

PREPARING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FOR THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL: THE ROLE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS #

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Abstract

This study presents the results of a narrative inquiry into the roles of early childhood educators and centres in preparing four-year-old children and their parents for their upcoming transition to kindergarten (the first year of school), in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Participants were seven mothers and the seven educators working with their children. Results revealed four themes: preparing the child; supporting the parent; transition rituals; and a rupture. Educators and parents described formal transition practices, often discussed in the literature, as well as informal transition practices, rarely acknowledged in research studies; and educator and parent attitudes and perceptions regarding what children need in order to be 'ready' for school as well as what will happen once they begin school.

Key words: transition to school; transition practices; early childhood; kindergarten.

Introduction

Children's transition from early childhood education and care to formal schooling is the subject of a vast domain of international research and policy (e.g., Dockett & Perry, 2004; Fabian & Dunlop, 2006; Margetts & Keinig, 2013). In Quebec (Canada), over half of all children from birth to age five attend government funded and regulated childcare services (Finances Quebec, 2009). While these services include home childcare and government-subsidised private daycare centres, the majority of children between the ages of four and five attend not-for-profit early childhood centres with low fees¹. These services are under the jurisdiction of Quebec's Ministry of Family. Elementary school is organised by the Ministry of Education, and is divided into preschool² and primary sectors. Parents have the option of sending their children to pre-kindergarten at age four, if they attend a school that has been designated as serving low-income families (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2013b). However, the majority of children begin school in kindergarten, at age five. Kindergarten is not compulsory, but 98% of five-year-old children attend (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2012; McCain, Mustard & McCuaig, 2011). The school year in Quebec runs from the last week of August to the third week of June (Gouvernement du Québec, 2013c).

In 2010, Quebec's Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ministries of Family and of Health and Social Services, released a guide aimed at schools, childcare services, community organisations, and health and social service professionals, in order to promote transectorial collaboration in ensuring a successful transition for children and their families (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2010). The guide recommends the establishment of multiple transition practices, and is based on six theoretical principles: 1) recognizing that it is the parent who is primarily responsible for the child's education; 2) sharing responsibility for a successful transition among stakeholders through collaborative practices; 3) continuously planning, organizing and assessing transition activities; 4) recognizing the time required and providing the necessary resources; 5) involving everyone who knows the child and tailoring transition

¹ Subsidised childcare fees are currently between \$7.30 and \$20.00 a day depending on family income (Fortin, 2015; Gouvernement du Québec, 2015a).

² Preschool includes full-day programming for four-year-olds in 'disadvantaged areas' and full-day programming accessible to all five-year olds. These programs are free of charge for families (Gouvernement du Québec, 2015c).

practices to the child, and; 6) recognizing that starting school is a determining factor in the child's development (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2010).

Transition practices are activities focusing on children, families, or teachers that are aimed at supporting and easing children's transitions to school (Early, Pianta, Taylor & Cox, 2001; La Paro, Pianta & Cox, 2000; Laverick, 2008). According to Corsaro and Molinari (2005), formal transition practices are initiated by adults or institutions, while informal transition practices are initiated by children and often take the form of play or spontaneous conversation (Ackesjö, 2013; Corsaro et Molinari, 2005). Research suggests that formal transition practices have a positive effect on children's transition and further academic success in primary school (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Schulting, Malone & Dodge, 2005) as well as on parent engagement (Schulting, Malone & Dodge, 2005). Furthermore, there appears to be a consensus within the literature that the most effective transition practices begin before children start kindergarten and involve collaboration between the early childhood and preschool sectors. However, few studies have examined transition practices from the perspective of early childhood educators or parents (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006; O'Farrelly & Hennessy, 2013; Peters, 2010; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) and even fewer have explored informal transition practices (Ackesjö, 2013; Corsaro & Molinari, 2005).

In 2015, Ruel and her colleagues evaluated the implantation of Quebec's *Guide for Supporting a Successful School Transition* (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2010). Parents, kindergarten teachers, school principals and vice-principals, as well as health and social service professionals participated in their evaluation. These authors did not receive permission to include early childhood educators in this evaluation. The evaluation determined that the number of transition practices implemented had increased from 2011 to 2013, and that these practices had positive effects for children, schools, and families:

The implementation of best practices supports children and their parents with school transition: they are better prepared for starting school, they feel more secure, and demonstrate greater confidence with regards to the school. Also, schools are more ready to welcome all children and the parents demonstrate more interest in getting involved. (p.vii)

On the other hand, this evaluation noted that reaching families before they begin school remains a challenge for teachers and schools (Ruel, Moreau, Bérubé & April, 2015).

