

International Perspectives on  
Early Childhood Education and Development 9

Bob Perry  
Sue Dockett  
Anne Petriwskyj *Editors*

# Transitions to School - International Research, Policy and Practice

 Springer

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# International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development

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## Volume 9

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Editors

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# Foreword

This book is a compilation of contributions from Australia and New Zealand; Finland, Iceland, Scotland, and Sweden in Northern Europe; the United States of America; and Hong Kong (China) in Asia. The editors and authors are well-known members of the scientific community and highly reputed researchers in the field of educational transitions, through attending national and international conferences, or on account of their important publications, which are highly cited throughout the field. This book makes a very original contribution through reports on actual research, practical projects, and programmatic work. The work is structured in the form of an introduction, a synthesis and analysis, and finally a shared position statement. Transition to formal schooling has a different significance in different countries, depending on each nation's education system with regard to allocation of children to institutions based on different ages, occupying different professional stakeholders, different philosophies depending on existing and developing curricula, and different theoretical approaches to understanding the ongoing processes of change that all participants experience. So the work addresses early childhood education researchers, teacher educators, policy makers, practitioners, and interested parents – but in the way it is constructed, it may well be an example for working together in other scientific fields.

My part is to consider what might happen if you carefully study the book. You will learn about some of the researchers and the paths through their professional lives in relation to transitions. Connected with a historical perspective, I remember an international conference Transforming Transitions held in Glasgow, Scotland, in 2007. Urie Bronfenbrenner was to deliver a keynote speech, but owing to his demise in 2005, Glenn Elder Jr. presented it instead. With this book, you learn to think not only in a life-span perspective but from the viewpoint of the life courses that are historically embedded.

Is every dynamic change in the experiences of individuals, families, groups, or communities a transition? Is there a common idea about the meaning of transitions for the subjects to define transitions? Is there anything that family transitions, educational transitions, professional transitions, and transitions in child and adult development have in common? These are questions the reader may be eager to explore.

What does a transition do to the individual and to the context in which changes and differences are offered, and what do the individual and the context do? You will encounter many challenges while you are studying this book – not necessarily as risks, but pertaining to the motivation to cope with demands instead of seeing them as a threat. There are demands on different levels.

## **Individual Level**

The reader will have to deal with strong emotions, their own competences, consciousness, reflectiveness, attitudes, and behavior. They will have to learn to reflect more critically about their own biases and inequities. They will have to learn to theorize in terms of historical, social, cultural, and political forces and in terms of their feeling and acting under the influence of these forces as an agent, not as a passive object. One example is the belief in continuity in learning and development through continuity in context. Could discontinuity in experience be seen as a stimulus for development, and development and learning be considered as other than a continuum? There are many stimuli in the book that help to see the world of transitions with new eyes. The reader has to understand that knowledge is socially constructed and that she/he is not alone in an ivory tower. The reader will have to reflect on ethics in terms of social justice or of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – an ethical canon that has been co-constructed and agreed upon by most countries in the world and is held as a legal norm in these countries. But is it respected in every relevant aspect?

The book ahead of the reader is about theories and making use of theories across research, policy, and practice. Different theoretical approaches may lead the reader to interpret the same situation differently, and reading about theories may change their own beliefs and standpoints, resulting in their working in new ways. The reader should adapt to readiness for diversity. They will have to be aware of their own values and learn to discover resources instead of emphasising deficits – also within themselves.

## **Interactional Level**

Studying this book requires the reader to see not only themselves but also others as agents in relations. This may lead to changes in relations with other researchers in different countries, from different disciplines and with stakeholders in transitions: children, parents, and professionals. New ways of reflecting and acting in respect to the participation of stakeholders will be emergent, taking into account the interest and wishes of those who are researched. New relations are to be formed with people who are not prepared to be researched or involved into such a practice, and the reader may not be prepared to interact with and find common fields of interest with

them. The reader might have to come to interact with different age-groups of children, depending on the transition being studied. If similar processes are described in similar ways but through different theoretical lenses, it will be necessary to communicate the results with colleagues. There may occur challenging discussions between paradigms like readiness of children or of institutions, or quality education for all children in all institutions. The book will help in developing ideas with others. The reader will understand that transition research means participating in a relational process. Collaborative partnerships between institutions, services, and families have to be established. Broader stakeholders' involvement must be seen within ecological or sociocultural frames with heterogeneous instead of homogeneous groups of learners and teachers. Bias-conscious encounters with all kinds of children and parents from diverse backgrounds will happen through open processes where future predictions cannot be made. In working collaboratively, the researcher, policy maker, practitioner, and interested parent will have to address visible and invisible power relations and take a standpoint. You will have to give up – maybe unwillingly – disrespectful relations and frame consciously respectful relationships instead. The reader will have to learn to think, speak, and act in line with inclusion, in strengths-based ways. They will have to learn to listen to the voices of children, families, communities – in their languages. There is a demand to make oneself evident when things are not self-evident: like school, learning, child, family, transition. The reader will have to learn networking as a part of professionalism and learn to theorise in relativities.

