**Children as experts in infant school transitions**

**A Pilot Study**

**2014**

**Introduction**

This paper reports on a Pilot Study which explores the perceptions of children who have recently moved to Year One about their experiences of transition. It forms part of a Doctorial study and builds on a Masters study (Taddeo, 2012) which explored how the same children viewed their transit from pre-school to school and their contribution to supporting other young children undergoing a similar transition.

**Background/Rationale**

As children transit through the Foundation Stage to Key Stage One, they experience abrupt changes. During the Foundation Stage in England, three to five year old children learn through an integrated play-based pedagogy (*The Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum*). This phase of learning spans transition to school. One year later, children make the transition to Year One where their learning is determined by the subject based *National Curriculum*. This transit marks the beginning of a more ‘formal’ approach to learning and can be a huge leap for some children (Fisher, 2010).

Children’s perspectives, experiences and expectations about transition and the next stages in their education can vary considerably from those of the adults involved in their transitions (Perry, Dockett and Tracey, 1998). Such incongruence can lead to a lack of understanding by both parties (Brooker, 2002). This calls for a Constructivist view of learning which acknowledges young children as active participants (Clark and Moss, 2005), thereby placing importance on young perspectives on the process of learning (Brooker, 2002; Carr, 2000; MacNaughton, 2003).

An aspect of transition which has particular relevance to children’s involvement in research and the transition process is the imbalance of power that exists between experienced and non-experienced children, and between adults and children, during a period of transition. Children are more vulnerable to unequal power relationships in research than other groups (Robinson and Kellett, 2004; Punch, 2002). Adults are generally in a position of power and the status of children is diminished when they enter a period of transition (Clark and Moss, 2005). One way of addressing imbalances is to give children control of the transition process (Clark and Moss, 2005) and involve them in research into transition (Dockett and Perry, 1999). Methods which enable children to demonstrate their perspectives supply practitioners with an informed starting point for supporting learning (Clark and Moss, 2005).

In order to examine adult-child relations during infant school transitions, it is relevant to explore the wider context and, in particular, theories relating to power (for example, Giddens, 1984; Foucault, 1979). Hence, we begin to locate children’s positions within the context of the dynamics of power and control which operate in their relationships with adults during transition.

**Wider Context**

Children have unique perspectives of matters which are important to them (Clark and Moss, 2005). They are principal stakeholders in policy and practice (Tolfree and Woodhead, 1999). Their perspectives in the critique and reform of education are relevant and important (Cook-Sather, 2002). However, children’s voices are not always recognised or considered (Qvortrup, 2004). Children have traditionally been defined by their perceived ‘incompetence’ in relation to adults (Storrie, 1997; Roche, 1999). Adult perceptions of children are dominated by discourses which portray them as innocent and vulnerable (Devine, 1999). Their capacities as ‘active agents’ have often been undermined by a protective approach, which encourages dependence (Storrie, 1997). Consequently, children have rarely been considered as social actors with a voice of their own (Devine, 2002). Children’s perceptions of themselves in relation to adults and society are inevitably influenced by such discourses. Within the context of school, children are traditionally positioned as subordinate (Devine, 2002). Hence, there is a strong interrelation between discourse, identity and practice in the structure of adult-child relations in school.

Recent advances in the way in which society perceives children and childhood (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998) highlight the positioning of children in relation to adults and how children’s minority status impacts on the way they are regarded within society (Corsaro, 1997; James et al, 1998, Qvorturp, 1994). Children’s rights to participate and express their views freely in matters that affect them, are outlined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Lansdown, 1996). Advocates for children’s rights challenge hierarchical patterns of association, in favour of recognition of the interdependencies and interconnectedness of adults’ and children’s lives (Roche, 1999). Revised approaches to citizenship challenge assumptions regarding the inability of children to be actors in their own right. A growing emphasis on connectedness, interdependence and community points the way towards acknowledgement of children’s competencies and a commitment to inclusion of children’s voices on matters which directly affect them (Roche, 1999; Cockburn, 1998).

*Theories of Power*

My research draws on theories of power constructed by Giddens (1976-2000) and Foucault (1979-1982) to begin to understand adult-child relations during infant transitions. It explores the concept of ‘Brokerage’ (Wenger, 1998). Whilst a number of other prominent and interconnecting theories have been explored, these are beyond the scope of this paper.

Giddens (1984) presents a theoretical approach to the ‘structuration’ of social systems through social interaction. According to Giddens (1984), these structures influence human action and become ingrained in practice. Within institutions, structures serve to position individuals with respect to one another. Children’s social positioning, however, is an ‘active process’ as they ‘continually evaluate and monitor their own behaviour….. in light of the expectations and evaluations of others’ (Devine, 2002). Giddens (1976) refers to this process as ‘Reflexive Monitoring’. Depending upon the structure and nature of interactions, reflexive monitoring can be either empowering or dominating.

