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Helping Children Transition from Kindergarten to First Grade

This article documents the challenges that young children face as they move from kindergarten to first grade and the important role that elementary school counselors can play in working with students, parents/caregivers, and teachers during this critical period of development. Research- and practitioner-based recommendations for effective interventions are discussed.

Many school counselors have witnessed a heartrending scene at the start of the school year, in which distressed young children are facing new and challenging situations and tasks. The early education literature validates the notion that not only is the move from preschool to kindergarten daunting, but transitioning from a relatively warm, caring, child-centered kindergarten environment to a potentially more intimidating and less flexible first-grade classroom is also quite a struggle for many children and their parents/caregivers (Yeom, 1998). In fact, this transition has been called a critical period for young children's social and academic development (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; La Paro, Pianta, & Cox, 2000a, 2000b; Toohey & Day, 2001) and is especially demanding for children at risk for school failure (Marcon, 2000, 2002).

School counselors often are faced with the challenging task of attending to the cognitive, social, and emotional changes that children experience during this important time of transition. The many factors associated with such a transition—ranging from challenging new tasks and social situations to acclimating to various teaching strategies and pedagogy differences between grade levels—can be overwhelming for students. This article will identify the stressors that impact students as well as strategies for school counselors to partner with classroom educators to facilitate a positive transition to first grade.

TRANSITION STRESSORS

Given that kindergarten and first grade have, to varying degrees, disparate educational structures,

processes, and curricula, young children often experience significant challenges during the transition process. These may include behavioral, cognitive, social-emotional, and physical concerns (Fox, Dunlap, & Cushing, 2002; La Paro et al., 2000a, 2000b; Yeom, 1998). School counselors can help to minimize these challenges by recognizing potential stressors and offering services and interventions involving all educational stakeholders, including the children and their parents/caregivers.

Kindergarten teachers tend to be well educated in what are and are not developmentally appropriate learning activities for 5- and 6-year-olds (Huffman & Speer, 2000). As a result, kindergarten education is more often than not affective in nature, "gentle," child-paced, play-oriented, engaging, and nonpunitive (Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002). It is not surprising then, when asked, many schoolchildren report positive feelings about their kindergarten experience.

In contrast, children entering first-grade classrooms for the first time recognize immediately that things have changed. Grade 1 is the onset of formal learning for most school districts, and it presents children with a far more ritualized and structured learning environment. Children's attention is redirected from following their own educational interests to attaining externally imposed, preset academic competencies, such as reading and mathematics. Moreover, first graders are faced, often for the initial time, with having to attend school for a full day without a longer rest break and to stay focused on topics that seem to be irrelevant and uninteresting to their worlds. All the while they must sit still in uncomfortable chairs and behave for extended periods. They also are discovering their social roles in the classroom, at recess, and in the lunchroom—often with bigger and more mature children. In addition, they are learning to accept the lead and control of several adult figures other than their main teacher (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Toohey & Day, 2001). Another disconcerting element for some children is that within first grade, educational

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practices are highly variable from teacher to teacher and school to school (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2002).

Parents and other caregivers also may note that the teaching methods (and their theoretical underpinnings) used in first-grade classrooms influence how their children perceive and experience the new learning environment. These perceptions and experiences have the potential to impact students socially and emotionally as well as educationally due to increased anxiety related to outcome-based classroom pedagogy—perhaps a drastic change from the nurturing environment of their kindergarten classrooms. The two major approaches normally found in these classrooms are labeled “learner-centered,” using constructivist pedagogy, versus “teacher-centered,” using direct instruction methods (Joyce, Weil, & Calhoun, 2003).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BEST PRACTICE

What can be problematic for many children provides elementary school counselors with a good opportunity to assist and develop close relationships with youngsters and their parents/caregivers early on in their school experience. Drawing from existing literature and the ideas suggested by current practitioners, we next outline various strategies to ease the transition process for children and their families.

What the Research Suggests

The following suggestions are research-based guidelines to direct school counselor interventions and services within the framework of a comprehensive school counseling program (American School Counselor Association, 2005). Because kindergarten to Grade 1 transition studies are relatively sparse and further application research will continue to be published in this area, school counselors should periodically revisit the current education and school counseling literature to update their practical knowledge base.

Solicit collaboration among all relevant educational partners. Not only must kindergarten and first-grade teachers be involved early on in preparing the children for the transition, but parents/caregivers and the children themselves need to be included in the collaboration process as well (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Fox et al., 2002; La Paro et al., 2000a, 2000b; Yeom, 1998). The research consistently suggests that all key parties must be involved, and especially parents/caregivers, in the grade transition process (Marcon, 1993; National Center for Early Development and Learning [NCEDL], 1998; Toohey & Day, 2001).