## **Contextual Level**

This book will confront you with the need to deal with a wider range of contexts and a wider understanding of contexts in international and interdisciplinary work. Let us take the question of diversity again in connection with different languages and cultures and a critical reflection on what has been achieved. The references listed in this international book are generally in English; only a few cited works are in the original language of those authors who do not come from English-speaking countries. These, such as Bronfenbrenner, van Gennep, or Vygotsky, shows that if they were not written in English, everybody has to rely on available translations into English – which means a selection from the body of available knowledge and thinking. An EU-Comenius project “Transition and Multilingualism” with partners from five European countries – not included in this book but an exemplification – made evident that exchange between scientists in a language that was not their mother tongue but in sociolects from other disciplines required intensive efforts in communicating. This difficulty encountered in the working process helped participants to understand better children and families who enter a school system that uses a language which is not their own. According to a guideline of the European Commission, and recognizing a growing migration worldwide, all children in Europe should speak at least three languages, including their family language in whatever context they are



actually living. Obviously, the scientific community has a long way to go to avoid exclusion of ideas and knowledge in other lingual-cultural contexts. The reader of the book is confronted with promoting intercultural perspectives within research, policy, and practice. Objects of research connected with transitions encompass attachment, resiliency, health, development, and language acquisition in communities of speakers and related cultures. The reader must be aware that from the perspective of a particular scientific discipline, other disciplines might appear foreshortened and not recognized in their inherent changes and development. In sociology, including ethnography and psychology, you find postmodern constructivist perspectives. In different countries, you might find different traditions in scientific disciplines, as well as in policy and practice, of course. The reader of this book will find opportunities for reflecting cultures: cultures of adults or of children in a society/community. To develop transition research, policy, and practice, it is necessary to contextualize the knowledge of partners, to understand and respect different social and cultural contexts, to value individual expertise and skills, and to negotiate objectives and processes independent of hierarchies and preconceived success formulas. As readers engage with views different from their own, they will co-construct a deeper understanding than that achieved by reading only things they already know or are agreed upon.

Why do I present before you this list of demands and challenges that may strike you when reading this book? Coping with changes and new demands in life experiences in a complex way that may be structured at individual, interactional, and contextual levels is a criterion to define a transition in the developmental psychology of families. Developmental transitions involve a restructuring of one's psychological sense of self and a shift in what Colin Murray Parkes has described as one's assumptive world, which means that in life's transitions, one's world will be seen through "new eyes." Achieving a new learning, a new attitude, and a new behavior as well as reflection and consciousness of this process is considered to be a developmental step in adulthood. If the reader takes the opportunity and exercises agency to learn, takes theories in the place of attitudes, methods, policy, and practice in the place of behaviors, and agrees on a new level of reflection, she/he gains from the development of an essential motive in (professional) life activity. It is not necessary to say in light of the complex demands that I mentioned that development and transition in adulthood are co-constructions. I promise the reader a lot of well-being.

State Institute of Early Childhood Education  
and Research, Munich, Germany

Wilfried Griebel

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## Contributors

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**Anders Garpelin** is Professor of Education/Special Needs Education and the principal scientific officer of Educational Sciences at Mälardalen University, Västerås, Sweden. His research concerns the meaning of educational transitions, also from a life perspective, for children/young people, with their diverse abilities and experiences. His current research deals with transitions young children encounter between three school forms, preschool, the preschool class, and school, with a special focus on learning and participation. Anders and his wife Merja live in a family where different cultural perspectives meet daily. The mother tongues Finnish, Hungarian, and Swedish are present almost daily with their children and grandchildren.

**Bronwyn Glass** is head teacher at Botany Downs Kindergarten in Howick, Auckland, New Zealand. She is a practicing teacher. Her research passions include possibility thinking, inclusive practice, building community, transitional actions, and how information technologies engage children and their families and build connections with the community. Bronwyn lives with her husband on a small rural holding with a range of animals including a rabbit that lives with the chickens.

**Wendy Goff** is a Lecturer at Monash University's Gippsland Campus and a doctoral student at Charles Sturt University, Albury Wodonga, Australia. She is currently researching on how working in partnership can support children's mathematical learning as they make the transition from preschool to primary school. Wendy shares her life with her beautiful children Lisa, Bradley, Joshua, and Jacob, her cat Rose, and her dog called Kevin.

**Elizabeth Graue** is a Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and the Director of Graduate Training at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. A former kindergarten teacher, she received her Ph.D. in Research and Evaluation Methodology from the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her research interests include kindergarten policy and practice (particularly as they relate to readiness issues), home-school relations, research methodology, and classroom practice. She is currently engaged in an NSF-funded professional development program for pre-K teachers focused on developmentally and culturally relevant pre-K mathematics.

**Linda J. Harrison** is Professor of Early Childhood Education within the School of Teacher Education and the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE), Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, Australia. Her research

and professional work focus on young children's experiences of education and care from infancy through to the primary school. She has investigated multiple dimensions of quality in early years settings and the ways that provisions and practices in childcare, preschool, and school influence children's health, learning, and well-being. Linda is a principal investigator on the Sydney Family Development Project, the Child Care Choices and Investigating Quality studies, the Sound Effects Study of young children with communication impairment, and THRIVE – a mental health intervention program for family day care. She is a founding member of the Research Consortium that is responsible for the design of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children.

**Shabnam Hinton** is the Transition to School Program Coordinator at Big Fat Smile, a not-for-profit, community-owned organisation that has been supporting children and their families for 30 years in the Illawarra area of NSW, Australia. Shabnam is a trained primary educator and has worked in both early childhood and primary age services. Shabnam is passionate about the importance of early childhood development, early intervention, creativity, and giving children the best possible start to school and in turn their life. Shabnam has experienced the excitement and challenges of transition to school with her own three children.

**Kathryn Hopps** is a doctoral candidate at the School of Education and the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE), Charles Sturt University, Albury Wodonga, Australia. Her doctoral work focuses on intersetting communication between preschool and school educators at the time of children's transition to school. She has previously worked as an early childhood educator in a diverse range of school and prior-to-school settings.

