

Child Care Workers' Perspectives on Transition Services for Pre-school Children with Special Needs in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Transitions that all young children have to make (including children with special needs) involve: starting school, moving from kindergarten to primary school, and sometimes moving from one school to another. With increasing awareness of the importance of early childhood education and intervention, transition planning for young children is attracting much more attention and action. Research suggests that there is a relationship between children's successful transitions and the outcomes of their development in cognition, literacy, social adjustment, and adaptive skills. However, the perspectives of teachers in transition planning were not sufficiently explored in the literature in the Chinese context. This paper focuses on the experiences, ideas, and perspectives of pre-school child care workers on the vertical transition of children from pre-school special centres to other educational institutions in Hong Kong. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with child care workers who work in special child care centres. Importance of transition planning for children with special needs, the role of pre-school special child care workers, challenges in the process, and suggestions for improvement are discussed. In particular, methods for facilitating the parents' choice of appropriate primary schools are shared.

Keywords: Child care workers; Children with special needs; Pre-school; Teachers' perspective; Transition services

INTRODUCTION

Vertical transition planning for pre-school children with special education needs from pre-school settings to primary schools is a critical process for children (Kemp, 2003). Children with disabilities or special needs include those with intellectual disability, specific learning disabilities, visual impairment, hearing impairment, deafblindness, multiple disabilities, autism, traumatic brain injury, speech or language disorders, serious emotional disturbance, orthopaedic impairments, and health impairments (Snyder & Hoffman, 2001). Some countries are developing guidelines for teachers to facilitate vertical transition planning (e.g., Victoria State Government, The Department of Education and Training, 2019). Research has suggested that a positive relationship exists between children's successful vertical transitions and outcomes of their ongoing development in cognition, literacy, social adjustment and adaptive skills (Griebel & Niesel, 2003; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

In addition to the necessary emphasis on academic development in the transition for normal children, the process for children with special needs often requires particular attention to the continuity of health care, training, and therapy. For example, some children with special needs require ongoing social skills training, physiotherapy, speech therapy, behaviour modification, and counselling. Therefore, facilitating smooth transitions for these special learners can be particularly challenging, compared with that of ordinary children in the following areas:

- children with special educational needs are more likely to be well below average in their academic performance due to their cognitive, sensory, or other limitations (Westwood, 2006)
- children with special educational needs are less likely to have developed secure attachments to significant others due to having more than one set of carers (Dent & Cameron, 2003)
- the risk of experiencing problems increases at times of change, resulting in stress (Dent & Cameron, 2003)
- children with special educational needs are at higher risk of having psycho-social and emotional difficulties and this increases their problems in adjusting to transitions (Reyes et al., 2000)
- children with special needs are twice as likely than their peers to experience bul-

lying (Daly & Gilligan, 2005); and being a victim of bullying is known to be a key inhibitor for successful transition (Evangelou et al., 2008)

- challenging behaviours are more prevalent among children with special needs, and this can hinder successful transition (Dent & Cameron, 2003)
- the transition process often results in extra stress for the whole family (Dent & Cameron, 2003)

Factors promoting a successful transition

According to Marcon (2002), the use of developmentally appropriate practices and the provision of high-quality learning environments promote successful transition and enhance the academic and social performance of children. Better cognitive outcomes are also said to result from positive and close teacher-children relationships (Mantzicopoulos, 2005). It is suggested that attempting a close match between the two environments across which a child is transitioning promotes a successful transition – for example, similar class size, curriculum, teaching approach, and management strategies (Chun, 2003). A smooth transition can be facilitated if a child and the teacher visit the new placement in advance before the transition occurs.

Role of teachers in transition planning

Teachers play an essential role in transition planning for children with special needs. They are responsible for helping identify and implement instructional techniques to promote a successful transition for these children, based on a detailed knowledge of each child's characteristics. Instead of a standard transition package, planning for each child is tailored and specific to each individual. Teachers are required to be sensitive to the time and context of the transition process, the special needs of the children and their families, and the specificity of the various programmes they will require (Blanchett, 2001). In this respect, teachers are essential in the process of identifying and linking children with various transition-related services (Kohler & Greene, 2004).

