

Professional Development

Transition Practices: Findings from a National Survey of Kindergarten Teachers

Diane M. Early,^{1,4} Robert C. Pianta,² Lorraine C. Taylor,³ and Martha J. Cox¹

INTRODUCTION

The “ready school” movement is attempting to shift national attention away from children’s readiness for school and onto schools’ readiness for incoming kindergartners (National Education Goals Panel, 1998). One feature of “ready schools” is that they engage in practices that are effective in helping children and families as they make the transition into kindergarten. “Ready schools,” according to Pianta, Cox, Taylor, and Early (1999), have three characteristics: (a) they reach out, linking families, preschool settings, and communities with schools; (b) they reach backward in time, making connections before the first day of school, and (c) they reach with appropriate intensity. The practices that teachers employ as they help children and families make the transition to school are one important aspect of the school’s readiness for the incoming children. Thus, understanding the school, teacher, and classroom characteristics that are linked to optimal transition practices is important as educators work to improve transitions for young children. This paper aims to elucidate these important links.

Information is currently lacking to inform us as to which practices are most beneficial in aiding children as they make this transition; however, there are some strong, theoretically based indications. Love, Logue, Trudeau, and Thayer (1992) argue that key ingredients to a successful transition are “activities and events (over

and above the preschool and school programs) that are designed to overcome the discontinuities that may disrupt children’s learning and development” (p. 9). Although high-quality experiences prior to the beginning of school and a high-quality kindergarten program are critical to child success, some attention must also be given to the discontinuities between the settings. Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) conclude that the system of relationships among social contexts (including teachers, parents, and preschool care providers) is a critical predictor of successful transitions. Effective communication and regular contact among the various social contexts engender connectedness and flexibility, thereby promoting an optimal transition.

Pianta *et al.* (1999) used the National Center for Early Development and Learning’s (NCEDL) Transition Practices Survey, a nationally representative survey of kindergarten teachers, to describe the specific practices teachers use in facilitating the transition to kindergarten and the barriers they perceive to additional transition practices. They found that while almost all teachers reported some practices aimed at facilitating children’s transitions into kindergarten, practices that would be most effective—those that reach out, backward in time, and with appropriate intensity—are relatively rare. Group-oriented practices occurring after the beginning of the school year (e.g., open houses) are the most common, while practices that involve one-to-one contact with children and families and those occurring prior to the first day of school are rare. Additionally, Pianta *et al.* found that in urban schools and in areas with more poverty and/or a higher concentration of minority students, these individualized practices prior to the beginning of the school year are even less prevalent. The most common barriers cited by teachers to implementing additional transition practices were that class lists are generated too late, the practices involve summer work that is not supported by salary, and a lack of a transition plan in the district. These barriers are largely administrative,

¹Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27599.

²Curry School of Education, P.O. Box 800784, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia 22904.

³Department of Psychology, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina 29208.

⁴Correspondence should be directed to Diane M. Early, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, Campus Box 8040, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27599-8040; e-mail: diane_early@unc.edu

indicating that many schools may not be “ready” for kindergartners.

The current paper builds on and expands the work of Pianta *et al.* (1999). Data from the same survey are used to make between-group comparisons regarding the timing and intensity of the transition practices used by kindergarten teachers, linking practices to various teacher and classroom characteristics. Although Pianta *et al.* reported on individual transition practices, the current paper aggregates the practices to allow for comparisons between the prevalence of practices before versus after the beginning of the school year and between the prevalence of group versus individualized practices, as a function of teacher and classroom characteristics. The aggregation also provides information on the extent to which preschool and community settings are involved in this transition.

At the teacher level, experience, education, certification, training in transition facilitation, and race/ethnicity are used as predictors of transition practices. We might expect that teachers who are better prepared and more experienced would engage in more effective practices (i.e., earlier, more individualized) to support children’s transitions. At the classroom level, class size and the timing of the generation of class lists are used as predictors of transition practices. Effective practices require a great deal of time and effort. Large classes and late class lists may prevent teachers from engaging in the most effective practices by limiting the time and energy available. In linking transition practice use to teacher and classroom variables, this paper provides information on how transition practices can be enhanced.

METHOD

Overview

Data for this paper were collected as part of NCEDL’s Transition Practices Survey. For this survey, a questionnaire was mailed to a stratified, random sample of 10,071 kindergarten teachers in public schools throughout the United States. The sample was drawn from a commercially available, complete list of public school kindergarten teachers; 3,595 completed questionnaires were returned. All findings presented in this paper are weighted to provide national estimates. For a technical report of the sampling, response rates by cell, and weighting procedures, please contact the first author.