Other studies in Quebec on the transition to school have focused on child observation or evaluation documents that are completed in childcare and then transferred to the kindergarten teacher upon school entry (Besnard, Cotnoir, Letarte & Lemelin., 2014; Cotnoir, 2015; Horizon 0-5, 2014). International research has questioned the impact of these collaborative practices between childcare centres and schools. According to two studies, communication between early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers leads to more positive evaluations of children's social competence, behaviour, and academic skills by their teachers (Ahtola, Silinskas, Poikonen, Kontoniemi & Nurmi, 2011; Lo Casale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer & Pianta, 2008). Rous and colleagues (2010) found that 74.1% of the 2,434 kindergarten teachers surveyed in their study reported receiving written reports from the childcare, and the majority (72.4% of the 2,434 teachers) reported consulting them. O'Kane and Hayes (2013) evaluated the use of a child evaluation document in Ireland. These authors report positive evaluations from all stakeholders, and underscore that the document permitted the transfer of children's strengths and needs.

In addition, two New Zealand studies on the transfer of children's portfolios from childcare to school demonstrated that parents are satisfied when teachers have access to information about

their children's skills and experience preceding school entry (Jones, 2006; Peters, Hartley, Rogers, Smith & Carr, 2009). Similarly, a German study revealed that parents who transferred their children's portfolios from childcare to school were satisfied with their decision to share the portfolios, but were not sure how the teachers used the portfolios once they received them. The study found that some parents did not share the portfolios because they worried that the teacher's opinion of their child would be biased (Backhaus, Bogatz & Hanke, 2013).

One of the child observation documents used during children's transition to school in Quebec is *Moving on to School*. The document is available for free download on the website of the Centre for Assistance and Support to Initiatives, Organisations, and Professionals in Early Childhood (CASIOPE), but was developed as a community mobilisation initiative involving childcare centres, elementary schools, health and social service clinics, and community organisations. The initiative involves two days of professional learning for educators working with four-year-olds and kindergarten teachers, focusing on a harmonious transition and on various transition practices, including the child observation document. The document is divided into six sections, based on spheres of child development (socio-affective and moral; motor; creativity; logic and math; self-control and attention/concentration; and language). The final page of the document contains information about whether the child has been diagnosed or received additional support services (CASIOPE, 2008).

However, the transfer of information regarding the child from one institution to the next is only one example of a transition practice (Early et al., 2001; Einarsdottir, Perry & Dockett, 2008; La Paro, Pianta & Cox, 2000; Laverick, 2008). The vast majority of practices identified and evaluated in the research literature (e.g., home visits, welcome letters, orientation programs and visits to the school) are organised by schools or teachers (Laverick, 2008). Little is known about transition practices organised by early childhood centres. Schneider and colleagues (Schneider, Manetti, Frattini, Rania, Santo, Coplan & Cwinn, 2014) followed 288 children in Reggio Emilia preschools. These authors found considerable variability in the transition practices in place, and that when preschools focused on preparing the elementary school instead of preparing the children, teachers reported fewer children with behaviour problems and happier children once they began school. Ackësjo (2013) explored visits to the school organised by childcare centres in Sweden from children's perspectives and found that the transition process involved the construction of a student identity and the deconstruction of children's preschool identity. The study also found that the transition process lasted a long time and began as soon as educators organised visits to school or other formal transition practices.

Bröstrom (2002) in Denmark, and Einarsdottir and her colleagues (2008) in Iceland and Australia, administered surveys to early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers in order to understand their use of and opinions about various transition practices. Bröstrom reported that school visits by children and school teachers visiting childcare centres to meet the children and conduct short lessons were the practices reported most frequently and considered most effective by both educators and teachers. Einarsdottir and colleagues reported that school visits were also frequent in Iceland, and that in Australia, the most frequently reported transition practices were information meetings for parents and children organised by schools. However, early childhood centres in Australia also organised meetings in order to inform parents about starting school (Einarsdottir, Dockett & Perry, 2008).

Gills, Winters and Friedman (2006) found that U.S. educators focused more often on children's academic preparation than on support for parents. Over half of the educators surveyed in this study reported sending written information about children to the school; a third reported assisting with school registrations; twenty percent reported organising school visits; and

twenty-two percent reported inviting kindergarten teachers to the childcare centres to meet the children.

While these studies provide some information about the practices implemented and valued by early childhood educators, as well as the impacts of some of these practices on children, little is known about how educators and parents understand and experience their role in preparing children's transition to kindergarten.

Research questions

In order to deepen our understanding of transition practices organised by childcare centres before school entry, and to understand how educators and parents experience these transition practices, the present study sought to answer the following questions:

- How do early childhood educators and other childcare personnel support children and their families during the transition to school?
- How are these practices narrated and experienced by educators and parents?

In addition, the practices and themes emerging through this research were compared with the principles in Quebec's *Guide for Supporting a Successful School Transition*.

Theoretical framework

This study is based on secondary analysis of the first author's doctoral research project, which relies on a reconceptualist framework. The reconceptualist movement in early childhood education attempts to politicise the field by challenging dominant taken-for-granted narratives and pursuing goals of social justice (e.g., Brougère & Vanderbroeck, 2007; Canella, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007; Lenz Taguchi, 2010; MacNaughton, 2005; Yelland, 2005). This research is also based on a postmodern narrative approach that views reality as a fluid, multifaceted social construction rooted in specific contexts (Spector-Mersel, 2010). The approach involves soliciting narratives that permit the researcher to have access to participants' preoccupations, inconsistencies and uncertainties more easily than through a traditional question and answer interview (Hollway & Jefferson, 2008). This project is also based on an understanding of the transition to school as a co-construction, where relationships between the child, family, teacher and educator are of utmost importance (Doucet & Tudge, 2007; Griebel & Niesel, 2002; Niesel & Griebel, 2007).