**Cathy Kaplun** is a researcher working at the Centre for Health Equity Training Research and Evaluation (CHETRE), University of NSW (Faculty of Medicine), Liverpool, Australia. Cathy has recently completed her Ph.D. at Charles Sturt University, Albury Wodonga, Australia, which focused on the transition to school experiences of families and children living in a disadvantaged community. At present, Cathy is exploring the educational experiences of Aboriginal families and children as they transition to school. These families have been involved in a longitudinal project, which commenced in 2005, describing the health and development of Aboriginal babies and children (0–5 years) living in an urban area. Cathy lives in Sydney with her husband, four children, their puppy, two mischievous rabbits, and a recently acquired and rather laid-back axolotl.

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**Mei Seung Lam** is Assistant Professor in the Early Childhood Department at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong. Mei Seung's current research interests include children's and parents' perspectives and experiences of transition to preschool and school, coping and identity, transition practices, parental choice of school, parental involvement, and tensions in researching with children in a Chinese context.

**Amy MacDonald** is a Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies within the School of Education and the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE), Charles Sturt University, Albury Wodonga, Australia. Her research interests are around the mathematics experiences and education of infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and children in the early years of primary school, with a particular focus on transitions in mathematics education. Amy is working on a number of numeracy-focused research projects utilizing data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children and is also involved in developing a program to support young children's numeracy development prior to school. She is also working on the Pedagogies of Educational Transitions (POET) global alliance project, with researchers from Australia, Iceland, Scotland, Sweden, and New Zealand. Amy lives in Wodonga with her husband Cody, their two dogs Burrito and Diego, their three cats Millie, Tilly, and Oscar, and their thirteen fish who are all called "Fishy."

**Noella Mackenzie** is a Senior Lecturer in Literacy Studies at the School of Education and the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE), Charles Sturt University, Albury Wodonga, Australia. Her current research is focused on writing acquisition and the relationship between success with early writing and ongoing literacy development. Noella's research projects involve the examination of the relationship between drawing and learning to write, the teaching and learning of writing in preschool, and the transition experience for early writers. She enjoys a rich life which centers on her family and friends. Her grandchildren are a particular source of enjoyment and challenge.

**Kay Margetts** is Associate Professor in Early Childhood Studies at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Her research has a particular focus on issues related to children's transition, adjustment, and progress in school, including the influence of prior-to-school experiences, and considers the perspectives of educators, parents, and children. Kay regularly provides professional development to schools and early childhood providers, locally and internationally.

**Elizabeth Murray** is a Lecturer in the School of Teacher Education at Charles Sturt University, Dubbo, Australia. Her research interests include examining children's social and emotional adjustment to kindergarten, transition to and readiness for formal schooling, child stress and anxiety, children's coping, and quality teaching and learning environments. She is interested in both qualitative and quantitative methodologies and, in particular, working with children to examine issues of concern for them as they make the transition to formal schooling. Elizabeth has recently

undertaken analyses using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children to examine academic and social trajectories for young children starting school, and is currently analyzing young children's drawings to examine their perspective of the teacher-child relationship across the first year of school.

**Bob Perry** is Professor of Education at the School of Education and the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE), Charles Sturt University, Albury Wodonga, Australia. Bob's current research interests include powerful mathematics ideas in preschool and the first years of school, ethical tensions in researching with children, student decision making around staying on at high school, starting school within families with complex support needs, preschool education in remote Indigenous communities, transition to school for Indigenous families, and building community capacity. Bob shares his life with his partner, Sue Dockett, and their son, Will, both of whom ensure that he keeps his feet firmly on the ground.

**Sally Peters** is Associate Professor and Associate Director of the Early Years Research Centre at the University of Waikato. Sally has a background in early childhood education and a particular interest in children's learning and thinking. She has been researching in the area of transitions through a number of projects, currently working in partnership with teachers and colleagues to explore the experiences of children and their families as the children move from early childhood education to school and to consider ways of supporting their learning over time.

**Anne Petriwskyj** is Adjunct Associate Professor, School of Early Childhood Education, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. Her current research interests are inclusive pedagogies in early childhood, transition to school of children with diverse abilities and backgrounds, inquiry-based science and technology in early childhood, and effective professional preparation of early childhood educators. Anne's background in teaching in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities together with her science interest frames a connectedness to land that extends to organic food growing.

**June Reineke** earned her B.S. from the University of Wisconsin–Steven's Point, her M.S. from WSU, and is currently working on her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Her area of expertise is early childhood education and policy. June has served on the state early childhood professional development subcommittee and the professional development advisory committee for childcare resource and referral. She is also on the leadership team for the Winona early childhood initiative.

**Susanne Rogers** is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the School of Education and the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE), Charles Sturt University, Albury Wodonga, Australia. Her research interest lies in the transition to school of children and their families. This interest has developed over decades of working as an early years educator in schools, a project manager, and recently as a coach in a literacy improvement project.



**Tuija Turunen** works as a Senior Lecturer in Primary School Teacher Education in the University of Lapland, Finland. She also has a position as an Adjunct Senior Lecturer within the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE), Charles Sturt University, Albury Wodonga, Australia. Tuija has two major foci in the field of transition to school research: curriculum for education commencing a year prior to compulsory schooling in Finland (Finnish preschool education) and adults' memories about starting school.

# Chapter 1

## Theorising Transition: Shifts and Tensions

Sue Dockett, Anne Petriwskyj, and Bob Perry

### 1.1 Introduction

Worldwide recognition of the significance of the early childhood years for later development and wellbeing and the importance of investing in high-quality early childhood education (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2006) has promoted a great deal of interest in transition to school research, policy and practice. Recognition of the importance of a positive start to school acknowledges not only social and educational advantages but also the potential impact of these outcomes on disrupting cycles of social and economic disadvantage and in promoting resilience among young people (Fabian and Dunlop 2007; Smart et al. 2008).

