition.

Similarly, whilst all children are offered two settling in sessions it is parental choice as to what number, if any, settling in sessions children attend. The study cohort children did not all attend both the settling in sessions offered by the setting. It could therefore be suggested that the children's attendance of settling in sessions does not necessarily present as an indicator of whether a child's transition into the setting will be a smooth transition.

The parents of two of the study cohort children expressed concerns in respect of their child being able to settle in smoothly. However, initially all six of the children settled in well and none presented with any separation anxiety when their parents left them at the setting. Observations of all six children also suggested that they quickly developed an understanding of the everyday routines of the setting. It is possible that this could be attributed to the children having had the opportunity to become familiar with the basic structure of the setting's day to day routines, the physical environment of the setting and the setting's resources through the sharing of the transitions guide.

Furthermore, when a child experienced settling in difficulties as a result of illness and other changes in family circumstances, it was possible for parents to continue to support that child's transition journey using a personalised settling in plan in conjunction with the transitions booklet.

It could therefore be suggested that the use of transitions booklets in conjunction with other settling in strategies used by the setting help children succeed in enjoying smooth transitions into the setting. These findings would concur with the hypotheses that relevant 'priming events' (Corsaro and Molinari (2005 cited Vogler et al. 2008) help encourage children to be actively involved in their experience of change (Vogler et al. 2008) during the 'neutral zone' (Bridges 2009) of transition and address some of the pivotal issues identified by Galton et al. (1999), particularly those in relation to helping children negotiate the Personal and Social and Management of Learning bridges.

#### **PARENTAL QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS ON MAINSTREAM SCHOOL ENTRY - SUMMARY**

A parental questionnaire was issued in October 2012 after the first half term period of the academic year following the mainstream school transition of the study cohort children. Of the six families involved in the project four responded to this questionnaire. This questionnaire asked similar questions of parents as the first questionnaire; however an additional request was made for parents to elicit the children's views of the transitions guides. Development Matters (Early Education 2012) statements in respect of children's

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Personal, Social and Emotional Development and Communication and Language Skills suggest that children aged between forty and sixty months plus would be developmentally more able to reflect on and express themselves effectively when considering and discussing their feelings and experiences.

Prior to starting at the partner mainstream school the four respondents of the initial study cohort had mixed experiences in respect of their familiarity with the school. Of the three respondents who expressed no concerns about how their children would settle in two indicated that their children were already familiar with the school either because they had a child already in attendance or through other contact e.g., a Childminder collecting minded children. The child of the respondent with the definite concerns about how their child would settle was very familiar with the school having two siblings in attendance. These responses indicate that familiarity with the school was not necessarily a precursor to a child's smooth transition and emphasised the unique nature of each child's transition journey.

In respect of parental perceptions as to whether using a transitions guide booklet was considered to have been advantageous in supporting the children's transitions into the partner mainstream school, three out of the four respondents considered that the guide had to some extent or definitely been useful. These responses further support the benefits of providing a resource that helps to 'prime' (Corsaro and Molinari (2005 cited Vogler et al. 2008) and prepare children for transition by giving them opportunities to come to terms with their losses and adjust to what is to come (Bridges 2009). As with the transitions guide to the setting, the guide to the partner mainstream school had also continued to enable children to be active contributors to their experiences of change (Vogler et al.'s 2008) and share those experiences with others.

Parental responses to this questionnaire also confirmed initial response findings in respect of helping children cross the Personal and Social transitions bridge (Galton et al. 1999, Barber 1999) and progress towards the Every Child Matters outcomes (DFES 2003a). Moreover, responses also corroborated findings from the initial questionnaire in respect of empowering children in managing their personal transition journeys.

The paper version of the guide continued to be the most popular format, however the DVD was used by one respondent and shared with a third party outside the research project by another.

Additional comments made by parents highlighted the difficulties faced by working parent families in helping their children in their transitions between early years settings. They were also used by respondents as an opportunity to comment on how their children had settled successfully into the partner mainstream school. Furthermore, these comments also gave an indication of the benefits of having transitions guides and how children and

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their families have independently shared transitions information with third parties outside the research project.

### **SETTING OBSERVATION ANALYSES ON SCHOOL ENTRY SUMMARY**

Reception colleagues at the partner mainstream school were invited to contribute their observations of the study cohort children in October 2012. Unfortunately no responses were received and therefore it has not been possible to produce triangulation evidence in respect of the efficacy of using a transitions guide booklet to support children’s transition journey into mainstream school.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The qualitative data from this project suggested that the study cohort children had benefitted from having transitions story guides to enable the children to be active participants in their transitions journeys and aid them in achieving smooth transitions into both the setting and on to mainstream school.

The inclusion of transitions story guides in the setting’s practice added a different but altogether positive dimension to some children’s learning experiences and their enjoyment of that learning. Complementary benefits also included the engagement of parents in their children’s learning processes and for some the opening of a conduit for children to share their learning and achievement with others.

Overall these findings indicate that transition story guides should be retained as a complementary addition to the transition strategies currently employed at the setting. To this end, downloadable versions of the setting’s transition guide booklets have been made available on the setting’s website and families are signposted to these resources as part of their initial welcome pack.

Furthermore the researcher would advocate that guides be created by all early years settings and mainstream schools and supplied to families (either as hard copies or downloadable from websites which could include LA websites) and used as a means of enabling children to become active participants in their transitions journeys and to assist parents in supporting their children’s transition journeys.

The researcher would also advocate that transition guides to mainstream schools be used by early years setting practitioners to share with children in the setting as priming events. This would help ensure that those children with working parents would also benefit.

Acknowledging the difficulties in respect of maintaining the accuracy of guides the researcher would advocate that guides for mainstream schools be maintained by mainstream schools. Furthermore up to date guides should be re-published annually in



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May (after mainstream school offer letters and acceptances) and made available to early years settings and families to enable early years settings, parents and other agencies to access them.

The researcher would also urge the local authority to consider the benefits of this approach with older children transiting on from primary schools as a complementary transitions strategy.

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