Questionnaire Design and Data Collection Procedures

The questionnaire’s content was developed by the authors, based on their earlier work and on the National

Transition Study (Love *et al.*, 1992). Feedback on the instrument was obtained from kindergarten teachers, a preschool program coordinator, the NCEDL Constituent Advisory Board, NCEDL Research Partners, and NCEDL Investigators.

All questionnaires were addressed to the teachers by name at their schools and were mailed during a period in late October 1996. Included with each questionnaire was a cover letter explaining the importance of the survey, how teachers were selected, information on how respondents could learn the survey’s results, and human subject’s approval information. Teachers were supplied with a postage-paid business reply envelope to use in returning the completed questionnaire. A reminder postcard was sent to all sample members approximately 1 week after the questionnaire was mailed. During the last half of November, a second copy of the questionnaire was mailed to teachers who had not yet responded.

Of the 10,071 questionnaires mailed, 3,595 completed questionnaires were returned. Additionally, we received 595 questionnaires from individuals who indicated that they were not kindergarten teachers and had therefore not completed the questionnaire and 50 questionnaires were returned to us as undeliverable by the post office. Thus, we know that a maximum of 9,426 kindergarten teachers received the survey. Our response of 3,595 represents 38% of that group.

Sample Characteristics

Detailed analyses of the teacher, classroom, and school characteristics of the sample are reported in Early, Pianta, and Cox (1999) and are summarized below. After weighting, 46.5% ($SE = 1.08$) of kindergarten teachers have a master’s degree or higher. Teachers have an average of 11.5 ($SE = 0.17$) years experience teaching kindergarten, with an additional 1.1 ($SE = 0.05$) years below kindergarten and 3.5 ($SE = 0.11$) years above kindergarten.

To determine teacher race/ethnicity, teachers were asked to check “the *one* category that best describes your race/ethnicity.” The choices and weighted responses were (a) American Indian or Native Alaskan (0.5%, $SE = 0.12$), (b) Asian/Pacific Islander (1.4%, $SE = 0.28$), (c) Black, not Hispanic (6.9%, $SE = 0.54$), (d) Hispanic (5.1%, $SE = 0.50$), (e) White, not Hispanic (79.8%, $SE = 0.82$), (f) Other (0.5%, $SE = 0.17$), and (g) Multiple origins (5.8%, $SE = 0.52$).

Representativeness of the Sample

The response rate is somewhat lower than anticipated based on work with a similar group of respondents (Early Childhood Follow-Through Research Institute,

1996). However, based on a comparison of our estimates with those from the National Center for Educational Statistics's Schools and Staffing Survey: 1993–1994, we believe our sample is largely representative of the nation's public school kindergarten teachers. See Early *et al.* (1999) for a detailed comparison of the two samples. After weighting, the samples look very similar with regard to most demographic variables; however, the teachers in our sample are somewhat more likely to have an advanced degree. Additionally, the percentage of minority students and the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced priced lunches in the classes of these kindergarten teachers are slightly higher than the School and Staffing Survey's national estimates for kindergarten teachers.

RESULTS

Analysis Plan

First, transition practices were aggregated for the entire sample. Next, *t* tests and correlations were conducted testing the relations between transition practice use and various types of teacher preparation, teacher race/ethnicity, class size, and timing of class list generation. Due to the large sample, only differences that were significant at $p < .01$ were interpreted.

Combining Transition Practices

The questionnaire asked teachers to indicate which of 20 possible transition practices they had used in the Fall of 1996. For each practice, teachers were asked to check if they “did not use,” “used for children with special needs,” “used for certain children,” or “used for the whole class.” See Pianta *et al.* (1999) for a description of the nonaggregated practices that teachers use in aiding children with this transition.

From these 20 transition practices, five aggregate measures were constructed, along theoretical lines. See Table I for the individual items that were combined into each aggregate measure and descriptive statistics. Each aggregate is a count of practices employed for any children (i.e., special needs, certain, or whole class). The major distinctions made in the measures are between practices that occur before versus after the beginning of the kindergarten school year and practices that are individualized for the child/family versus those aimed at the entire class. The fifth measure indicates the extent to which the teacher coordinates transition efforts with preschools or the community. Alpha coefficients can not be calculated because these are counts of reported behaviors. Because different measures have different maximum

values, comparisons across measures must use the “proportion of total,” calculated by dividing the score by the maximum for that count.