In three multistate studies of transition practices, researchers followed pre-kindergarteners through first grade (see NCEDL, n.d.; also, e.g., Early, Pianta, Taylor, & Cox, 2001; Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999). Some important yet troubling findings were reported, for example in an NCEDL study: Only about 50% of kindergarten teachers surveyed reported conducting meetings with the children’s future Grade 1 teachers to discuss stability in the curriculum from one grade to the next. No more than 56% of the kindergarten teachers said they were arranging for their students to visit a first-grade classroom. Fewer than 25% of the kindergarten teachers reported showing up at general transition meetings, distributing to parents information on how placements in first grade are accomplished, attending meetings to prepare transitions for individual students, or organizing transition activities for children with special needs. Most obviously missing are practices that engage the parents/caregivers in relevant decisions about who will be their child’s first-grade teacher and what the expectations are for first grade (Pianta et al.).

Obviously, school counselors can encourage and assist with implementing these collaborative partnerships more fully (Amatea, Daniels, Bringman, & Vandiver, 2004; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). These supportive relationships are especially important in schools that find these K–first grade student transitions generally problematic (e.g., urban schools with a high percentage of minority and low-income students; Pianta et al., 1999; Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005).

Finally, elementary school counselors in consort with other building educators need to adopt a broad-based educational approach to guide transition practices. While it is beyond the scope of this article to detail this idea, either Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (1998) ecological-developmental framework or Pianta’s (1999) systems approach to education could be used as a “big picture” map (see also Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Rous, Harbin, & McCormick, 2006). In other words, as school counselors, teachers, and parents/caregivers collaborate on helping children transition from grade to grade, they should consider the children’s important subsystems (e.g., culture and community, ethnicity, family) that influence these changes (Pianta et al., 1999; Schulting et al., 2005).

By looking beyond the immediate goal—that is, moving a kindergarten child to first grade without considering other important factors affecting the placement—strong ties can be created among salient members of students’ subsystems (e.g., all relevant educators, parents/caregivers and extended family, religious leaders). By doing so, the continuity from early education programs to kindergarten and Grade

It can be more fluid and less distressing for youngsters and their parents/caregivers (La Paro et al., 2000a, 2000b). In short, “systems thinking” needs to be applied whenever educators make major changes in students’ school/classroom placements, schedules, and interventions (Pianta, 1999; Pianta et al., 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Rous et al., 2006). A research-based transition plan needs to be in place.

Encourage pedagogy evaluation. To help kindergarteners adjust more readily to first grade, learner-centered classrooms are generally more effective than the more conventional pedagogies such as direct instruction. School counselors can familiarize themselves with this pedagogy and facilitate a discussion session with the early elementary teachers. Such a meeting would allow a time for teachers to share the pedagogy used in their classrooms with the school counselors and each other. In addition, it would serve as a time for school counselors to share current research related to pedagogy and emotional and behavioral concerns that potentially impact student achievement. School counselors can partner with elementary school teachers to share expertise in an effort to attend to the students’ social, emotional, and educational needs. Ideally such a conversation would evolve into a sharing of concrete suggestions for classroom design, organization, and curriculum design from a learner-centered pedagogy.

Avoid the use of delayed entry into kindergarten, transition or developmental classrooms, and retention interventions. When kindergarteners struggle academically or otherwise, these three interventions are generally used, although there is little research evidence to undergird them. For example, even as the practice has not been supported in the literature, parents and teachers generally believe that holding young children out of kindergarten for one year, perhaps until they turn 6, will subsequently smooth the transition to first grade. While the rationale seems palpable—that is, provide children with extra time to further mature and develop the skills needed for a successful first-grade experience—it appears that this practice is largely unhelpful over the long run (Mantzicopoulos & Neuharth-Pritchett, 1998). Most “underdeveloped” youngsters will catch up to their peers by perhaps Grade 3.

Mantzicopoulos’s (2003a) longitudinal study examining the efficacy of developmental Grade 1 transition (developmental first-grade classroom) programs provided little evidence that these classrooms are superior to other ways of remediating kindergarteners’ deficient pre-academic and social skills. Interestingly, in an earlier investigation of teachers’ perceptions of the effectiveness of first-grade transition classes, Grade 1 teachers largely sup-

ported the practice and viewed it as helpful, despite negative empirical evidence to the contrary (Horn-Wingerd, Carelia, & Warford, 1993).

It is also tempting for kindergarten teachers to suggest nonpromotion of low-achieving children. However, retention tends to be a less than satisfactory alternative. This practice has significant emotional and social costs for the retained children and does not necessarily ensure that they will be successful learners in subsequent grades (Holloway, 2003; Marcon, 2002; Peel, 1997). Instead, in most cases, allow the child to move on to first grade, while providing scaffolding services and both educational and counseling interventions for the child, teacher, and parents/caregivers.