Research design

This qualitative narrative multi-case study followed the mothers and educators of seven four-year-old children involved in the *Moving on to School* transition program. The study was carried out between March and July of 2014. The children commenced kindergarten (the first year of school) the following August.

Site and participants

The children in this study (5 boys, 2 girls) attended four different childcare centres in three Montreal neighbourhoods. Although mothers and fathers were invited to participate in the study, only mothers responded and accepted to participate. Selection criteria for the larger study involved parents identified as 'disadvantaged,' 'vulnerable' or 'marginalised' by the educator or childcare administrator and who were experiencing the transition to school for the first time (with their oldest child). Two of the children were in the same group and had the same educator, and one child was in a double group with two educators who both participated in the study. The

educators all had early childhood training and were qualified according to Quebec's Ministry of Family. They had between four and nineteen years of professional experience.

Procedure

After receiving ethics approval from the University, seventeen childcare centre directors who had participated in the *Moving on to School* professional learning sessions were contacted. All the directors accepted to participate in the study, with the exception of one whose centre had recently decided to stop using the *Moving on to School* document. The educators at nine of the centres agreed to participate in the study and identified parents who met the selection criteria. These educators approached the parents to see if they were interested in participating. Four of the centres did not have any parents who met the criteria. In one centre, the only eligible parent did not have any time to participate. In the four centres where the educators and the parents agreed to participate, educators and the mothers were contacted to schedule interviews.

At the beginning of each interview, participants signed a consent form and answered a short questionnaire regarding socio-demographic information. Each participant was interviewed individually twice, once in March-April (after the children had been registered for school) and once in June-July (after the *Moving on to School* document had been completed and shared with the parent, and after most schools held visits for children and information meetings for parents). One educator was on sick leave at the time of the second interview. For the child in the group with two educators, an interview was held with one educator in March and the other educator in June. The interviews were held at the childcare centre or the parents' homes and lasted between ten and forty-five minutes each. Interviews were digitally recorded and were conducted in either French or English, according to the language in which the participants felt most comfortable.

Data and analysis

Narrative interviews involve open-ended questions designed to elicit descriptive recounts of specific experiences (Hollway & Jefferson, 2008; King & Horrocks, 2010). Open-ended questions about the transition to school and relationships between the educators and parents were posed. Follow-up questions probed for additional details without encouraging the narrator to theorize or rationalize events. Examples of questions posed were: Tell me about an experience where you felt like you were working with the parent/educator to prepare the child for school; Did you participate in any transition activities organised by the childcare centre? If yes, can you tell me what happened?

Interviews were transcribed, followed by inductive analyses of the sections of the narratives related to preparing the children for school, to transition practices, and to the *Moving on to School* document. Analyses included the use of *invivo* coding, analytic memo writing, and preliminary categorisation. Finally, themes were identified through a conceptual analysis of preliminary categories as suggested by Saldaña (2009).

Results and discussion

Four themes were identified in relation to the role of early childhood educators and centres in children's and parents' transition to school: preparing the child; supporting the parent; transition rituals, and; a rupture. These themes include formal transition practices, similar to those reported in previous research (e.g., Broström, 2002; Early et al., 2001; Einarsdottir et al., 2008), and informal transition practices, rarely explored in the literature (Ackesjö, 2014; Corsaro & Molinari, 2005). These themes also include educator and parent attitudes and perceptions of

what children need in order to be 'ready' for school, and of what will happen once the children begin school.

Preparing the child

This first theme was present in all the educators' narratives and half of the mothers' narratives. It consists of four categories: academic learning; autonomy and emotional preparation; is a child ready; and informing children.

Academic learning Six of the seven educators and three of the mothers mentioned academic learning when asked about children's preparation for school. The educators mentioned teaching letters, letter-sounds, numbers, shapes, colours, teaching the child how to write their name, as well as supporting their fine motor skills by helping them improve their scissor skills, hold a pencil, and draw people and houses. One educator added teaching a child to speak French as an additional language. Some of the educators mentioned that this learning happened in collaboration with the families. The mothers noted that they reinforced concepts learned at the childcare centre at home in order to prepare the children for school, and that they recreated the same activities as those the child engaged in at the centre, such as practicing writing their names or supported their child in learning French.