Devine (1998) situates Giddens’ (1984) approach in a model which demonstrates the interrelationship between structure, power and agency within institutionalised practices.

Parallels exist between the analyses of Giddens and Foucault relating to the exercise of power. Foucault (1979) examines the role of institutions in shaping power through a process of promoting, reproducing and disseminating particular discourses. Similar to the views of Giddens, Foucault connects power and knowledge. Both theorists conceptualise power as something which circulates between people, in the course of social interaction, rather than being the possession of any one party to the interaction.

Foucault argues that objects of research are frequently people in less powerful positions. This production of knowledge about ‘disadvantaged people’ helps to maintain their less powerful position. However, Foucault believes that production of information by the marginalised themselves can alter this status quo.

***Brokerage***

Wenger (1998) describes the concept of *brokerage* where experienced members of a community (*experts*) bridge the gap for new members or members of another community (*novices*) in a form of ‘mediation’ (Middleton, Sawada, Judson, Bloom and Turley, 2002). Within the context of transition this involves persons who are already familiar with school practices engaging with those who are unfamiliar. This helps novices to learn about existing practices and develop a sense of belonging to the community (Fasoli, 2003).

**Pilot Study**

This pilot study explores children’s perspectives of their transition to Year One. The following research questions underpin the study:

* What are the children’s perspectives of transition from the Foundation Stage to Key Stage One?
* How can they support children who are about to enter Key Stage One?
* What power balances exist?

**Approach/Methodology**

The main aim of my research was to find out what transition into Year One was really like for the children. It appeared appropriate, therefore, to involve the main ‘stakeholders’ (Titman, 1994) in every aspect of the research process. An added advantage was that, through their involvement, experienced *stakeholders* would begin to support novice *stakeholders* as they became participants in Year One. Ultimately, I hoped to use children’s views to ‘guide to action’ (Borland, 2001) which would improve transition in our school.

Traditional transition programmes centre upon a community of practice wherein adults attempt to ‘bridge the gap’ by conveying information and supporting children. In this case my intention was to upturn this power balance by involving Children as *Agents of Change* in the Transition Process and as active participants in research. Inspired by the ‘Mosaic’ approach (Clark and Moss, 2001, 2005), I used child friendly methods within a context of multiple listening to elicit children’s ideas about transition. I wanted the children to develop their research skills and use their findings and experiences to support new groups of children moving into Key Stage One. I believed they had the potential to become key ‘brokers’ in the transition process.

Research took place in a small, one form entry infant school during the last three weeks before the Easter break. This provided the children with time to become familiar with different aspects and practices of Year One and at the same time for memories of their transit to be fresh (Margetts, 2006). All of the twenty four children in the class were involved. The rationale for this decision was the school’s commitment to inclusive pedagogy and a firm belief that listening to a variety of children’s voices leads the way to a better understanding of the issues (James and Prout, 1990).

It is relevant to mention, that I had been the children’s teacher in Year R (during the time in which they had been involved in the Pre-School to Year R transition project). Consequently, I knew the children well and I was familiar with their previous experience of research. At the time of this study I was teaching a new Year R cohort, whilst my young ‘researchers’ were becoming accustomed to their new positions in Year One. Throughout the pilot, I operated as ‘visiting researcher’, using my non-contact time to work with the children at times agreed with the Year One teachers.

Research took place in four stages.

**Stage One –** Initial discussions with groups of 4-5 children, during which I asked the children about their experiences in Year One.

**Stage Two** - Working in threes, children photographed things they thought the next cohort of children should know about Year One.

**Stage Three** – Children reviewed the photographs and decided which they considered to be most important. They then worked together to make a book containing photos and annotations/comments (written by the children or scribed/part-scribed by me)

**Stage Four** – Children shared their books with Year R, leading to orientation visits guided by the experts.

**Findings**

Data illustrated what aspects of Year One were important to the children. My methods generated a substantial body of data, which led to reduction and selection (Miles and Hubermann, 1994). Analysis of selected data enabled me to unpick some of the issues and consider their implications within the process of transition.

Several emerging themes linked to my literature review. I remained mindful, however, that my readings could influence how I viewed the data and cause me to draw tentative links in order to make what the children said ‘fit’ the theory.