To promote a successful transition, special education teachers play an important role in facilitating the effective involvement of parents and children in the necessary planning. They help by sharing information, listening, and assisting children and their families to make informed decisions according to the goals for children in transition (Blanchett, 2001).

According to Daley et al. (2011), transition practices offered by educators can be divided into two categories, high-intensity and low-intensity. High-intensity practices refer to the individualized transition planning for each child. It is an essential component of the individual educational plan (IEP) of each child with special needs. Low-intensity practices refer to whole-class or group practices, for example, group training and class activities in transition planning supported by teachers or other educators. Teachers need to be fully involved in both high-intensity and low-intensity transition planning practices. All these practices are to be conducted by a closely collaborating multi-disciplinary team, composed of child care workers, social workers, therapists, clinical psychologists, etc. (Harbin et al., 2005).

Challenges and difficulties in transition planning

Although teachers play an essential role in the transition process for children with special educational needs, many are still lacking the understanding of the significance of transition planning (Kohler, 1997). For example, according to Kohler & Greene (2004), special education teachers have revealed little knowledge about the roles of various transition services and support agencies; nor do they know how best to achieve inter-agency collaboration. In particular, they were unsure how to choose curricula to assist with the transition.

Morningstar et al. (2008) suggested that special education teachers felt unprepared for providing effective transition planning services. There appeared to be limited training courses related to the topic of transition offered within teacher pre-service education programmes. Where courses do exist, the transition content does not contain an adequate emphasis on important practicalities and issues (Severson et al., 1994). Kochhar-Bryant (2003) identified that most transition training for teachers occurs 'on-the-job', with limited systems for supporting and evaluating outcomes. Some teachers have received no training at all on this topic, which makes the skills and knowledge about transition vary markedly from person to person. This tends to limit the potential for teachers to collaborate and improve existing provisions. In Hong Kong, there is only limited endorsement of training in transition for special needs children, so there is extreme variation in both transition standards and course content.

According to Blanchett (2001), training related to writing IEPs, conducting IEP meetings, participating as part of a multidisciplinary team, assessing and teaching social skills, and teaching daily living skills is an essential element in the pre-service transition training programme of special education teachers. However, these essential ele-

ments are integrated insufficiently or not included in the current transition training of special education teachers.

Suggestions for increasing transition planning competencies

To equip special education teachers with skills in transition planning for children with special needs, Kohler and Greene (2004) suggested different approaches in teaching transition-related content for teachers. They recommended (1) the infusion of transition-related content across the teacher education curriculum, (2) specialised transition courses, and (3) a combination of both. With the infusion of transition-related content across the curriculum, all graduates are equipped with equal knowledge and exposure to transition-related skills. However, the ability of university instructors to teach transition-related knowledge varies greatly, and some of them are not knowledgeable in teaching the area of transition services. Transition-related knowledge may therefore be taught at a superficial level since it is considered a second priority compared with other education topics. With the specialised transition courses, transition-related content is taught more thoroughly and in-depth. Specialised courses equip trainee teachers with more specialised skills in transition planning for children, including those with special needs. However, there is often pressure to limit the time devoted to this topic due to the tight programme for pre-service special education teachers. A common sense viewpoint would suggest that the topics of transition and transition planning should ideally be taught to trainee teachers through a combination of specialised courses and infusion across the curriculum.

Purpose of the study

The perspectives of teachers in transition planning for pre-school children were not sufficiently explored in the literature in the Chinese context. In this qualitative study, the researchers investigate the importance of transition planning services by child care workers for pre-school children with special needs, the role of child care workers in the process, challenges faced, and suggestions for enhancing pre-school special child care workers' competencies in providing transition planning services from the perspective of child care workers. The study focuses on the pre-school special education sector in Hong Kong.

METHODS

The use of an interview approach is described as one of the most powerful ways to understand the perspective of

a person (Fontana & Frey, 2000). In this study, an interview was used to collect data concerning the perspectives of child care workers. A qualitative study enables the investigator to gather rich descriptive information on the importance of transition planning services as seen by child care workers in a pre-school special centre. In particular, the intention was to investigate their role in the transition planning process, identify the challenges they face in transition planning, and suggest strategies for enhancing special child care workers' competencies in providing transition planning services.