Although Quebec's *Educational Program for Early Childhood* includes these activities in their list of global development skills for children to acquire by the age of five (Ministère de la Famille et des Aînés, 2007), naming these activities traditionally associated with primary school (and not other activities like symbolic play or throwing a ball) as activities that prepare children for school is intriguing. These results seem to suggest that educators and some parents seem preoccupied with what they consider the expectations of the school kindergarten teachers. However, research has suggested that these teachers accord more importance to children's social skills and behaviour as they enter kindergarten, than to academic skills (Hains, Fowler, Schwartz, Kottwitz & Rosenkoetter, 1989; Lin, Lawrence & Gorrell, 2003; Rimm-Kaufmann, Pianta & Cox, 2000). These preoccupations may be due to the publication of a report by Montreal's public health agency in 2008 which concluded that many children, particularly those in low-income neighbourhoods, were vulnerable in certain spheres of kindergarten readiness (ASSM-DSP, 2008; Bilodeau, Laurin, Giguère, & Lebel, 2011; Laurin *et al.*, 2012). The current results appear to confirm previous research that suggests that pressure from the school system, whether real or imagined, often leads to the 'schoolification' of early childhood education (Gananathan, 2011; Moss, 2008, 2012; Sofou & Tsafos, 2009) and confirms that educators view their role in the transition to kindergarten mostly in terms of children's academic preparation (Gills, Winters & Friedman, 2006).

In addition, the recreation by parents of childcare activities at home is an example of what Popkewitz (2003, 2008) labels the pedagogicalisation of parents. Pedagogicalisation is a form of governmentality where the progress of each individual child is linked to the economic progress of the nation, and involves the institutionalisation of particular parenting practices in support of school agendas (Popkewitz, 2003). Popkewitz maintains that discourses and policy impose and legitimise the behaviours of a 'good parent of a student'. The current results seem to indicate that some parents take on this pedagogicalised role, without necessarily being conscious of it.

Autonomy and emotional preparation In order to prepare children for kindergarten, some educators explained that they skip naptime during the summer; that they walk around the

neighbourhood without the 'snake'³; and that they encourage the children to be more autonomous when they use the washroom. For example, one educator told the following anecdote about going for a walk to the park:

I didn't take the snake, I said, 'OK my friends, you can do it, you can walk two-by two holding hands, we're going to the park, you can do it, I trust you, we're preparing for school, friends, hooray!

Related to this same category, some mothers mentioned that they wished the childcare centre would eliminate naptime in the months leading up to school. For example, *I seriously thought that she would reduce the nap to prepare them for school, but no, everything is just like the other years here.* One of the mothers explained that she collaborates with the educator in order to help her child be autonomous while putting on her coat because the kindergarten teacher won't have the time to help all the children with their zippers. Another mother explained that the four- and five-year old room, compared to previous years, *is more preparation for school, there are no more hugs, yes there are hugs, but it's less gentle.*

These results seemed to confirm Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta's (2000) assertion that the transition to kindergarten is characterised by a relationship with the adult based more on learning than on affection and care. These results also demonstrate that the educators and parents are aware of this upcoming change. They know that the adult-child ratio, 1:10 for four-year-olds in childcare (Gouvernement du Québec, 2015a) will increase to 1:20 in kindergarten (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2013a). In addition, these results appear to indicate that the educators and parents assume that it is the children who need to adapt to the school context, and not the teachers or the school or who need to adapt to the children and their families. This appears to illustrate an imbalance of power between the early childhood educator and the primary school context, often reported in the literature (OCDE, 2001, 2006; Moss, 2008, 2012).

Is a child ready? The educators of two children who were diagnosed with additional support needs, and the French-speaking educator of an English-speaking child, discussed the interventions they implemented for these children with a focus on preparing the child for school. For example:

When I suspected that L. [child] had gaps [...] I said, 'Oh, she's going to school, it's her last year, it's not so bad for her sister, she'll spend another year here, but for her, I must talk to her, so I discussed it with N. [mother].

Other educators identified mothers' concerns about their child's readiness. As one educator explained,

It makes her insecure about school. The mother will say, 'I sometimes think my son is not ready for school.' Then she will say, 'Yes, but he is ready for school, there are some things to work on, that's true. Yes but at school he'll have a hard time.' It worries her a lot.

Two of the mothers also expressed these concerns. For example, *It worried me a little because I really wanted her to fit into the mould of a child whom one would say is OK to start school.*

These results are similar to those of other studies that have found that the transition to school is often more complicated and difficult for children identified as having additional support needs (e.g., Byrnes, 2012; Forlin, 2013; Hutchinson, Pyle, Villeneuve, Dods, Dalton & Minnes, 2014;

³ A rope that children hold on to or are attached to when they walk to the park or on other outings.

Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron & Hughes, 2008; Rothe, Urban & Werning, 2014; Ruel, 2011). In addition, findings support suggestions that some educators and parents have a tendency to focus on children's deficiencies (Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2011; Heydon & Iannacci, 2009), which could imply that they have internalised an image of a normalised childhood that they apply to all children (Alasuutari, Markström & Vallberg-Roth, 2014; Hughes & Paterson, 2010; Kang, 2009; Moss, Dillon & Statham, 2000; Reid & Valle, 2004).