In recent years, international attention has been drawn to the transition to school through comparative studies such as the OECD Starting Strong reports (2001, 2006). Indeed, Starting Strong II (OECD 2006, p. 1) recognised both the opportunities and challenges associated with the transition to school and urged that

attention should be given to transition challenges faced by young children as they enter school ... Facilitating transitions for children is a policy challenge in all systems. Transitions for children are generally a stimulus to growth and development, but if too abrupt and handled without care, they carry – particularly for young children – the risk of regression and failure.

The growing international focus on transition to school reflects a shift from attention at the local level to recognition that transition forms part of national and international education agendas. International comparisons, such as *Programme*

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for *International Student Assessment (PISA)* (OECD 2010) and *Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS)* (Mullis et al. 2012), compare children's performance well beyond the start of school but have the potential to influence what occurs within that transition, particularly around areas of curriculum and pedagogy. In several countries, such as Australia and the United States of America, state-by-state comparisons of standardised tests also drive educational agendas. These comparisons influence many educational debates, including those about curriculum continuity from prior-to-school to school settings, standards and expectations as children start school and the implementation of pedagogies of transition. In these countries, as well as in several others, it is not uncommon to hear regular media and research discussions about the age at which children should start school and the potential implications of this for their performance on later standardised assessments. Discussions of results and potential explanations for these often turn to the age of the children involved and the years of school education they have experienced at the time of the assessments (Peters 2010). As a consequence, interest in the transition to school extends well beyond the early childhood years.

## 1.2 Defining Transition to School

The term 'transition to school' is understood and applied in many ways in different contexts. Some approaches incorporate school readiness and adjustment, defining transition to school as:

...children moving into and adjusting to new learning environments, families learning to work within a sociocultural system (i.e. education) and schools making provisions for admitting new children into the system. (UNICEF 2012, p. 8)

Broader definitions move beyond this focus on readiness and adjustment emphasising transition as a set of processes as individuals move from one (in this case, educational) context to another or change their role in educational communities (Dockett and Perry 2007; Fabian 2007; Vogler et al. 2008). These definitions focus on changes in identity and agency as individuals, and those around them engage in different educational contexts and adopt different roles. Within these definitions, processes of transition are regarded as both individual and social experiences, actively constructed as individuals participate in social and cultural processes that, by their very nature, are communal events (Rogoff 2003).

Other definitions of transition emphasise the intensified demands for children (Fthenakis 1998) as well as families (Griebel and Niesel 2009). Some researchers suggest that these increased demands present almost overwhelming challenges for some children (Hirst et al. 2011), while others focus on the importance of providing support and acknowledging children's strengths as they navigate these challenges and develop an enhanced sense of their own competence (Fabian and Dunlop 2007; Page 2000).

Throughout the world, debates continue about the role of adjustment, adaptation, continuity and readiness in the transition to school, the timing of transition and the teacher and/or school practices that support transition (Broström and Wagner 2003; Dockett and Perry 2013, in press; Dunlop and Fabian 2007; Petriwskyj et al. 2005; Ramey and Ramey 1999; Vrinioti et al. 2010; Yeboah 2002). While there is no universally accepted definition of transition, there is acceptance that transition is a multifaceted phenomenon (Petriwskyj et al. 2005), involving a range of interactions and processes over time, experienced in different ways by different people in different contexts. In very general terms, the outcome of a positive transition is a sense of belonging in the new setting (Dockett and Perry 2004; Fabian 2007). The ways in which this outcome may be achieved vary according to the theoretical perspective/s adopted.

### 1.3 Shifts in Theorising Transition to School

For many of the contributors to this book, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory marks a common starting point for theorising transition (see MacDonald et al. Chap. 16). However, different emphases and different connections with other theoretical perspectives lead to considerable variation in the implementation of research using this one theory. Critical perspectives also feature in the work of several contributors to this book, as does focus on rites of passage and border crossing. These variations in theoretical perspective frame three sections of this text. Such variation serves to remind us of the complexity of transition, in terms of those involved, their perspectives, the contexts in which they are located, the institutions involved and the ways that people position themselves and are positioned by others.

However, it also raises a number of questions about the role of theory in transitions research. For example, what makes a sufficient theory? Is it possible to engage with part of a theory? What is gained, and what is lost, by an eclectic approach to theorising transition? How can theories be adapted and refined without losing coherence?

Theories do not exist in isolation. They reflect particular ways of being and knowing and exist in historical time. We should not be surprised that different contexts, cultures and communities give rise to different ways of looking at things and accord importance to different elements and factors. In reflecting on the role of theory in her research, Einarsdóttir (Chap. 2) comments

Theory helps me to see what is visible in a new light, notice novel things, and reveal new understandings. I also use it to help me understand the reality that I am investigating and explain what I see, why I see it, and what it means.

