

Launch
Transition to school: Position Statement

by
Professor Alan Hayes
Director, Australian Institute of Family Studies

4.00pm
Monday 8 August 2011
Murray School of Education, Charles Sturt University
Elizabeth Mitchell Drive, Albury

Launch of the
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Director, Australian Institute of Family Studies

at the
Albury Campus of Charles Sturt University,
Monday 8 August 2011

I wish to acknowledge

- Sue Moloney, Head of Campus
- Associate Professor Louise Hard (Head of Murray School of Education)
- Professor Sue Dockett and Professor Bob Perry
- Associate Professor Kay Margetts
- Noella MacKenzie
- Tuija Turunen
- PhD students
 - Amy MacDonald
 - Kathryn Hopps
- Robyn Cooper
- Emma Kearney

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to be with you this afternoon for this important event.

May I too start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Wiradjuri people, and pay my respects to their elders both past and present.

I would especially acknowledge Aunty Nancy Rooke OAM whose many sustained contributions have been fittingly recognised in an award under the Order of Australia.

Thank you Aunty Nancy for your very warm and wise welcome to the land of the Wiradjuri.

We cannot escape the fact that the coming of our ancestors to your land has brought difficult turning points, and forced turbulent transitions on your people, Mrs Rooke, for which my people's apology was a long time coming.

Turning points and transitions punctuate the pathways we take through life and can leave indelible imprints.

For me, one of my most salient transitions was from home and school, to higher education, when I embarked on the path to becoming a primary school teacher. That involved moving from the protected world of life in a small country town, to Wagga Wagga Teachers' College, a forebear of what is now this University. What a wonderful campus – weather and water didn't get in the way of an excellent, though brief, tour of your wetlands. This is a real treasure.

It is indeed an honour to return, if not to Wagga Wagga, at least to this fine campus of what has become my *Alma Mater*. While that transition brought its achievements, satisfactions and challenges, it was at least one for which I was reasonably prepared.

My transition to school was another matter. Of course my parents and siblings had spoken about this thing called school. And like many children I was both delighted and daunted by the prospect of stepping into the largely unknown. Novelty has great appeal to the callow!

The day dawned for my start to school. Bright eyed and bushy tailed, with brand new uniform, polished shoes and packed port, I confidently marched through the gate to the new world that awaited me. The teacher was welcoming, the lessons were fun and then the bell rang.

So that was school. I'd enjoyed it. It was over. Now it was time to go home to resume my life of play and pampered parenting, as the youngest member of my family.

So a little after 11am my mother was surprised to see me striding manfully up the drive proudly having "done school"!

Getting me back there was another matter. Not the ideal start!

On that less than ideal foundation, my education was blighted. Despite many high points, some memorable teachers—for the best and worst of reasons—primary school culminated in the dubious honour of my appointment as a "bin boy", in 6th Class. I rapidly rose to the rank of incinerator attendant, on the way to a higher degree in pyromania. But that's another story.

The fact that I was a year younger than every child in my class and was accelerated, thereby missing "transition" as it was then called, clearly contributed to my plight.

Like any life transition, how we negotiate it can make a world of difference to what follows.

Get it right and it forms a solid foundation for a world of experiences that enrich life.

Get it wrong, and there is much re-building to be done.

Renovating and remediating can be costly, less than satisfactory and far from effective. Often, it is not easy to get back to the right track when, from the very outset, a journey has gone awry.

After all, enrolment in school signals one of the most significant of changes for children. School is the first of the transitions most

children make to a universal, very large social institution beyond the comfortably confined bounds of home and neighbourhood.

Apart from the very small minority of parents who “home-school”, the vast majority send their children to the care of the educational institution that is “school”. It is an obligatory rite of passage in most societies.

School is a world on a scale that is larger than previously encountered by most children. The rules, practices and culture for many, if not most, can be frankly impenetrable.

As the German saying goes, *Aller Anfang ist schwer*, which can be variously translated as *Every beginning is difficult* or *The first step is the hardest*.

Of course, as for any journey, the ease or difficulty of the first step, and those that follow, comes down to the effectiveness of planning and preparation. Belief in serendipity and luck can be a very dangerous approach for the traveller.