Informing children Four of the educator narratives mentioned emotional support for children to reassure them about their upcoming school start. Educators mentioned that they explained to children they won't start school on their fifth birthdays, but must wait until the end of the summer; they reported reassuring children that some of their childcare friends would also go to the same school; and they recounted explaining the similarities and differences between the childcare centre and the kindergarten class to the children. The educators also mentioned transition practices they implemented in order to inform the children about the upcoming transition. For example, one of the centres organised a trip to the school-age care program with the children; and one educator reporting reading books about starting school to children and spontaneously inviting children who had started school but had come back to the centre to visit to tell the current childcare children about their experiences in school.

One of the mothers mentioned that her daughter visited the school with her childcare centre. Another mother was disappointed during the first interview in March, because there hadn't yet been a project about school, books about starting school, or a school visit organised by the childcare centre. It must be noted that the educators in this centre mentioned all three of those transition practices during the second interview in June.

These results are similar to those of previous research concerning formal transition practices that are considered effective and implemented by educators such as school visits and reading books about school (Early et al., 2001; Einarsdottir, Perry & Dockett, 2008; Gills, Winters & Friedman, 2006; La Paro, Pianta & Cox, 2000; Laverick, 2008;). These practices have been called *priming events* since they prepare children for the changes to come during the transition to school (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000). According to Ackejö (2013), these visits can be understood as border crossings between the childcare centre and the school that allow children the opportunity to develop an identity as a school child and are more effective when the educators render the transition process explicit for the children.

These results also seem to resonate with studies on children's perspectives of the transition to school (Ackesjö, 2013; Broström, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Einarsdottir, 2002; Jackson & Cartmel, 2010) which suggest that having or making friends are amongst children's most frequent concerns about their upcoming transition (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Jackson & Cartmel, 2010). The current study adds that educators seemed aware of this concern and they understood their own role in informing and reassuring children during the months preceding their entry to kindergarten.

Finally, the fact that parents reported not being aware of transition practices organised by the childcare centre suggests that, for some parents, communication remains a challenge, as noted by previous research (Cortis, Katz & Patulny, 2009; Mapp & Hong, 2010; Ruel et al., 2015).

Supporting parents

Four educators and three mothers referred to this second theme of supporting parents which comprised three categories: informing parents; advising parents, and; reassuring parents.

Informing parents One educator explained that she puts up notices about kindergarten Open Houses on the bulletin board, and that she discusses which school children will be attending with parents. A mother in this childcare centre added that the pedagogical advisor explained the school registration process to her, and even telephoned the school to make her an appointment. In another childcare centre, an educator reported discussing school choice with the mother.

Advising parents This previous educator added that she provided the mother with advice about her child's schooling. She recommended that the mother of an English-speaking child register her son in a 'welcome class' (destined for new immigrants who don't speak French) and not to delay her move to another province (originally scheduled for January) until June, as she had been planning, so that her son would have friends to play with over the summer. This mother didn't mention the educators' advice during the interviews, but she was preoccupied with her child not having the right to attend English school (Gouvernement du Québec, 2015b). She was particularly upset about the idea that he might be placed in the 'welcome class' where he would only 'learn a language', and would then have to catch up later on. She was also worried that the school wouldn't recognize how smart her son was. According to the educator,

She doesn't want to put him into a French class where he knows absolutely nothing, I've been trying to talk to her and saying 'y'know, even if he does end up in French school there are some welcome kindergarten classes, where it's some of the children who don't know any French at all' so just kind of preparing her for that in case it happens.

In terms of her plans to move, the mother didn't mention discussing her plans with the educator, but she did tell us that she was planning to move out West in January.

Reassuring parents In one childcare centre, two educators explained that the pedagogical director organised an evening session for parents where a kindergarten teacher from the nearest school came to the centre to answer parents' questions. Of the three mothers whose children attended this centre, only one told us about the activity when we asked if the childcare centre organised any transitions practices or activities to prepare the children and parents for school. This mother explained that she attended the event and found it was reassuring:

We also had a meeting to reassure us, there were lots of parents who had questions like, 'When I get to school do I just dump my child?' There were parents who were really insecure like, 'Do I leave my child in the yard and go?' [...] a teacher came from a school here to really answer parents' questions, to reassure them, things like that, what was fun really was that we really knew things like exactly, they were really able to answer, there is really a teacher who will take care of your children, but you stay there, you don't have the right to enter, but your child will get used to it [...] I think it reassured parents a lot.

Another parent in that same childcare centre told us that she would have liked *a day for parents, to explain school to us*, indicating that she didn't seem aware of this event.

Discussion regarding supporting parents

Other than the organisation of a meeting with a kindergarten teacher in one childcare centre, the results of the current study point to mostly informal and spontaneous transition practices. However, the current results suggest that educators and parents can initiate these spontaneous informal transition practices, unlike Corsaro and Molinari (2005) who define informal transition practices as those that are initiated by children. Gills and colleagues (2006) include 'coordinating kindergarten registration' as a transition practice used by educators, but they do not clarify if the twenty percent of educators who reported using this practice in their study did

so in an informal manner, like the pedagogical advisor in the current study, or in a more formal manner with all children.