We invite readers to engage with theories and theorising transition as they explore the chapters of this book. We commence discussion of theoretical positions by considering the recent shift from a reliance on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory in efforts to understand the transition to school. While Bronfenbrenner's early conceptualisations have been influential, later refinements of his theory, as well as a range of different theoretical positions, inform current research.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. xiii) noted that ecological transitions occur as an individual's 'position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both'. Bronfenbrenner's systems model of nested concentric circles, locating the child at the centre, is familiar to many educators and researchers. It promotes focus on the many and varied contexts in which people exist and interactions at the intersections of these contexts. Bioecological theory, which reflects Bronfenbrenner's later work (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006), retained this focus on context and people but placed increased emphasis on the importance of processes and time. From this emerged the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). Key elements of this model are proximal processes – defined as increasingly complex reciprocal interactions between an individual and the environment; the individual characteristics of each person, including their experiences, resources, temperament and motivation as well as their agency; the context, or systems including those in which individuals interact (microsystems), overlapping contexts (mesosystems), that influence their actions even though they are not direct participants in these contexts (exosystem), and the broader societal and cultural context (macrosystem); and time, which incorporates both what occurs during a specific activity or event, interactions that occur consistently as well as the chronosystem, that is, the specific historical context in which people and processes are located (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). Life course theory (Elder 1996) pays particular attention to the chronosystem, arguing that people who inhabit different time periods can experience the same event in different ways. In relation to starting school, focus on the chronosystem could help explain differences in the experiences of parents and children and of children in different social, political and economic contexts.

The PPCT model provides a great deal of flexibility in researching transition to school. When applied in full, it prompts attention to the relationships and interactions associated with starting school, the characteristics and resources each individual (be they a child, family member or educator) brings with them to the transition, recognition of the various systems or contexts in which children and families are located as well as attention to specific events, patterns of interactions and historical context. It provides potential to explore issues of continuity and change, in terms of the individuals, the nature of experiences and interactions they have, the people with whom they interact and the contexts in which they are located. It also recognises that social and cultural contexts are dynamic, affected by processes of continuity and change. These elements are noted in the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition, developed by Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000), which emphasised:

...the transition to school in terms of developmental processes that take place within the transition ecology. It is a system of interactions and transactions among persons, settings, and institutions that are oriented to support progress of children...rather than understanding a child's transition solely in terms of the child's skills, or the influences on those skills at any given time, this perspective emphasizes the organization of assets within a social ecology, how this organization emerges and how it supports (or hinders) child competence over time. (Pianta 2010, p. 35)

While recognising the possibilities afforded by bioecological approaches, limitations are also outlined. For example, Petriwskyj (Chap. 15) argues that these do not account sufficiently for the diversity of children's lives or inform children's longer-term trajectories. Similar criticisms are outlined by Vogler et al. (2008, p. 25), who note that 'while the identification of multiple interacting systems is conceptually elegant, there is a risk of objectifying boundaries and assuming internal sub-system coherence'. In other words, we should expect blurring of boundaries and not expect that microsystems, such as the family or school, operate in similar ways for all children. A further criticism of bioecological theory is that locating the child at the centre does not necessarily reflect the priorities of the systems and contexts, or the social constructs and power relations, in which they are located (Corsaro et al. 2002; Vogler et al. 2008). That is, not all microsystems prioritise the individual child.

Many of the contributors to this book refer to the importance of bioecological theory in their work, either as a guiding theoretical framework or as a trigger for further conceptualisation of transition. For example, Dunlop (Chap. 3) outlines her adoption of bioecological theory, noting how it offers an umbrella that can accommodate related theoretical frameworks, such as life course theory (Elder 1996), which outlines the principles of historical time, timing in lives, linked lives and human agency. Life course theory and bioecological theory can be complementary in their focus on historical time (chronosystem) and agency. Both theories accord significance to the active role of individuals as they influence, and are influenced by, the contexts in which they live. They also identify potential for change as different systems or contexts, and those located within them, interact. The combination of interactions, change and time sets up a dynamic model in which the transition to school can be explored by focusing on the overlapping or intersecting contexts of children's experience. From this, it is expected that each experience of the transition will be different; not only would it be expected that children's perspectives would be different from those of adults, but also each child's experience of their ecology would be expected to be different. This is evident in Turunen's (Chap. 11) exploration of transition to school as part of life history, where memories of starting school are described as potential turning points in each individual's life course.

One area highlighted by the combination of bioecological and life course theories is the ways in which contextual, or environmental, factors have different effects on those who experience them (Elder 1974). This is one pathway to the exploration of risk and protective factors, the identification of resilience and vulnerability, which are explored by Harrison (Chap. 5), as well as concepts of adjustment and transition (Margetts Chap. 6). It is also part of the underlying argument for the focus on high-quality early childhood education for all children, contending that this has 'the potential of supporting young children and their caregivers in coping with adversities and improving their prospects of successful school transitions' (Vogler et al. 2008, p. 28).

Some contributors incorporate a base of bioecological theory, complemented or expanded by other theoretical frameworks and conceptualisations. Peters (Chap. 8) describes the ways in which bioecological and sociocultural theories underpin her approach to transitions research; and Einarsdóttir (Chap. 2), Murray (Chap. 4),

Harrison (Chap. 5), Margetts (Chap. 6), Mackenzie (Chap. 7), Graue and Reineke (Chap. 12), Perry (Chap. 13) and Dockett (Chap. 14) all incorporate elements of bioecological theory in their explorations of transition.

Murray (Chap. 4) combines a strong focus on bioecological theory with a commitment to incorporating the perspectives of children in her research, on the basis that a successful transition to school relies not only on personal characteristics but also on interpersonal (relationship) and institutional factors. Mackenzie (Chap. 7) applies a similar model as children make the transition to becoming school students, specifically in the area of writing.

Harrison (Chap. 5) locates her research in bioecological theory, focusing particularly on proximal processes and connections between the intrapersonal (e.g. temperament) and interpersonal (e.g. attachment) worlds of the school student. She combines this with a transactional model of children development (Sameroff 2009), which holds that such development occurs as a result of continuous dynamic interactions between children and their environments. Relationships are central to this model, as is the power of relationships to effect change to, and for, individuals. The model also proposes that individual characteristics predispose children to be affected differentially by their environments. Hence, it is possible to consider both risk and protective factors that can be associated with transition to school.