The key themes included (but were not limited to):

* **The difference between Year R and Year 1** - in Year One children ‘worked not played’, there were few opportunities for outside play and limited creative time. There were more tables and chairs and less floor space. They had to do a lot more writing.
* **Things they liked about Year R and things they missed –** the Creative area. The large writing area with exciting tools (eg pens).
* **Choice – ‘**Golden Time’ (occurred once a week, enabling free choice). ‘Discovery Time/Challenge Time’ (Occurred daily, teachers chose).
* **Progression in their learning** – PE with a ‘real coach’, more writing/’handwriting’, ‘Maths’

*Children’s perspectives on how their time and space in Year One is controlled*

Children’s comments relating to Discovery and Challenge Time, things they were expected to do (for example ‘lots of writing’) and activities and resources they felt they no longer had free access to (for example, creative time and outside space) suggested they were experiencing greater control by others over their time and space. Comments, such as ‘In Discovery and Challenge Time the teachers get to choose what you do’ and ‘We don’t really get to go outside, except at playtime’ resonated with regret as well as an acceptance that ‘that was how it was’ in Year One. Contrary to the more integrated approach to play and learning that they had experienced in Year R, their time and space seemed to be classified into ‘worktime/space’ and ‘playtime/space’. Timetables, rules and routines established boundaries on the nature and extent of their activities. The spontaneous physical activity which they had experienced within the Year R free flow in and out facility, for example, had been replaced with teacher-timetabled PE. In the children’s eyes, it was teachers who made most of the decisions and held control.

Applying Gidden’s theories (1987) to the context suggests that the teacher’s power to influence children’s time and space patterns was an authoritative resource which facilitated their surveillance and control. This automatically positioned teachers as more powerful in relation to the children. It appeared that, through ‘timetable’ organisation, children were forming distinct views on what was valued at school (for example, maths and writing) as well as the priority of work over play in their school day. Specific discourses shaping this understanding had implications for the children’s ‘sense of connectedness to their learning experiences as well as their sense of themselves as individuals with a particular status and position within the school’ (Devine, 2002, p.309). This, in turn, began to shape the children’s perceptions of what kind of learning was more valued in adult life and what was less valued. Interestingly, however, it was ‘less valued’ activities (such as art or ‘creating’) that had more appeal to the children, as exemplified by children’s comments regarding restrictions that were placed on the creative area.

‘I miss the creative area. We don’t really have one in Year One. Well there is a bit of a creative area, but we only get to use it for project stuff then the teachers tell you what to make. You don’t really choose’

Several children commented on the increased expectations for writing.

 ‘You have to do a lot more writing in Year One’

 Knowing the children as I did (especially some of the younger boys), I understood how this change caused anxiety. In Year R the emphasis was on enticing reluctant writers to ‘write’ out of their own choice, as exemplified by one child’s comments about the Year R writing area:

‘The writing area in Year R is bigger…You have lots of interesting things to write with – Angry Bird pens….glitter pens…and stuff. In Year One, we just write with pencils’

Devine (2002, p.312) suggests that control over children’s time and space within school defines their experience of education in ‘relatively narrow , instrumental terms’. It also serves to ‘construct children in particular ways relative to adults’ (ibid).

As a teacher, I understood the need for a more structured approach to learning in Key Stage One. There were after all Government and School targets to fulfil! I could not help thinking, however, that organisation of the children’s time and space would be more empowering if the children were consulted and actively participated in the process. It was disheartening to think that children’s sense of belonging and connectedness to Year One learning experiences were compromised by the pressure to work through formal education material as they progressed through the school.

Organisation of physical space was a pertinent difference mentioned by several children in different discussion groups.

‘There’s more tables and chairs in Year One, cos’ we do more work. There’s not really much room on the carpet for building and stuff’

Foucault (1979) refers to communication of differences in status and position through institutional space allocation as ‘architectural composition of space’. A number of children mentioned access to the outside and how this was mainly limited to designated playtimes or specific, prescribed learning opportunities. My observations of the Year One ‘courtyard’ was that, compared to the busy, vibrant Year R area where children were encouraged to pursue their own ideas and interests, it was quite barren and prescribed – set up at that time to facilitate a gardening project with rows of planters that children were ‘let out’ to tend to at adult specified times. This seemed to represent another renegotiation of power between teachers and children.

One child’s observations regarding differences in access to resources seemed symbolic of power relations between adults and children.

‘In Year R you can look in all the drawers. In Year One the teachers open the drawers’

I was reminded of Foucault’s (1979) references to ‘analytical pedagogy’ which is created by limiting and controlling children’s movement to maximise discipline and learning (Devine, 2002).

Whilst many children commented to some extent on control differences in Year One, it was interesting to note how different peer groups reacted to this change. Most of the girls, for example, seemed more accepting and conforming to Year One expectations. Boys, on the contrary, were more overtly vocal about the control teachers exercised over them. I wondered if this was a reflection on gender differences (in maturity, interests and learning development) and whether girls were ‘more ready’ for the formal approach in Key Stage One.

