

Transitions of American Indian and Alaskan Native Children
From Pre-school to Kindergarten

Cheryl D. Clay

WHEN YOUNG children anticipate entering kindergarten, they may have feelings of excitement, uncertainty, or even fear of the unknown. Likewise, families, including American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) families may look forward to their children entering kindergarten with both anticipation and apprehension. Will their children find success in school? Some families of AI/AN children, due to their own challenges with schooling, may be apprehensive about how their children will cope with the new teacher and his/her academic and behavioral expectations. Is my child prepared to succeed with the academic goals of kindergarten? Will my child behave and learn what this kindergarten teacher expects? Will my child be accepted by other youngsters and find friends in school? What can I do to help my son or daughter succeed in kindergarten? Although AI/AN families may experience similar hopes and fears as other families, their children may also face challenges of coping with curriculum, language and cultural discontinuities between the educational contexts of preschool and kindergarten. AI/AN parents and preschool and kindergarten personnel seek transition strategies, programs, and models to facilitate AI/AN children in learning academic skills and social competencies needed for school success while maintaining language and cultural participation with their families and tribal communities.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the transition of AI/AN children as part of the change process of entering kindergarten along with maintaining connections with their unique home languages and cultures. First, a brief history of transition programs is reviewed including definitions of transition and continuity. Second, attention is given to how preschools and elementary schools support the involvement of AI/AN families as they and their children transition between preschool and kindergarten. Third, promising transition strategies for AI/AN children from the literature are reviewed. Fourth, pro-

gram models in the literature are described including features that address ways to build successful relationships among families and school personnel from diverse language and cultural backgrounds. Fifth, research needs and recommendations are discussed. Finally, policy recommendations for improving the transition of AI/AN to kindergarten are proposed.

History of Transition

For the past 20 years positive adjustment during transition to kindergarten has been broadly recognized as the first step to school success. In 1992 transition was defined in the U.S. Department of Education's National Transition Study as "those activities initiated by schools or preschools to bridge the gap between the preschool and kindergarten experiences" (RMS Research Corporation, 1992). The transition of AI/AN children from preschool to kindergarten encompasses the changes that occur as AI/AN children complete the last few months in their preschool, often reservation-based Head Start, classrooms and their first few months in kindergarten classrooms. Within an ecological view of transition to kindergarten (Pianta & Cox, 1999), children and family members experience letting go of relationships with the familiar people and setting of preschool and forming new relationships with unfamiliar kindergarten personnel and procedures. They also encounter different curricula in preschool and kindergarten. Preschools, including Head Start, have been designed as developmentally appropriate while kindergartens were academically oriented. Developmentally appropriate meant that the curriculum and methods were designed to match the cognitive/language, social/emotional, and physical/motor developmental levels of the children in the class. In contrast, kindergarten curricula focused on the academic goals of the school district curriculum for all children regardless of individual developmental levels.

Not all children adjust to the academic and behavioral expectations of kindergarten programs in ways that are both effective and appropriate (socially competent). According to Lombardi (1992),

“many children have problems adjusting to elementary school programs that have a different philosophy, teaching style, and structure than those programs in which they participated during their earlier years.” As many as half of entering kindergarten students experienced adjustment difficulties that interfered with their learning progress according to kindergarten teachers (Pianta & Cox, 1999). Children who experience greater discontinuities, such as language, culture, and socioeconomic background, between preschool and kindergarten programs may need more supports in order to adapt to the new schooling and benefit from learning activities.

In the 1980s and 1990s, preschool teachers and parents endeavored to “prepare” children for kindergarten with school and home “readiness” activities. These efforts were intended to bridge the gap between developmentally appropriate preschool curricula and academic kindergarten curricula (Lombardi, 1992) by preparing children to perform specific academic skills and to behave in ways effective and appropriate to kindergarten. For children deemed “not ready” according to readiness screening procedures of academic and behavioral skills, parents were often advised to provide the “gift of time” through academic red shirting (extra year of preschool), transition kindergarten classes, transition first grade classes and kindergarten retention. There is some evidence that Native American children were referred to these extra year programs at a disproportionately higher rate compared with non-Native American children (Clay, 1998).

The popularity of “extra year” programs diminished after the National Association for the Education of Young Children ([NAEYC], 1995a) issued a position statement on school readiness. This document reviewed longitudinal research that showed short-term academic benefits of an extra year washed out by second or third grade and the risk of damage to self-esteem was more likely to negatively affect academic performance in the long term. Many policy makers and practitioners shifted their concern from preparing “ready” children to changing schools to be ready for all students. According to NAEYC, schools were called upon to promote universal school readiness through *schools* that are ready for all age-eligible students, by:

- Addressing the inequities in early life experiences so that all children have access to the opportunities that promote school success;
- Recognizing and supporting individual differences among children including linguistic and cultural differences; and
- Establishing reasonable and appropriate expectations of children's capabilities upon school entry.