Aggregate Transition Practice Use

As indicated on Table I, teachers were least likely to use the most time-intensive practices: those that take place before school starts and involve individualized interaction/communication with a particular child/family. On average, teachers used only 29% of the total possible. Likewise, teachers reported using few practices involving “coordination with preschool programs and the community”; 36% of the total possible. The most commonly used practices were those that take place after the beginning of the school year and are aimed at the class as a whole: On average teachers used 65% of these practices.

How Do Teacher Experience and Training Relate to Transition Practices?

Teaching Experience. These data indicate that on average, after weighting, the nation's kindergarten teachers have 11.5 years ($SE = 0.17$) experience teaching at the kindergarten level. Correlations between the number of years a teacher has taught kindergarten and use of the various transition practices were mostly nonsignificant, indicating no relation between teaching experience and transition practice use. The only exception was that teachers with more experience use slightly fewer practices aimed at the whole group, after the beginning of the school year, $r(3510) = -.07$, $p < .01$.

Teacher Education. After weighting, 46.5% ($SE = 1.08$) of teachers reported having a master's or doctorate degree; 52.4% ($SE = 1.08$) reported having a bachelor's degree, and 1.1% ($SE = 0.22$) reported having either no degree or did not respond to this question. To test for differences in transition practices based on teacher education, three sets of *t* tests comparing each level of education to each other level were conducted for each of the five transition practice aggregates. These *t* tests were all nonsignificant, indicating that education level was not related to any of the measures of transition practice use.

Teacher Certification. Teachers were asked to: “Check the area(s) of specialization or certification you hold. This pertains to state-level certifications. Check all that apply.” This item was followed by a list of closed-ended choices and space to include “other” certifications. After weighting, 49.5% ($SE = 1.07$) of teachers checked “early childhood/primary grades” in the closed-ended portion of the question or wrote in that they had

Table I. Aggregated Transition Practice Items

Aggregate measure and individual items	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	Mean proportion of total
Practices that take place before the school year starts and involve individualized interaction with a particular child/family	0.87	0.01	0.29
A visit to the child's home before school starts			
A talk/meeting with the child's parents before school starts			
A call to the child before school starts			
Practices that take place before the school year starts and are aimed at the class as a whole	2.36	0.02	.59
A letter, flyer, or informational brochure sent to the child's parents before school starts			
A letter to the child sent before school starts			
An open house for parents and children before school starts			
Participation in kindergarten registration for my school or district			
Practices that take place after the school year starts and involve individualized interaction with a particular child/family	1.77	0.02	.44
A visit to the child's home after school starts			
A talk with the child's parents after school starts			
A call to the child after school starts			
Facilitate contacts between parents of children in my class			
Practices that take place after the school year starts and are aimed at the class as a whole	1.95	0.01	.65
A letter, flyer, or informational brochure sent to child's parents after school starts			
A letter to the child sent after school starts			
An open house for parents and children after school starts			
Coordination with preschool programs and the community	2.17	0.03	.36
Written records of child's past experiences or status are made available to me and I read them			
Visits to preschools and programs for four-year old in the community			
Informal contacts with preschool teachers about children			
Preschool teacher(s) bring next year's children to my classroom			
Regular meetings among school, early childhood, and preschool staff in the community			
Contacts made to develop a coordinated curriculum with preschool programs			

a kindergarten certification, kindergarten endorsement, or a K-1, K-2, or K-3 certification. Figure 1 depicts the average proportion of practices engaged in by teachers who do and do not hold primary certifications and *t* statistics comparing the two groups on the transition practice aggregates. Teachers with a primary certification use slightly more individualized practices, both before and after the beginning of the school year.

Training in Transitions to Kindergarten. Of teachers, 22.3% (*SE* = 0.91) reported having "specialized training to enhance children's transition *into kindergarten*" that included more than teaching experience. As seen in Figure 2, teachers with this specialized training, as compared with teachers without this training, report using more of all types of transition practices.

How Does the Teacher's Race/Ethnicity Relate to Transition Practice Use?