As few studies on transition practices have included informal practices, (e.g. Broström, 2002; Early et al., 2001; Einarsdottir, 2008) or informal communication with parents (Griebel & Niesel, 2013; Tietze, Cryer, Bairrão, Palacios & Wetzel, 1996), it is difficult to compare our results. In addition, most of these studies do not take early childhood prior to school contexts into account (Aceksjö, 2000; Corsaro & Molinari, 2000; Schneider et al., 2014). Thus, these results appear to add a new dimension to our understanding of transition practices. Finally, the fact that only one of three mothers reported being aware of the information night with the teacher organised by the childcare centre seems to confirm the results of previous studies that report difficulty reaching families before school, or communicating with certain families who have been labeled as 'hard to reach' (e.g., Cortis, Katz & Patulny, 2009; Mapp & Hong, 2010; Ruel et al., 2015).

Transition rituals

This theme is inspired by Ackesjö (2013, 2014) and Garpelin (2014) for conceptualizing the transition from early childhood education to the first year of primary school as a sociocultural ritual marked by multiple rites of passage. Ackesjö (2013) explained that these rituals are important in children's identity construction as ex-preschool children. In the current study, the educators' and mothers' narratives regarding the childcare graduation ceremony and the act of completing the *Moving on to School* document for the child and sharing it with the parent were categorised as transition rituals. These transition practices were in place at all of the childcare centres in the study and appear to function as rituals that mark the end of a stage in the children's education.

The graduation ceremony Five of the mothers (in three of the childcare centres) mentioned that they experienced the graduation ceremony as a particularly positive event. In contrast, only two of the educators mentioned this ritual. According to the mothers,

The graduation was beautiful, compared to Christmas, Christmas was great as well but the kids were so shy, this time round they weren't, the bigger ones, they were just like, owning the stage and having a great time and A. was actually not shy at all, he was like, doing his own thing, having his own little fun, I was so proud of it, the graduation was like awesome, really really well done, made me cry, the whole time.

Yeah, they did some singing, some dancing, and then they had the receiving of the diplomas and dressed up in the cap and gowns, and I was like, 'oh no, I'm not ready for this.' But yeah, it was really nice, I liked it.

It was really nice [...] there were lots of photos, the children with their gowns and the little hat, there were balloons, they were all sitting at the edge of the window [...] the educators began to speak, they showed us little folders, with all the children's artwork and each time they named a child, and then they gave a little diploma and they took a photo.

When the two educators discussed this event, one of them recounted how happy she was that both the mother and father (who were separated) attended at the same time. The other educator didn't use the word graduation (although mothers at the same centre did). She described a conversation with the parent about the child practicing songs for the concert at home. This ritual seems both important and emotional for parents, who mentioned symbols related to future school graduations (the diploma, cap, and gown). For educators, the ceremony does not seem

to hold the same meaning. Previous research and lists of transition practices, as far as we know, do not seem to mention this transition ritual.

Moving on to School When educators described the process of completing the *Moving on to School* document, they seemed proud to describe the different steps involved in observing the children and verifying their evaluations of the children. For example,

It's the third year that I am filling them out. Certainly the first years I really took my time, I wanted to be sure that I understood each item. Now it goes super well, I take notes all year, observations, so in April I collect all of that together, I look at it, then I complete my 'Moving on to Schools'. If I have any questions, if there is anything I am not really sure about, then I go consult the person who does the rotation on my days off, to see if she has seen the same things I have. Filling out the document went really well.

In a situation where childcare educators seek recognition as professionals (Osgood, 2006; Simpson, 2010; Taggart, 2011), this narrative was interpreted as the educator constructing her identity as a professional.

When it comes to sharing the document with parents, only two of the centres set aside time to meet with the parents in order to present the document. One of the educators described finding some of the meetings difficult, especially when there were many items that the child had not yet mastered. For example, *It was a little bit difficult, but I also had many, many positive things too.*

In another centre, the educator explained that she handed out the documents at the end of the day. Her narrative was focused on the parents' role in bringing the document to the school:

I didn't have a lot of time because the parents all came at the same time. So I stayed with the mom, she was the first to arrive. I explained, I said, 'Here, are you going to take N. [child] for a meeting?' So I explained to her, 'There's a document that you will give, it's a document on N.'s developmental spheres.' I explained to her that the teacher will know where he is situated, she'll know the child a little bit through this. After I said, 'But I need you to sign the form.

In the fourth centre, the educators reported leaving the documents in an envelope in the children's cubby, without any verbal discussion or explanation.

A number of educators wondered what the kindergarten teachers did with the documents once they received them, as they had no feedback from the teachers, schools, or parents regarding the transmitted information.

We've been doing this, I don't know, since I've been here, I've been doing the upstairs classrooms, I think five-six years now and never once has a kindergarten teacher called, like I had a special needs child last year who I did the same thing for and I think, just because she was special needs they called me, but based on the 'Moving on to School' thing, nothing, like no response on that at all. But it would be nice if they worked more, y'know, with the daycare educators, or even paid more attention to the 'Moving on' thing.