Individual child characteristics are also addressed by Margetts (Chap. 6), in her discussion of transition and adjustment. In her investigations of children's capacity to adapt to the new school context, Margetts highlights the importance of children's changing sense of identity and belonging as well as their adaptive behaviour within the school setting.

In drawing on sociocultural theory, Lam (Chap. 10) and Peters (Chap. 8) incorporate the importance of social context and social interactions that is a feature of Vygotskian (1978) theory. From this perspective, interactions that occur within historical, cultural and institutional contexts shape children's development and their view of the world. At the same time, children are viewed as active agents who learn to use cultural tools to master actions that are valued within that particular culture (Wertsch 1991). When applied to the study of transition to school, sociocultural theory prompts a focus on the ways in which children's social interactions provide a basis for new ways of engaging in different contexts, where the 'process of changing participation in sociocultural activities of their communities' (Rogoff 2003, p. 52) is paramount. This translates into consideration of how children, families and educators change as a result of participating in activities and events that are significant in the context of school (such as orientation visits) but also exploring the ways in which those activities and events change over time as a result of that participation.

Children's participation in different contexts is a critical element of sociocultural theory, used by Corsaro et al. (2002) to frame transition as a process of interactions between people and involvement in activities that results in children's changed participation in sociocultural activities. These researchers regard transitions as 'always collectively produced and shared with significant others' (Corsaro et al. 2002, p. 325) and argue strongly against models of transition that focus primarily on the individual or a set of individual variables.

In its focus on children's developing mastery of culturally valued actions, sociocultural theory posits an important role for adults and peers. To this end, Rogoff (2003) describes processes of guided participation, as more knowledgeable others guide children's participation in culturally valued activities. Similarly, Lave and Wenger (1991) describe a process of legitimate peripheral participation, where those new to a community move towards becoming members of that community by engaging in peripheral activities that help them become aware of the ways in which the community is organised and operates. Experts, or more experienced others, play important roles in guiding the participation of newcomers. While it is not only adults who are regarded as more experienced, there is a clear role for adults in cultural reproduction. Intergenerational influences are also important, with parents, grandparents and other significant adults reflecting different visions of school and what it means to make the transition to school. Their perspectives shape the transition to school experiences of children and families (Turunen Chap. 11). Family habitus (Bourdieu 1997) is influenced by family history and the stories told within the family about school and education. These contribute to dispositions that support and guide particular practices within families.

The historical, social, cultural and political contexts, in which transition to school is, and has been located, are the focus of the critical constructionism that underpins Graue and Reineke's (Chap. 12) investigation of the ways in which transition and readiness have been constructed in the United States. This theoretical orientation emphasises the sociocultural construction of knowledge (Vygotsky 1978) and incorporates critical theory through a focus on the construction of cultural myths and expectations (Habermas 1972). In arguing that the ways in which people think about and enact transition and readiness are located within specific social and cultural contexts and have historical legacies, Graue and Reineke align notions of time (bioecological theory) and sociocultural theory with critical theory, arguing for the contextualisation of knowledge, promoting the importance of critical reflection on what is known, how it is known, and to whom it is known.

Critical and post-structuralist theories underpin Petriwskyj's (Chap. 15) approach to the study of transition to school as she draws attention to inequalities related to power and the exercise of power. Post-structuralist theories examine the political nature of knowledge and the role of language in the politics of knowledge:

Poststructuralists believe that individuals may tell several – possibly competing – stories about themselves (identities) and about societies. The politics of our time and place influence which stories ...are told, when and by whom, which is why some stories are heard more often and given greater status than others ... identifying the sources ... that are silenced or marginalised and then sharing them is a political act. (MacNaughton 2005, p. 4)

Critical theory also examines connections between knowledge and power, exploring the social and historical contexts of knowledge and the ways in which some ideas direct our understandings and explanations of phenomena. In particular, critical theory questions inequities in access to power and resources. Critical and post-structuralist perspectives direct attention towards ensuring the educational participation of marginalised or ignored groups (including children with disabilities, refugees, children in geographically isolated locations, gifted



children), together with the implementation of more socially inclusive policies and practices. Transition to school approaches framed by these perspectives are directed towards listening to the perspectives of all involved in transition (children, families, educators and communities) and promoting their active engagement in decision-making around the transition.

Listening to the perspectives of children has been a hallmark of Einarsdóttir's research. In Chap. 2, she describes how her theoretical stance draws on postmodernism, arguing that knowledge is socially constructed and, because of its contextual nature, can be contradictory (Albon 2011). Moving away from accepted truths, Einarsdóttir questions assumptions about children and childhood. Her work positions children as competent and capable, able to share their perspectives and with rights to be heard.

Critical reflection characterises the approaches adopted by Perry (Chap. 13) and Dockett (Chap. 14) as each questions how power is exercised or operates in the construction of transition to school. Both chapters reflect on dominant ideologies and argue for the importance of critical knowledge in promoting social justice (Perry Chap. 13) and unsettling expectations about who is expected to experience a successful, or problematic, transition to school (Dockett Chap. 14). These chapters argue that issues of power are central to interactions and expectations and 'examine the social and political factors that produce dominant educational knowledge and practices, and ... ask whose interests they serve' (MacNaughton 2005, p. 9). Critical reflection is a central plank of critical pedagogy and of approaches to social justice. It provides a basis for identifying inequality and injustice in approaches to transition to school as well as a platform for promoting change. Critical pedagogy encourages educators to engage in a 'language of possibility' (Giroux 2005, p. 68) and so to

develop knowledge/power relations in which multiple narratives and social practices are constructed around a politics and pedagogy of difference that offers students the opportunity to read the world differently, resist the abuse of power and privilege and construct alternative democratic communities.