Children vary greatly in their preparedness to take this crucial step to the world of school.

Factors in their background such as their parents’ education and experience of school, along with the skills and capabilities each child brings, can make a huge difference.

It is all too easy to overlook or underestimate the extent of children’s developmental differences on starting school. Individual differences are the norm.

They may be obvious or subtle; evident or emergent; malleable or annoyingly immutable.

As the analyses of data from *Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)* show, children vary greatly in their preparation to make the transition to school.

It is difficult to discern the evidence of the accidents of birth at the beginning of life. However, the gradients in development that open across the first four or five years of life, as a function of social address, are well-entrenched by the time children enter school. Socio-economic status makes an unfortunate difference that we should be further advanced in overcoming. But, again, that is another story.

Irrespective of their source, the extent of developmental age differences in an average class can be counted in years, rather than mere months. And developmental age makes a real difference to the acquisition of new concepts and the capacity to keep up with a curriculum that all too often proceeds by calendar time.

The industrial scale of schools has made calendar-, rather than developmental-time, the focus.

When this occurs, expectations can be out of kilter with the pace that is appropriate for individual learners. While not the whole story, respecting individual differences lies at the heart of a successful transition to school.

A poor, as opposed to a good start, carries considerable scope for significant, adverse effects, across life.

The impacts, for good or ill, can occur in a range of areas of development including language, learning and cognition; in behaviour, social skill and participation; as well as in physical and mental health. In the best and worst cases it is "*all of the above*"!

While individual characteristics and family background make a difference, a range of community factors can also smooth the path or make for a rocky road.

It is not just a matter of children's readiness for school but rather the readiness of schools and their educators to embrace and celebrate the diversity of the children they enrol.

The Position Statement that I launch today is a very important landmark on the path to ensuring that children are supported to make successful transitions to school. The value of a great start to school cannot be over-estimated.

The process of development of the Position Statement brought together some of the leading researchers in the field, from Australia and abroad. It is an impressive internationally collaborative effort, and its quality shows the value of the rich partnership that brought it to fruition.

This is an accessible document that has the right mix of aspiration, grounded in research, practice and policy expertise. The focus on transition forms the bridge between Australia's priority on the early years, to ensure a good start in life, and the concern that this continues across the educational journey.

Early in life is important but certainly not enough.

Smoothing the way for children from diverse backgrounds to enter and succeed in the mysterious world of school requires a team effort. It involves effective partnerships between families, educators, other professionals and the community, as the position Statement underscores.

When partnerships work successfully, children can be supported to make a secure transition in an environment that respects the richness of their individuality. Each child brings diverse capability, cultural heritage, family background, personality and preferences. Success lies in making children feel a sense of belonging, of being valued, and respected, in their own right.

Understanding and aligning the expectations of children, their parents and their educators are key contributors to successful transitions.

Respecting what children and their parents bring to the endeavour is another of the keys to success outlined in the Position Statement.

As the Position Statement eloquently argues, the active involvement of parents and children in the transition process is fundamental to making a successful transition. In turn, successful transition is a key element in providing a high quality education. Education is one of our most powerful engines of opportunity. High quality educational opportunities lay the foundations for success, satisfaction and social mobility, throughout school and in the world beyond. All children are entitled to no less! A socially inclusive society cannot expect any less!

The power of the Position Statement lies, therefore, in succinctly and clearly outlining the rationale for making the focus on school transitions a priority. It does much more, however, than merely rehearse the arguments. It also identifies on the basis of the accumulated research the key contributors to successful transitions to school. Most importantly, however it frames recommendations that provide an achievable call to action. Together these represent an eminently valuable contribution that should effect change for the good!

Would that I had benefited from the wisdom that is embodied in this document!

I congratulate the authors on this very timely publication. In facilitating this venture Sue, Bob, their colleagues and students have made a very tangible contribution to advancing educational opportunity for children.

Behind this skilfully succinct document lies a great deal of wisdom, skill and effort.

It gives me great pleasure to launch the Transition to School Position Statement!

Thank you.