The burden of “readiness” shifted from “ready” children to “ready” schools. According to Shore (1998) the responsibility for a successful transition was a specific responsibility of elementary schools:

- Ready schools strive for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary schools.
- Ready schools smooth the transition from home to school.

Continuity is the concept of similarities or differences between preschool and kindergarten. Continuity is the degree to which behaviors learned in the first environment are seen as appropriate in the next. Will adults in kindergarten respond to children in ways that are consistent with expectations established in preschool? If children suddenly find that their usual ways of responding are no longer effective and appropriate, they will experience discontinuity. American Indian children experience cultural discontinuity through disrupted reciprocal use of oral language in kindergarten consistent with academic disorientation, lower oral language skills and slower development of literacy skills (Clay, 1998). It is possible to reduce academic, language, and cultural discontinuities through family involvement and building relationships that sustain communication and coordination among stakeholders (Smrekar, Guthrie, Owens, & Sims, 2001).

Preschool and Kindergarten Transition Efforts

Preschools and schools may address the need for greater continu-

ity during transitions of AI/AN children to kindergarten with three changes: 1) coordination of the curricula of preschools and kindergartens; 2) school procedures to build relationships and maintain communication and coordination of stakeholders; and, 3) specific strategies to address the languages and cultures of AI/AN families. The following discussion reviews research related to each of these ways to change preschools and schools, increase continuity across settings, and improve adjustments and school success of AI/AN children.

Early childhood care and education programs must be high quality in order to effectively prepare young children for school success (Helburn et al., 1995). In this study, children from low-income, single-parent families who attended low-quality early childhood education programs were most vulnerable to lower academic skills in kindergarten, first and second grades. On a wider scale, in 2003 federal legislation required Head Start grantees to assess and plan curriculum around more academic content focused on specific child outcomes in literacy:

- Understands an increasingly complex and varied vocabulary.
- For non-English-speaking children, progresses in listening to and understanding English.
- Develops increasing abilities to understand and use language to communicate information, experiences, ideas, feelings, opinions, needs, questions; and for other varied purposes.
- Uses an increasingly complex and varied spoken vocabulary.
- For non-English-speaking children, progresses in speaking English.
- Associates sounds with written words, such as awareness that different words begin with the same sound.
- Recognizes a word as a unit of print, or awareness that letters are grouped to form words, and that words are separated by spaces.
- Identifies at least 10 letters of the alphabet, especially those in their own name.

- Knows that letters of the alphabet are a special category of visual graphics that can be individually named.

In this way Head Start Program curricula became a closer match to the more expectations for academic skills of entering kindergarteners. More recently, some elementary schools have reached out to coordinate curricula further by housing Head Start or preschools on site. This facilitated adopting preschool and kindergarten literacy and mathematics curricula from the same company.

On the kindergarten side of transition efforts, the National Association of Elementary School Principals urged elementary principals to lead initiatives among stakeholders that advocate for quality early childhood programs associated with their schools (2005). This report specifically recommended that principals “create transition programs that ensure close contact among Head Start programs, preschool programs and public schools” (p. 9). In contrast to common assumptions, families from all cultural backgrounds, education, and income levels are known to have a positive influence on their children’s school success (Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Shaver & Walls, 1998). In research synthesized by Henderson and Mapp and published by Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (2003), programs that strengthened connections among school, family and community had a positive impact on school achievement. When schools welcomed parents to be involved and addressed specific needs of families and the community, their transition programs were more successful in generating engagement and supporting the positive adjustment of children (Peña, 2000; Sanders & Harvey, 2000).

As AI/AN children enter kindergarten they encounter cultural discontinuities related to differences between home languages and cultures and mainstream schools. It may be the first time they are in a position to relate to non-Native American authority figures and peers without older AI/AN family or community members to mediate the experience (Vygotsky, 1978). Children who attend reservation-based Head Start classrooms often have AI/AN teachers, aids, or support staff who act as their language and cultural mediators (Moore, Beatty,

& Pérez-Méndez, 1995). For example, the events of daily life such as birth, tragedies, stresses, job changes or accomplishments of a family are more readily known, understood and accommodated in a relatively small, homogeneous AI/AN community. The language and way language is used are more readily understood by an AI/AN child in their reservation (Clay, 1998) or village classroom. When children enter kindergarten, it may be their first experience interpreting and responding to languages of non-American Indians or Alaskan Natives on their own. To the extent that families are involved in the transition of their children to kindergarten, they serve as mediators to interpret and support the daily learning activities.