Studies of the transition to school recognise that schools, schooling and education are largely institutionalised. Bourdieu's (1992) description of rites of institution addresses the significance of the rituals associated with education and the function they serve to separate those belonging to the institution of school from those who do not.

Garpelin (Chap. 9) and Lam (Chap. 10) also invoke the notion of rites as they describe the transition to school as a rite of passage. To do so, they draw upon van Gennep's (1960) description of rituals associated with life transitions as rites of passage, marking significant transitions to positions of new social status across the life course. Rites of passage acknowledge the departure from one phase of life and arrival in another phase. Three phases contribute to thinking about rites of passage: preliminal rites (rites of separation, as people detach from the existing group), liminal (or threshold rites, where people are in-between states, having left one group or status, but not yet become part of another) and postliminal rites (where people become incorporated into the new group, assuming the new status and identity that goes with being a member of this group).

In considering the transition to school, it is possible to conceptualise the move from preschool to school as a process of moving from one group and status (preschooler) to another (school student). Both Garpelin and Lam emphasise the potential ambiguity for children and their families, as they encounter the liminal phase, where they are betwixt and between (Turner 1969), in this case, neither a preschooler nor school student. At this time, it is possible to describe children and their families as entering a borderland (Peters Chap. 8) as they seek to cross the border into school. Writing about individuals as they seek to cross cultural and national borders, Anzaldúa (1987, p. 3) described a borderland as a ‘vague and undetermined place’, full of tensions as boundaries overlap and as contexts intersect. It is possible to consider children who have left one context (preschool) but not yet entered another (school) as traversing borderlands, those spaces that surround borders. Giroux (2005, p. 2) argues that

thinking in terms of borders allows one to critically engage the struggle over those territories, spaces, and contact zones where power operates to either expand or to shrink the distance and connectedness among individuals, groups, and places.

Conceptualising transition to school in terms of border crossing facilitates discussion about the border itself (e.g. When do children start school? Is it at the time of orientation or transition or when they have their official first day of school? Do all agree on when children start school, or when they should start school?) and the borderlands surrounding it (What happens for children between preschool and school? Is there a crossover period where school and preschool intermingle?) Such an approach also opens the space for some critical reflections around the transition to school, asking questions such as the following: Whose territory is involved in the transition to school? Who owns this space? Who is responsible for ensuring safe passage? What level of border patrol is involved? Do borders exist to keep people in or to keep people out? What credentials are required to cross borders? Who decides?

## 1.4 Tensions Around Transition

Across the chapters of this book, researchers involved in theorising and researching transition refer to a number of tensions. These, in turn, raise questions and provoke critical reflection. In noting the following tensions, we share some of the questions that have accompanied our discussions and invite readers to consider their own responses and theoretical positions.

### 1.4.1 *Who Is at the Centre of Transitions Research?*

Bioecological theory situates the child at the centre, focusing attention on the contexts in which the child is located and the intersections of these contexts. Yet this is also a criticism of the theory, as we are reminded that not all contexts in which

children exist prioritise their role. What does it mean to locate the child at the centre of research on transition to school? Does that suggest that children's experiences and perspectives are of central importance, more so than the experiences of educators, families or communities? Are the experiences and perspectives of these groups mutually exclusive? Must it be the individual child at the centre? Could we locate social groups at the centre? Rogoff (2003, p. 49) has cautioned that the model of nested systems that characterises many applications of the bioecological model can 'constrain our concepts by separating person and culture into stand-alone entities, with culture influencing the person (or in some models, with the two entities interacting)'. In adopting and applying bioecological theory, how do we emphasise the interrelatedness of person and culture? Is this achieved through the PPCT model?

#### ***1.4.2 What Image(s) of Children Underpins Transitions Research?***

A range of current theoretical perspectives (including sociology of childhood, post-modern and post-structuralist theory) emphasise the importance of listening to all involved in transition and work to include the perspectives of the marginalised or those whose voices are often silenced. In a range of situations, children, particularly young children, are both marginalised and silenced. The processes of transition involve encounters with the unfamiliar and the unknown. How researchers view children will not only inform the research questions they ask but the ways in which these questions are investigated.

What image(s) of children underpins our transitions research? Are children positioned as competent and capable, able to share their perspectives and with rights to be heard? Is there also recognition that competent children sometimes require appropriate support? Do we focus on children's strengths, acknowledging, but not being limited by, potential problems? Who speaks for children in our research?

#### ***1.4.3 How Are Families, Educators and Communities Positioned in Transitions Research?***

What are the descriptors we use when referring to families? How do these position families? It is possible to describe families in terms of the challenges they face or the problems they encounter and the contexts in which they live. When these factors are taken into account, do we look for strengths (Munford and Sanders 2003) as well as problems? How do we acknowledge diversity among families, recognising the considerable strengths that many families display in the face of adversity? How do our research methods and approaches respect families and their commitment to promoting positive educational environments and outcomes for children? How do we hear the perspectives of families?

How are educators positioned in transitions research? Who do we consider as educators in our research – those in prior-to-school settings, those in the early years of school or both? Does our research recognise diversity among educators? Do we – or others – position educators as experts? Do we expect educators to speak for other participants, including children and families? Are educators positioned as instigators of innovation and change that might challenge policy and inform research?