Participants

All 4 special child care workers (SCCW) of a special child care centre (SCCC) service were invited to participate in the study. SCCC in Hong Kong provide special training and care for pre-school children with moderate to severe disabilities to facilitate their growth and development, and prepare them as far as possible for primary education in an inclusive school or special school. Pre-school children receive pre-school education at the centres instead of attending a typical kindergarten. These children with special needs may later go to mainstream primary schools, special schools with different grades of severity, with or without residential services, or may repeat pre-school education in typical kindergartens after leaving the SCCC. Children in SCCC can also transfer horizontally to other types of special education services before graduation – for example, an integrated programme (IP) in kindergarten-cum-child care centre, early education and training centre (EETC), or private special pre-schools. In Hong Kong, SCCWs have extra knowledge regarding special education and special care in addition to typical pre-school teacher training. They take the role of teachers in the SCCC.

Procedure

Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted by the first author since this can offer extra information which written responses cannot provide – for example, the interviewer can interpret non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, and verbal cues such as intonation and confidence. Additionally, face-to-face interview enables immediate clarification of interview questions and responses (to avoid any misunderstanding and incorrect interpretation).

Participants were interviewed individually to minimize the potential problem of group influence on responses. All interviews were conducted by the first-named author. Cantonese was used in the interview because this is the mother tongue of both participants and researchers. A semi-structured interview guide was created to ensure in-

terview consistency while still allowing a certain degree of flexibility in follow-up questioning. The questions were as follows:

1. What are your thoughts on transition planning by SCCWs for children with special needs in SCCC?
2. What is the role of SCCWs in the transition planning process for children with special needs in SCCC?
3. What challenges or difficulties do you face during the process of transition planning for children with special needs in SCCC?
4. How can the transition planning competencies of SCCWs in SCCC be enhanced? How can the challenges or difficulties mentioned above best be addressed?

The questions are considered as valid measures, as it is the daily work of the participants; therefore, all participants were capable of answering them.

Procedures of data collection

Informed consent was obtained from participants before the interview. The purpose of the study and the principle of confidentiality were explained at the beginning of the interview. It was emphasized that the responses were entirely independent of the work of the participants and would not be conveyed to their employers. Participants were also assured that they could withdraw from the interview at any time without any negative consequences. During the interview, verbal responses were audio-taped as an immediate record of the key points. This helped to promote the accuracy of the data collected. Approval of audio-taping was obtained at the informed consent stage before the interview. The interview was conducted by the first-named author who knew the participants before the study. This helped to reduce any anxiety that might have resulted from being questioned by a stranger. Each interview was kept to fifteen minutes – and this also helped to minimize the inconvenience for the SCCWs.

Individual interviews were conducted in the classroom of each SCCW after front line duty. Familiarity with the environment helped to reduce any anxiety in the participants, which could have otherwise affected the reliability of responses.

Data Analysis

The audiotaped interview was listened to and checked by the researcher and each participant. Key points were then transcribed to a handwritten record by the researcher and

confirmed by the participants. This process helps to increase the accuracy of findings from interviews and avoid any misinterpretation (Janesick, 2000).

The data (key points and additional notes taken during interviews) was analysed by general qualitative analysis techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994). It was summarised, and then first-level coding was conducted using an inductively-derived list of key points and codes, generated after reviewing the data line by line. Pattern coding was followed according to the separate points identified at the first-level coding to reveal broader themes.

RESULTS

Themes that emerged from the analysis of responses to each question are summarized below. As all participants followed the interview questions closely, no other themes were identified in the participants' sharing through inductive coding.

Importance of transition planning services: choosing appropriate primary schools

All four participants agreed that the transition planning services by teachers are essential for pre-school children with special needs when they transit to other educational settings. All participants suggested that transition planning would facilitate pre-schoolers with special needs to move to a suitable school for their further development and then receive appropriate continuing support for their learning. The process also helps parents make appropriate decisions. For example, one of the participants described the importance of transition planning by teachers:

“Transition planning helps parents choose a suitable school for children with special needs.”