Although much was known about the value of a positive adjustment to kindergarten in the 1990s, the National Education Goals Panel declared that “transition activities . . . are the exception rather than the rule in our public schools” (as cited in Bohan-Baker & Little, 2002). The most common way kindergarten teachers (95%) helped children make the transition to kindergarten was to talk with the child’s parent after school started. What, specifically, is known about how schools may support families as they transition to kindergarten? How do school personnel facilitate stakeholders to form positive relationships during transition? Currently, many schools have transition programs designed to ameliorate apprehensions of all families; promising features of these transition programs are now considered for AI/AN children and families.

A review of current transition practices shows many ways stakeholders seek to communicate, coordinate, and increase the quality and quantity of family involvement. They share information about school, early education, individual children, and ways to respect language and culture along with other promising transition practices.

Sharing Information about School

- Principal, teacher, teacher assistant and other support staff who warmly welcome families, but do not intimidate
- Clear, jargon-free description of the kindergarten program

- Tour of the classrooms to see teachers and children “in action”
- Tour of the school including gym, cafeteria, playground, nurse’s station
- Clear answers to questions in their native language
- Expectations of the school of entering kindergarteners and their families
- Opportunity to meet and interact with other parents
- User-friendly printed information and a phone number for future questions
- Parents may help children become familiar with kindergarten teachers by reviewing their names, showing their pictures and talking about the kindergarten classroom (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 1999).

Sharing Information about Preschool Children

- Preschool curriculum and methods
- Preschool personnel prepare information about individual children: health, special needs, test results and progress reports
- Kindergarten teachers adapt curriculum with above information
- Transition staffing for children with identified disabilities in preschool
- Invite parents of preschoolers to PTO/PTA meetings
- Joint inservice professional training with preschool and kindergarten teachers
- Resource/parent center and libraries in preschools and elementary schools open to all staff and parents
- Aggregate data on assessments of individual children, classrooms and programs shared with preschool and kindergarten personnel
- Respect for the language and culture of each family
- Classroom environment shows AI/AN culture with pictures, children’s literature, cultural displays
- Curriculum materials (counting objects, stories, vocabulary of

common concepts in native language—colors, numbers, animals, direction words, family relationships)

- Classroom procedures reflect AI/AN cultural values (daily greetings, display of knowledge, individual vs. group work, use of time and space)
- Classroom presenters from AI/AN communities such as dancers, musicians, cultural events, storytellers, pottery makers, weavers, tribal leaders
- ECE and kindergarten staffed with bilingual teacher aides, as needed, to serve as cultural mediators
- Preschool and kindergarten personnel trained in cross-cultural competence (Moore, Beatty & Pérez-Méndez, 1995).

Other promising practices to involve families in transition to kindergarten include:

- Spring kindergarten visits by preschool children and parents
- Home learning activities such as reading to children and discussions
- Elementary school informational meetings about kindergarten in the spring
- Preschools partner with local PTAs
- Home visits by preschool and kindergarten teachers
- Family support groups during transition to kindergarten
- Preschool teachers maintain informal contact with preschool “graduates”
- Early registration and assignment of children to kindergarten classes
- Class assignments with kindergarten teachers who taught older siblings to facilitate relationships between the teacher and family members (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 1999).

While these features of transition programs offer promise for communication and coordination among stakeholders, specific barriers have also been identified; class lists generated too late to make

contacts with children and families before school starts, summer work by kindergarten teachers is not supported, and a plan for transition to kindergarten is not available in the school district. Furthermore, a national survey by the National Center for Early Development and Learning showed that kindergarten teachers perceived that family characteristics are greater barriers to family involvement in schools that are urban, have a higher minority population, or are located in higher concentrations of poverty. The following models are included as examples of promising features likely to overcome these barriers.

Models for Transition Programs

Although preschools, Head Start programs, and elementary schools have adopted practices believed to improve the adjustments and school performance of children during their transition to kindergarten, few research-based models of transition programs are currently in use. This section describes Head Start transition requirements and the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition.