The parents all recounted being happy about receiving the *Moving on to school* document. They stressed the 'progress' that their child had made while at the childcare centre, and said they intended to bring the document to the school. However, when they described the meeting where they received the document, or looking it over at home, their child's challenges, or items that their child was not able to do on their own, appeared to retain their attention. They also

explained changes they planned to make to the child's home routine over the summer in order to help the child with these 'challenges' identified through the use of this document.

When she gave me the Moving on to School guide [...] when she handed it to me, L. [child] was fine, she had like graduated from her speech therapy, she didn't need it any more, and when she gave it to me there were a few little things [...] self-confidence, affirming herself, and controlling her emotions [...] it's just the emotions and self-esteem, so at least if we start working on that her transition should go well.

I was surprised. There were some aspects where I thought it was going better, his development (laughs) and they said maybe he needs assistance, but for the most part I was happy.

I read over it, actually I'm really really proud of her [...] there's only two small issues, it's tying her shoes, and going up the stairs one foot at a time, and that, it's more me, I kind of encourage her to take her time cuz she's kind of clumsy, she's a little klutzy like me, so it's like 'OK, don't go up and down and rush, just take your time' y'know, and tying her shoes, we've been practicing with it but uh (laughs) it's gonna take a little while (laughs) it's more of a game for her [...] I was very happy, with what she's been, uh, how far she's progressed since she's started there.

Only one mother recounted receiving only positive comments about her son:

Oh my god. A. [educator] told me 'there's not much to say [laughs], S. (child) is progressing very well, everything's going well, there's like no problem, he's ready to go to school,' she said, 'it won't take a long time, I don't have anything to say, everything is going well, his development' like positive there, it's fun to be told that your child, everything is going well (laughs).

One of the educators explained that she presented the document to the parents during an orientation meeting at the childcare centre at the beginning of the year. A mother in that centre seemed to understand that more communication between the childcare centre and the school took place, which she believed was a wonderful idea.

K. [educator] told me that she talks a lot with the school [name of school] [...] each time they finish a stage at the childcare centre they always fill out a form, the child can tie their laces, understands well or has a certain difficulty, and then they pass that on to the school, but not just pass on, they also talk to the teachers. That permits the teacher to know the child a little bit. She also told me that we don't just place the child in school, there is a little document, that goes, that explains a little bit how the child is and all that [...] I think it's a super idea that the teacher has an idea.

A few previous studies have examined the transfer of information between childcare and school settings (Backhaus, Bogatz & Hanke, 2013; Besnard et al., 2014; Cotnoir, 2015; Jones, 2006; O'Kane & Hayes, 2013; Peters et al., 2009) Similarly to this body of previous research, our results seem to confirm that parents appreciate the documents, and add that educators, as well as parents, as reported by Backhaus and colleagues (2013), are not sure whether, or how, teachers use them. The emphasis on children's deficits in our study may indicate that the document orientates participants towards what the children are not able to do and constructs a normative image of what a child who is ready for school is, or is not (Alasuutari, Markström & Vallberg-Roth, 2014; Lehrer, 2018). In contrast to the positive results about using a similar document revealed in previous studies (Besnard et al., 2014; Cotnoir, 2015; O'Kane & Hayes, 2013), the results of the current study lead us to wonder whether methods other than a child development checklist may better showcase children's strengths and interests. Findings appear

to confirm a report on transition practices in Montreal neighbourhoods which revealed that out of 19 neighbourhoods, 17 had chosen to use *Moving on to School* or a similar document, and only two decided not to use a written observation or assessment of children because the members of the early childhood and transition committee were concerned that the children would be viewed negatively and that the document would not succeed in transmitting information about the child's strengths (Horizon 0-5, 2013).

A rupture

The final theme emerging from the data related to the transition from children care child to kindergarten student.

From childcare child to kindergarten student. One educator believed there is a difference between a childcare child and a kindergarten student, and between what children do at childcare and what they do at school, as expressed in the following anecdote:

We'll probably be bringing them to the park, just getting them more ready for, in the summer we're very very relaxed, so it's a lot of going outside, playing in the park, just letting them be kids before they have to sit down and do work.

One could conclude that she holds a romantic view of childhood, and of what it means to 'be kids' (Taylor, 2013). This educator appears to consider entry into school as a rupture in children's lives (Moss 2012), instead of a gentle harmonious transition, as promoted in the academic literature (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Early, et al., 2001; Fabian & Dunlop, 2006; La Paro, Pianta & Cox, 2000; Laverick, 2008; Margetts & Keinig, 2013), and the Quebec transition guide (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir, et du Sport, 2010).

Relationship to Quebec's *Guide for Supporting a Successful School Transition*

This study sought to deepen our understanding of transition practices organised by childcare centres and early childhood educators prior to school entry, and to understand how educators and parents experienced these transition practices. Table 1 displays the four themes and the various categories identified in educator and mother narratives about children's preparation for and transition to school.