Although many of the children drew attention to limitations on pupil choice and voice, this remained an unspoken reference to power and control. I did not feel it appropriate at this stage to ask children directly about their perceptions of how powerful they thought the teachers were in relation to their own positions. Whether children were or were not explicitly aware of it, however, there seemed, to be an embedded discourse through which they viewed themselves as individuals with subordinate status in the classroom (Devine, 2002). It occurred to me that children’s explicit knowledge of power in their immediate context may warrant further exploration.

**Turning Tables: Powerless to Empowered**

Rather than viewing the power relationships I was observing as purely oppressive, I chose (at this point) to explore the multiple, rather than one way, functions of power (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012, p.49) and to focus on ‘the productive effects of power’ as it circulated amongst the ‘practices of people’ in our school. Hence, the latter stages of my research promoted children’s growing expertise in Year One and developed their role as ‘Brokers’ (Wenger, 1998) in the transition process for the next cohort.

Children often counterbalance adult-power relations in school by their interactions with one another (Devine, 2002). Several studies have highlighted a ‘child culture’ (Davies, 1991; Dyson, 1994; Pollard, 1985; Opie, 1994; Sluckin, 1981) as central in helping children cope with the evaluative context of school, as well as enabling them to regain some autonomy in the face of adult control (McNamee, 2000; Pollard, 1996). Giddens (1984) suggests that children’s feelings of powerlessness and domination manifest in relations with their peers which in turn become a coping strategy. My ‘mentoring’ programme was a positive way of channelling children’s innate urge to counter-balance power relations through peer interactions.

Sharing information about practices and expectations of school is one way of assisting others to engage in these practices (Dockett and Perry, 2005). Recent, first hand, experience of transition meant that the children understood and could relate to what the next cohort were experiencing. As established members, they were in a position to play key roles in helping ‘novices’ learn about Year One (Fasoli, 2003, p.39). Encouraging children to use their Year One knowledge to support novices elevated them to the role of experts and was immediately empowering.

Through their photographs, book-making and tours, experts provided information, experience and advice for novices. These included ‘top tips’, such as:

‘Challenges are usually something teachers have already taught you. You can use what you know to help you’

‘If you like going outside join the gardening club…You get to go out more’

‘Don’t worry. You will get to do making in projects’

In my opinion, their ‘toolkit’ was more relevant to the needs and interests of novices than any that adults could supply. Furthermore, their recent first-hand experience of transition gave them special insider knowledge that could not be replicated by any other peers or adults. I concluded that they were natural brokers of transition to Year One.

Interactions with the ‘experts’ indicated that they were starting to think of themselves as ‘big children’. They frequently referred to Year R’s as ‘the little ones’. This suggested that the experts were aware of the hierarchical nature of school and unspoken ‘rites of passage’ (Van Gennep1960; Campbell Clark, 2000).

Active participation in the research empowered the children (Kellett, 2005) and developed their perceptions as themselves as experts. Becoming a broker required knowledge and experience. Individuals or groups who graduated as brokers held a position of power. Rather than diminishing the position of the children during transition, I had begun to address imbalances of power that exist between a researcher and the researched or between adults and children during a period of transition by involving the children in the research and, thus, enabling them to retrieve control of the transition process (Clark and Moss, 2005). In Foucault’s terms, I had awarded the less powerful a voice.

**Some implications of the pilot for the future study**

Children highlight differences in pedagogy between the Foundation Stage and Key Stage One, including greater adult ‘controlled’ structuring in the latter Key Stage. These contribute to the cycle of power balance shifts which accompany children’s transit through school. My research implies that more could be done to smooth transition from the Foundation Stage to Key Stage One, including developing practice in Year One that is more conducive to Foundation Stage practice and involving expert children as brokers in the process.

Some key questions warrant further exploration, for example:

* Was Year R more empowering for the children than Year One?
* Are children more dominated in Year One?

Armed with a developing understanding of theoretical concepts relating to power, I am now in a position to revisit the findings of my previous study and to begin to map power shifts as they occur during the first two years of schooling.

The next stage in my PhD study coincides with transition in my own learning journey, as I am preparing to move into Year One. The opportunity to teach in Year One and experience transition alongside the children inevitably presents new dynamics for my research. It will be interesting to reflect on similarities and differences between parallel journeys (my own and that of the children) and to view the data from a Year One teacher’s perspective. Along the way, I anticipate that there will be shifts in my own personal experiences of power relations during times of transition. After all, I will be leaving the Foundation Stage as an expert (with more than seven years’ experience in the field) and entering Year One as a novice with much to learn.

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