The reauthorized Head Start Act (2003) provides guidelines for local programs to implement transition practices. “Each Head Start agency shall take steps to coordinate with the local educational agency serving the community involved and with schools in which children participating in a Head Start program operated by such agency will enroll following such program, including:

1. Developing and implementing a systematic procedure for transferring, with parental consent, Head Start program records for each participating child to the school in which such child will enroll.
2. Establishing channels of communication between Head Start staff and their counterparts in the schools (including teachers, social workers, and health staff) to facilitate coordination of programs.
3. Conducting meetings involving parents, kindergarten or el-

- elementary school teachers, and Head Start program teachers to discuss the educational, developmental and other needs of individual children.
4. Organizing and participating in joint transition-related training of school staff and Head Start staff.
 5. Developing and implementing a family outreach and support program in cooperation with entities carrying out parental involvement efforts under title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 6301 et seq.).
 6. Assisting families, administrators, and teachers in enhancing educational and developmental continuity between Head Start services and elementary school classes.
 7. Linking the services provided in such Head Start program with the education services provided by such local educational agency.

Each local Head Start grantee uses the above guidelines to design a specific transition plan that fits their local community. Local plans and transition efforts vary widely across Head Start programs. A key factor in the effectiveness of transition interventions is the extent to which transition plans are actually implemented (Boethel, 2004).

The most promising comprehensive theoretical model for the transition of AI/AN children from preschool to kindergarten is the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000) (see Fig. 1), which is included in Bohan-Baker's and Little's (2002) review of family involvement literature. This model shows how relationships change over time for transition stakeholders of preschool and kindergarten. As children move from preschool to kindergarten, their continuing relationships are with parents and peers if they are assigned to the same kindergarten classroom. The move to kindergarten necessitates that both children and their families disengage from the familiar relationships of preschool and establish new relationships with the teacher, peers and community members in kindergarten. If families are actively involved, they more actively support their children to form new relationships during their transi-

tion to kindergarten.

Through active involvement, family members are also in a position to mediate the adjustment of their children as they are forming new relationships in kindergarten. They may assist their children to cope with discontinuities specifically associated with language and culture. For example, mainstream kindergarten teachers use space, time and their voices in culturally determined ways that are different from practices in AI/AN families. Space and time are more flexible in AI/AN communities, responsive to the needs of children and teachers at the moment. AI/AN family members and teachers communicate with children using low voices and culturally specific gestures; mainstream teachers more typically use high pitched, louder voices to communicate and control behaviors of students (Clay, 1998). Families may be able to help their children interpret behavioral expectations at school and ways to meet their teacher's academic expectations.

For research purposes, this ecological model of transition provides a promising framework for evaluating which transition strategies most effectively impact the adjustment and school success of AI/AN children during their transition to kindergarten. For example, what intervention strategies are associated with increased family in-

The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition

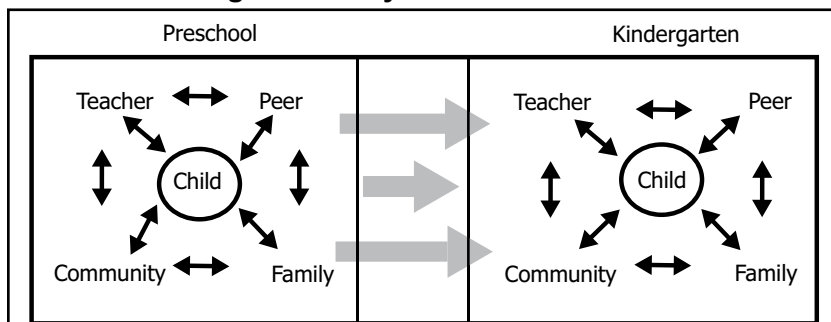


Figure 1. From Kraft-Sayre, M.E., & Pianta, R.C. (2000). *Enhancing the transition to kindergarten: Linking children, families and school*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, National Center for Early Development and Learning.

Diagram from Bohan-Baker, M., & Little, P.M.D. (2000). *The transition to kindergarten: A review of current research and promising practices to involve families*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project. Retrieved March 19, 2006, from www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/bohan.html.

involvement and school success for AI/AN children? What strategies increase the involvement of tribal officials and other tribal leaders in the transition of young AI/AN children to kindergarten?

Although much has been written about the process of transition from preschool to kindergarten and promising strategies for effective transition programs, little is known about the relative effectiveness of specific strategies and no evaluations have been conducted of comprehensive models of transition. Even less is known about how the languages and cultures of AI/AN children may be associated with involvement of family members, new relationships in kindergarten, adjustments to kindergarten, and subsequent school success. For example, the Family and Child Education Program sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Schultz, Lopez, & Hochberg, 1995) could be studied using the ecological model discussed above. What specific family involvement strategies of the reservation-based Parents as Teachers program and center-based Even Start Family Literacy Program were associated with positive adjustment to kindergarten?