Use family-oriented and small and large group interventions early on. When problem behaviors such as nervousness or reluctance to participate emerge before, during, or after the transitioning process, they are most effectively addressed using family-centered early intervention strategies that take into account all the individual and contextual variables (home, school, neighborhood) in play (Amatea et al., 2004; Fox et al., 2002; Mantzicopoulos, 2003b). In other words, do not wait to see if children “grow” out of their problems. They often are exacerbated with time, not ameliorated. Classroom meetings (Edwards & Mullis, 2003), artwork (Hale & Boozer, 1998), and small and large group bibliotherapy (Nicholson & Pearson, 2003), for example, may be the most useful tools to reduce children’s stress and fears about transitioning to formal education. In addition, these types of interventions may provide some insights into children’s literacy development.

What Practitioners Suggest

In an effort to integrate research with current practice, six elementary school counselors and two classroom teachers were asked to share, anecdotally, their kindergarten to first grade transition interventions. Of the four emerging themes discussed above as best practice recommendations, the respondents we talked to had clear preferences. The transition strategies most cited focused on (a) building a collaborative relationship between the kindergarten and first-grade teachers, and (b) providing direct student assistance/interventions. Regrettably, including the parents/caregivers as educational partners appeared to be absent in the interventions shared.

Kindergarten and first-grade students often are provided with various opportunities to meet, express concerns, and share experiences as well as the wisdom gained through successfully making the transition. One example of such direct student assistance was shared by elementary school counselor Naomi Nichols (personal communication, September 28,

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2006). She has the first graders at her school write letters to the kindergarteners at the end of the school year, in an effort to provide both advice and encouragement to those preparing for the transition. The counsel shared in the letters included heartfelt recommendations such as “Sound more intelligent,” which were circulated to the kindergartners and then later posted on a bulletin board in the classroom.

Several other collaborative direct service interventions at the same Seattle-area school included having kindergarteners enrolled in a half-day program stay through lunch and practice eating in the school cafeteria, where they later eat as first graders. Initially students practiced with lunches packed at home and several days later went through the lunch line, learning to pick up trays and pay for their food. Kindergarten students also were given permission to tour several first-grade classrooms to learn where the classrooms were located and what they looked like and to perhaps observe the similarities and differences compared to their current kindergarten classrooms.

Carol Wahl (personal communication, September 21, 2006), an elementary school counselor (Enumclaw School District, WA), reported several interventions practiced in her building including “Move-Up Day,” in which kindergarten students spend 45 minutes in what will be their first-grade classroom the following year, getting to know their future classroom teacher and classmates. An example of a teacher collaboration activity involves weekly staff meetings in which teams of kindergarten and first-grade teachers meet to discuss various students’ educational and transitional needs. A structural strategy that one school has implemented includes utilizing a district-wide full-day kindergarten in an attempt to reduce the separation anxiety surrounding transition difficulties as kindergarteners familiarize themselves with more time away from home and their parents/caregivers.

Variations of these student-focused strategies also were shared including opportunities at the end of the school year for entire classrooms of kindergarteners and first graders to meet in first-grade classrooms for reading and coloring as well as a “buddy system,” in which kindergarteners who have recently participated in a graduation ceremony are partnered with first graders to spend an hour in their classrooms to observe various subjects being taught at the first-grade level. Although it is exciting to hear what is currently being implemented to encourage collaboration and, thus, assist in the transition process, evidence of a lack of the spectrum of interventions recommended in the literature in current practice points to a need for expanded services and ongoing research. Moreover, feedback from school

counselors and classroom educators suggests that some districts continue to utilize interventions that are thought to hinder the transition process, such as creating transitional or developmental classrooms for younger kindergarteners, including those with summer birthdays.

SUMMARY AND FINAL REMARKS

Any grade transition can be distressing for students and their parents/caregivers, but this change is particularly challenging for youngsters (and their families) as they move from kindergarten to first grade. Few consistent and effective research-based interventions to smooth the transition are applied school-wide. Based on the literature, we recommend that elementary school counselors do their part by encouraging more collaboration among all relevant stakeholders. The children and their parents/caregivers must be included in the preparation and implementation phases of transition. Moreover, counselors should consult closely with first-grade teachers to work together to establish or enhance their learner-centered pedagogy. As children experience difficulties, the research suggests that the more conventional and punitive approaches of delaying entry, holding children back in kindergarten, or moving them into a transitional or developmental first-grade classroom are not as effective as family-directed and small and large group interventions. Such tools can greatly assist students and their families with the adjustment process. This underscores the need for counselors to be well trained in family work. Elementary school counselors, working within the context of a comprehensive school counseling program (e.g., ASCA National Model®) and a viable transition model (e.g., Rous et al., 2006), can help young children, teachers, and parents/caregivers make this critical period of development less stressful and more positive through their prevention-oriented interventions. ■

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