How do we acknowledge the role of communities in transitions research? Communities exist at many levels. These include communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) as well as communities based on social, geographic and cultural connections (Fegan and Bowes 2009). How do we recognise children as citizens of diverse communities? How do we describe communities? In what ways do we recognise community capacity, social and/or cultural capital, and how does this impact on our theorising around transition?

#### ***1.4.4 How Is Time Conceptualised in Transition Research?***

Many approaches to transition and transitions research identify time as a critical factor. Historically, much transition to school research has drawn on maturational theory, referring to the gift of time (Ames 1986). Critiques of this notion have questioned the strategy of keeping children out of school to allow them to have more time to mature (Graue et al. 2003). Other researchers have explored notions of readiness and age. There are many discussions about the right time for children to start school. Transition to school is often described as a process that takes time, with individual children and families requiring different amounts of time in order to adjust to school or to feel a sense of belonging in the school environment. Time is also employed as a marker of development, adjustment and autonomy. Transition to school is situated in an historic time, and there is evidence that this life course event has implications for later life as well as in the ways in which individuals respond to later transitions. Transition experiences also have the potential to impact on trajectories over time. How do we explore notions of time in our transitions research? What assumptions do we make about time? If there is an expectation that transition takes time, what shared responsibilities, across longer timeframes, are possible or required?

#### ***1.4.5 What Is Considered to Be an Effective Transition?***

How do we conceptualise a positive or effective transition? Is it a seamless transition, or is there some value in children experiencing the excitement and challenge of change as they commence school? Would an effective transition be an invisible transition, where the boundaries of school and prior-to-school were

blurred? What are the strengths and weakness of such a position? Is an effective transition more likely to be one where children, families, educators and communities mark and recognise the changes that occur? How can we promote both continuity and change at times of transition? What evidence should we seek regarding the success or otherwise of particular strategies for transition? Should this evidence differ depending on the cultural context? Who should decide? While there is no suggestion that we should all agree on what makes an effective transition, it is evident that multiple strategies and multiple lenses are needed in the study of transitions in order to promote different readings and perceptions of the same situation.

#### ***1.4.6 Is There a Preferred Theoretical Model for Transition and Transitions Research?***

While many of the chapter authors in this book utilise bioecological theory, there are many alternative theoretical paradigms that have been used to investigate transition to school. Critical examination of policies, practices and research evidence through alternate theoretical lenses can illuminate the shortcomings as well as the contributions of various approaches (Scott-Little et al. 2006). In adopting any model of transition, it is important to consider what is invisible or assumed within the model. All models have gaps and silences, and all contain, hide and subsume assumptions. In adopting any model, it is important to consider what is masked as well as what is highlighted. Is there value in the more eclectic theoretical positioning outlined by several researchers in this book (such as Peters Chap. 8; Dunlop Chap. 3), provided the underlying perspectives are identified?

#### ***1.4.7 Should We Focus on Transition or Readiness?***

The process of naming our research and research focus is important. The terms readiness and transition are often used interchangeably, yet can be interpreted to mean quite different things. Readiness, for example, is often used to refer to characteristics of individual children or populations yet can also be used in relation to families, schools and communities. The term transition is often applied to collections of practices or programs but can also be used to refer to processes of relationship building. Are readiness and transition interrelated, and if so, what are the connections (Dockett and Perry 2013, in press)? Are they indeed complementary, as suggested by Graue and Reineke (Chap. 12)? Do their differing theoretical frames mean that should be considered separately? How do they reflect the historical time in which they are located? What is gained, and what is lost, by conceptualising our research as either readiness or transitions research or both?

### 1.4.8 *One Transition or Many?*

It is possible to focus on the transition experiences of individuals and of collective groups or cohorts. Each brings strengths and challenges. Exploring individual experiences of transition recognises diversity of experiences and acknowledges that each individual experiences their ecology in different ways. However, there are limitations in the extent to which such experiences can be generalised. Investigating collective experiences of transition has the potential to homogenise groups and mask diversity. How do we recognise starting school as a time of transition for individuals as well as an institutionalised transition?

When investigating transition, it is also possible to focus on the experiences of one group – children, families, educators, communities – and to exclude others. Do we recognise that the transition to school is a transition for all of these groups? How does our transitions research recognise both unity and diversity? Does it address one transition, or many?

There is the potential for many tensions around the research base of transition to school. These reflect the many different and varied theoretical frames that are used to study transition as well as the different theoretical lenses that are applied to the analysis and application of research outcomes.

## 1.5 Theory, Policy and Practice

The shifts and tensions that are evident in transitions research are also reflected in policy and practice. Although there has been an assumption that research informs policy and practice, this assumption is contested (Nutley et al. 2007). New insights in practice or new policy demands to meet changing social circumstances may also prompt research and consideration of theoretical frameworks consistent with the changing environment (Ohi 2008).

Just as theories do not exist in isolation, ‘research does not speak for itself, nor does it have definitive implications for particular problems of practice or policy. Research users must always interpret the meaning of research and its implications’ (Tseng 2012, p. 7). Translating theory and research involves an iterative process of engagement and knowledge exchange between researchers, policymakers and practitioners (Davies et al. 2008). Critical to these processes is recognition that practitioners and policymakers are experts in their fields, with a great deal to contribute to the identification of research questions and their resolution. Knowledge that derives from practice and from policy is key to interrogating and changing practice (Rickinson et al. 2011).

Each research chapter highlights the implications of theoretical frames or particular research evidence to policy and practice. Three chapters in this book (Kirk-Downey Chap. 17; Glass and Cotman Chap. 18; Arnup Chap. 19) explore connections between theory, policy and practice in more depth. Each chapter