Another participant expressed the same view:

“Transition planning helps to choose a suitable school for children with special needs, no matter if they go to mainstream primary schools or special schools, so that appropriate support can be provided for them.”

Importance of transition planning services: better adaptation to primary school

Three of the participants commented that transition planning services help pre-schoolers with special needs to adapt more easily and faster to the new educational setting, and thus have a happy learning experience. One participant stated that proper transition planning can help to promote an easy transition:

“As pre-schoolers transit from a familiar environment to an unfamiliar environment, a well-planned transition can help them to adapt faster.”

Another participant expressed:

“The difference between pre-school and primary school is very large, and the study in primary school is much more difficult. If there is a well-planned transition, it helps parents choose a school with a suitable learning syllabus for children. Therefore, children can have an easier adaptation and a happy time in primary schools.”

Role of special education teachers: facilitating the parents' choice of appropriate schools

Participants stated that they had different roles in the transition planning process. All participants stated that they had the responsibility to help parents understand the abilities of their children and the differences among choices of schools. Besides, teachers agreed that they had to understand and appreciate the expectations of the parents. For example, one of the participants said:

“As a SCCW, I should understand the abilities of the children to let parents understand their children's needs. Also, this helps parents choose an educational setting which suits the abilities and needs of their children. Also, SCCW should help parents understand the choices of different schools and know more about the resources in different educational settings.”

One participant mentioned that:

“As SCCWs, we need to understand the desires of parents.”

Role of special education teachers: giving updated information on schools and the transition system to parents

Three of the participants suggested arranging parents to visit mainstream primary schools and special schools so that they could better understand the resources available. For example, one participant said:

“I think that more visits to different types of schools, including special schools and mainstream primary schools, can offer chances for parents to understand the resources and syllabus of different schools. Therefore, they can choose a suitable school for their children.”

The other means suggested to convey updated information of schools and the transition system was giving talks to parents. One participant shared:

“Different talks are suggested for parents to help them to choose a suitable school for their children.”

Role of special education teachers: designing suitable preparation activities for children

Participants recognized that they had the responsibility to design suitable preparation activities to promote the child's future adaptation in other educational settings after children leave the SCCC. One participant stated that:

“We need to design some primary school preparation syllabus for children to experience the learning method in primary schools so that they can adapt more easily after the transition.”

Challenges and difficulties: managing the expectations of parents

All participants stated that the greatest challenge in the transition planning process was achieving a balance between the difference of parents' expectations (sometimes unrealistic) and the abilities of their children. One mentioned:

“The most difficult thing is how to make parents accept the fact that when their expectation is too high, it does not match the abilities of their children.”

Another participant said:

“The most difficult thing is communication with parents when parents think that the children's abilities are high enough to be promoted to mainstream schools or IP service in the nursery – but our assessments show that the child's abilities are not strong enough.”

Challenges and difficulties: lack of updated information on special needs resources in primary schools

One participant also mentioned the lack of updated information to provide for parents, and how this affects advice to parents and the designing of suitable preparation programmes for children:

“If we do not understand about different schools, it is difficult to explain to parents about the educational level, the programmes, and the teaching in different schools. Also, it is difficult to design suitable programmes or syllabi for children to have an easier transition.”

Suggestions for enhancing pre-school special education teachers' competencies: getting up-to-date information about the transition system and the resources of different schools through visits and talks

Special child care workers interviewed in this study all suggested that more up-to-date information about the transition system and the resources of different schools can better equip them to communicate with parents and enable them to participate in the transition planning process. Three of them suggested visits to mainstream primary schools and special schools for teachers to promote a better understanding of the resources available. For example, one participant said:

„Teachers can know more about the updated information through visits so that they can share it with parents.”

One participant also suggested the visits to other pre-school settings to share ideas about the design of different preparation programmes for children in the transition planning process:

“Visits to other pre-school settings help us to understand how others design primary school preparation syllabi and programmes so that we can design programmes and preparation syllabi to help children with faster adaptation in primary schools.”