In light of the dearth of comprehensive research addressing research-based theoretical models of transition of children, particularly AI/AN children, to kindergarten, more research is needed to better understand effective transition practices.

Research Needs and Recommendations

According to McWayne (2004), transition research projects should be planned and implemented using these recommendations:

- Multidimensional measures
- Culturally relevant constructs and operationalizations
- Family involvement across different developmental periods
- Longitudinal designs
- Regression models that incorporate other known correlates of child outcomes
- School variables and effects on family involvement
- Empirical investigations of programs that work

The following research topics drawn from multiple sources are timely and critical to improving the transition of AI/AN children to kindergarten.

Parent Involvement

- Factors motivating parents' decisions to become involved in their children's education, how involvement influences outcomes, and how to help teachers and schools encourage involvement
- How to build relationships between home and school before concerns and tensions lead to mistrust between home and school (Pianta & Cox, 1998)
- Community organizing as a means of involving low-income and ethnically diverse parents and community members to improve low-performing schools and children's learning and development (Weiss, Henderson, Epstein, Hoover-Dempsey, & Jeynes, 2005)
- Workable alternatives for involving working parents, parents of infants, or parents experiencing high stress
- Home-based family involvement interventions
- Male involvement/outreach

Communication/coordination among stakeholders

- Home-school reciprocal dialog, parental expectations for children's academic success, notions of parents' and schools' responsibilities
- School-based programs of school, family, and community (tribal) partnership and the roles of districts and states in guiding these programs
- Cultural discontinuities in current classroom practice
- Professional development to increase cultural awareness and sensitivity
- Exchange of quality information on children's development in home and school contexts
- Expert/unilateral dictations versus reciprocal dialogue and col-

laborative action

- Bilingual staff and community paraprofessionals
- Efficacy of “culture-language mediators” to increase the quantity and quality of family involvement during transition (Barrera, 1996)
- Indirect (brochures, packets, media messages) vs. direct contact (phone calls, home visits, conversations at school) in generating family involvement

Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations are based upon the transition practices likely to facilitate a more positive transition of AI/AN children to kindergarten. They are divided into policies to improve the quality of preschools and elementary schools, structure of transition programs and professional development.

Preschools

1. Tribal Head Start Program personnel encouraged to participate in language preservation and cultural activities in preschool classrooms and to communicate these practices to stakeholders during the transition process (Drew & Glass, 2005).
2. Universal enrollment of all 3- and 4-year-old children in poverty in high quality early childhood care and education programs (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005).

Elementary Schools

1. Family Involvement programs employ paraprofessionals within the AI/AN community as language/cultural mediators (O’Connell, 1998).
2. School Principals provide leadership to establish transition teams made up of stakeholders (parents, preschool and kindergarten personnel, and tribal community members) to plan,

implement, and evaluate transition programs (Ferrandino, 2005).

Structure of Transition Programs

1. Frequent direct stakeholder contact, especially children, family members and kindergarten teachers
2. Alignment of curriculum and program features of preschool and kindergarten
3. Timely communication/coordination between preschool and kindergarten programs; provide families with kindergarten information in the spring in order to better prepare their child to participate in kindergarten (Pacheco, Tullis, Everest, Baker, & Sutherland, 2004).
4. Recruit and support educators in preschool and kindergarten who are trained in languages other than English—multilingual and multicultural backgrounds (NAEYC, 1995b).

Professional Development

Elementary principals and preschool administrators should require joint professional development training for kindergarten and preschool classroom personnel (NAEYC, 1995b; Pacheco, Tullis, Baker, & Sutherland, 2004) that includes the following topics:

- Cultural awareness and sensitivity in areas of culture, language, and diversity to achieve cross-cultural communication and competence, including how to use self-reflection tools to assess cultural competence (Moore, Beatty, & Pérez-Méndez, 1995).
- Communication patterns differ among families and teachers from different language and cultural backgrounds (Phillips, 1992).
- Communication patterns of American Indian kindergarteners are disrupted in kindergarten compared with preschool with peers and adults, evidence of cultural discontinuity (Clay, 1998).

- Inherent cultural conflicts between AI/AN tribal communities and mainstream schooling (Peshkin, 1997).

Summary

AI/AN children experience cultural and language discontinuities as they transition from preschool to kindergarten. Family members who are involved in the transition process may serve as cultural mediators as their children move from preschool to kindergarten. Using the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition, the promising transition strategies may be the subject of research to better understand and improve the transition of AI/AN, the beginning of a positive adjustment to kindergarten and school success.

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