Table 1 Themes and categories

Preparing the child	Supporting parents	Transition rituals	A rupture
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic learning • Autonomy and emotional preparation • Is the child ready? • Informing children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informing parents • Advising parents • Reassuring parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The graduation ceremony • <i>Moving on to School</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From childcare child to kindergarten student

When comparing these themes to the principles of Quebec's *Guide for Supporting a Successful School Transition* (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir, et du Sport, 2010), some of the principles seem more present than others in our results. In presenting our results, we will compare each principle with the evaluation by Ruel and colleagues (2015) of the implementation of the guide.

Recognizing that it is the parent who is primarily responsible for the child's education

Parents and educators in our study did not explicitly refer to this principle at all. In addition, the emphasis in our findings on supporting parents appears indicate that the educators in our study understood that parents' needed support during this transition, and that they viewed parents not as a means to children's success, or as pedagogicalised (Popkewitz, 2003, 2008), but

rather as important people in their own right. Ruel and colleagues' (2015) study, in which parents, educators, teachers and other stakeholders were asked direct questions related to each principle, found that participants expressed both belief in and implementation of this principle.

Sharing responsibility for a successful transition among stakeholders through collaborative practices In the current study, educators and mothers both mentioned joint collaboration, particularly with regards to the first theme, preparing the child. This seems to imply that they believed that responsibility for a successful transition was shared between them, as indicated by the second principle of the guide. Ruel and colleagues (2015) found that while participants reported believing in this principle, it was not fully implemented in practice.

Continuously planning, organizing and assessing transition activities Results of the study indicate that educators, directors, and pedagogical advisors in childcare centres planned and organised transition activities, often in collaboration with a local school. However, participants in our study did not mention assessing these activities. In relation to the implementation of this principle, Ruel and colleagues (2015) found an improvement over the two years of their study, but reported that planning for the transition was not carried out systematically.

Recognizing the time required and providing the necessary resources Participants in our study did not mention this principle. Ruel and colleagues' (2015) evaluation reported that schools recognised the time and resources required to implement transition practices, but added that financial and human resource challenges were also identified.

Involving everyone who knows the child and tailoring transition practices to the child This principle was present in educators' and mothers' narratives, particularly when other professionals such as a speech therapist or occupational therapist were involved with children. Ruel and colleagues (2015) found that transition practices before school started targeted all students, and were only personalised after the child began school. They found that schools were not prepared to welcome children with 'special needs' and recommend individualised support for these children and their families prior to the beginning of the school year.

Recognizing that starting school is a determining factor in the child's development Educators and mothers seemed to recognize that starting school is a determining factor in the child's development. This was particularly evident in our results related to the first theme: preparing the child. Ruel and colleagues (2015) found that practices related to this principle had increased over the two years of their study, but that teachers should offer more formal and informal transition practices directed to welcoming and supporting parents.

Limitations of the study

Despite the novelty of our findings, a number of limitations bear mentioning. First of all, our results are limited to a small number of educators and mothers from one city, and from neighbourhoods and families with similar characteristics, and five out of the seven children at the centre of our study were boys. Furthermore, no fathers manifested interest in participating in the study, and the childcare centres were all not-for-profit government-subsidised and government-regulated centres that had been involved in the *Moving on to School* transition practice for a number of years. We don't know how educators in other types of childcare (private, home childcare) support children's transitions to kindergarten. Nor do we know how not-for-profit centres that do not participate in community initiatives such as *Moving on to School* support children's transitions. Finally, while the study investigated educator and mother narratives, childcare centre directors were not included to find out the range of transition

practices offered across childcare centres, although our method may have been more appropriate for understanding informal and spontaneous transition practices.

Implications

Despite these limitations, the following implications are inferred for future research, policy, and practice. Future research could explore the role of childcare centres in children's transitions to kindergarten in different geopolitical locations: other regions of Quebec as well as elsewhere in the world. Similarly, future research could explore educators' use and organisation of informal and formal transition practices in private and home-based childcare centres. Fathers and the children themselves, as well as directors and pedagogical advisors could be included in these future projects, in addition to educators and mothers. Finally, future research could explore how schools and teachers use the *Moving on to School* documents once the parents bring them to school.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that educators, as well as pedagogical advisors in childcare centres, play an important role in supporting and preparing children's transitions to school, and in supporting and preparing families for this transition. This needs to be recognised and included in early childhood education and professional learning programs and policy documents. For example, the diversity of transition practices, the expectations of kindergarten teachers and the kindergarten curriculum with regards to children's academic knowledge, and support for children and parents in the months leading up to school entry should be included in educator training curricula. In addition, the importance of supporting parents should be included in a revision of the *Guide for Supporting a Successful School Transition* (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir, et du Sport, 2010). Finally, results suggest that if we wish to support children and their families during transition to school, critical reflection on the use of child development assessments should be undertaken, in order to ensure that information about children's strengths and interests are transmitted to schools.

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