Other than school visits, one participant suggested that they could also get updated information through talks. For instance, that participant said:

„Teachers can know about the updated information from the talks.”

DISCUSSION

Consistent with previous findings, transition planning for pre-schoolers with SEN was found to be important in the current study. Similar to the suggestions of Harper (2016), participants in the study expressed that transition planning could facilitate faster adaptation to primary school and lead to better emotional wellness.

This study also found that, in the context of Hong Kong, choosing an appropriate primary school was important in transition planning. Hong Kong is a densely populated city, with 587 primary schools (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2020) in 1,106 km², i.e., on average around 2 schools within 1 km². Therefore, after considering the geographical location of the schools, there are often several schools for parents to choose from. Furthermore, resources for children with special education needs vary among schools. Therefore, good transition planning included informing the parents of such resources in various schools so that they could choose a suitable school for

their children that could provide appropriate support in new educational settings after the transition.

About the role of SCCWs in working with the parents, the findings revealed that the SCCWs saw it as their role to facilitate the parents to better understand the abilities of their children and how these should determine the choice of the next school. Literature also found that parents desired more information to prepare for the transition (McIntyre et al., 2007). At times, this process can help parents modify their expectations for their child's future. Meanwhile, for children, the SCCWs' support role is to design and implement adaptive programmes to promote a smooth transition. This is consistent with the suggestions by Chun (2003), that the transition would be smoother if the syllabus in SCCC matched that of the primary school. Good understanding of the needs, characteristics, and abilities of each child is therefore crucial. About the challenge of enacting the roles mentioned above, this study revealed that at times it would be difficult for the parents to have realistic and practical expectations towards children's actual abilities. SCCWs mentioned that parents' expectations for their children are usually higher than the actual abilities possessed by said children, based on SCCWs' perspectives and assessments. Transition planning may therefore often involve helping parents accept a realistic long-term goal for the child with special needs.

Rapid innovations and frequent changes within educational systems and in policies in different schools presented a challenge for some participants. They found it difficult to share up-to-date information with parents due to the lack of recent information about different schools and the transition system. Participants of the study suggested that to keep teachers, as well as parents, informed, more visits to different schools would help them obtain a better understanding of the education standards, available support and resources, and teaching methods in each choice of school. To supplement this, informative talks could be provided by schools and the Education Bureau and Child Assessment Centres. Some participants also suggested that better sharing among pre-school settings could improve the design and implementation of transition preparation for pre-schoolers. Significance of the study

One of the aims of the study was to understand the importance of transition planning for children with special needs from the perspective of pre-school special education teachers. Although this study was small-scale and exploratory, the findings will help to enhance special education teachers' awareness of the importance of transition planning. This may also further help to enhance parents' and public's awareness of the importance of transition for

children with special needs. Resources allocation under the education system may need to be developed to improve current provisions. Much better coverage of transition issues also needs to be provided in pre-service and in-service professional development programmes. The study has also highlighted the difficulties that teachers often encounter in attempting to facilitate children's transitions within the system. This has implications for the content of what is taught in pre-service and in-service courses.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is small-scale and exploratory, so the findings may not generalise across other centres in Hong Kong. SCCCs also differ in administration and policy, so the opinions solicited here from one centre may not apply to other special education sectors or other SCCCs. Research with a much larger sample across different centres would help to confirm the results reported here and may well identify other difficulties and challenges.

The four SCCWs all had different educational backgrounds and working experiences, so they tended to reflect upon current practices from different starting points. Previous education, training, and experience may increase variation in responses obtained – but in practice, it is impossible to control for this influence.

In this study, coding of the transcribed data was performed by the researcher only; and for practical reasons, it was not possible to evaluate inter-coder reliability. Ideally, any future studies should incorporate the evaluation of inter-coder agreement and reliability of the coding process.

CONCLUSION

Although the generalisability of findings is limited due to sample size and location, the study begins the investigation of pre-school transition services for children with special needs in Hong Kong. The study pointed out the role of special child care workers. The challenges they encounter in the process of transition planning highlight areas needing improvement, which would eventually improve interdisciplinary work on transition planning.

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