Figure 3 illustrates differences in transition practice use between teachers from different racial/ethnic groups. Between-group comparisons (*t* tests) were conducted for only the White, Black, and Hispanic teachers, due to the small sizes of the other groups. In general, the White teachers use more practices before the beginning of the

school year than the Black or Hispanic teachers, whereas Black teachers use more practices after the beginning of the school year than White teachers. Few differences were found between Black and Hispanic teachers' transition practices and no between-group differences were found in practices involving coordination with preschool programs and the community.

How Does Class Size Relate to Transition Practice Use?

After weighting, teachers report an average of 22.2 students (*SE* = 0.10) enrolled in their classes. Findings indicate that teachers of larger classes use fewer individualized practices before the beginning of the school year, $r(3506) = -.08, p < .001$ and fewer group practices before the beginning of the school year, $r(3518) = -.10, p < .001$. Class size was unrelated to any of the other types of transition practices.

How Does Timing of Class List Receipt Relate to Transition Practice Use?

Teachers were asked, "Approximately how many days before school started this year did you receive your

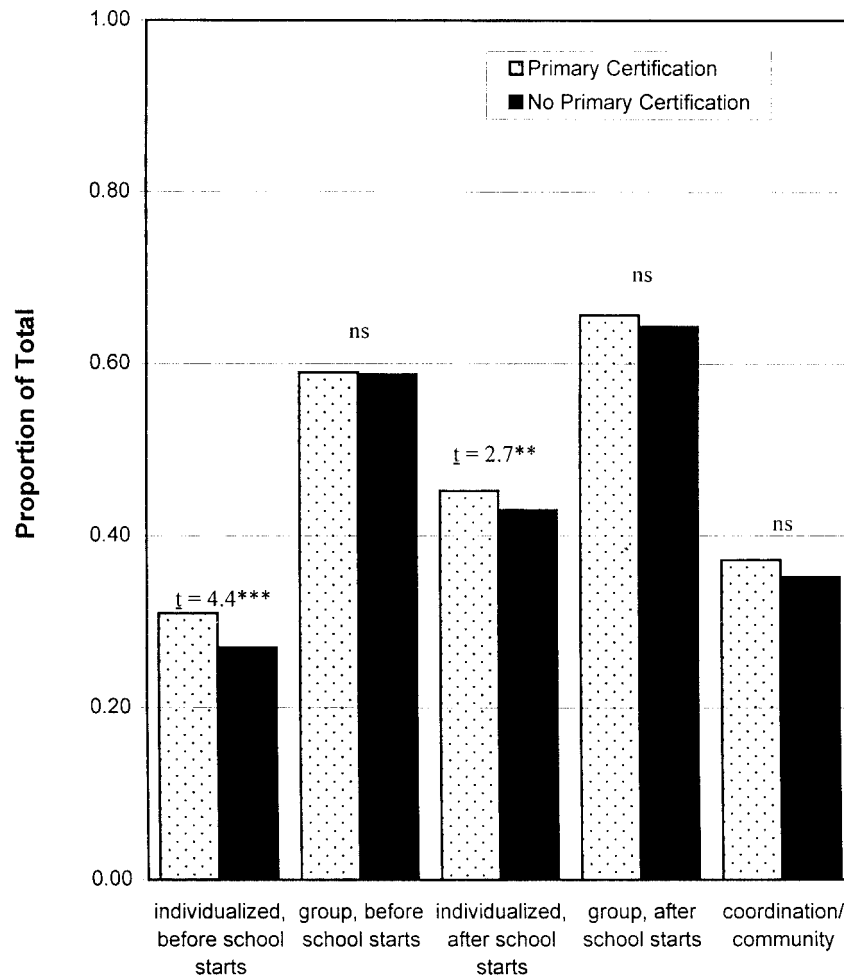


Fig. 1. Transition practice use by certification in primary education. Note: $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$, all t tests include over 3,000 df.

class list?” After weighting, teachers reported receiving their class lists an average of 15.4 days ($SE = 0.58$) before the first day of school. Zero-order correlations indicate that the timing of class list receipt was significantly related to four of the types of transition practices. Teachers who receive class lists earlier report using more transition practices before the school year starts, $r(3400) = .06$, $p < .01$ for those aimed at the individual child/family; $r(3411) = .19$, $p < .001$ for those aimed at the whole class, and fewer transition practices after the beginning of the school year, $r(3412) = -.06$, $p < .01$ for those aimed at the individual child/family; $r(3410) = -.08$, $p < .001$ for those aimed at the whole class. There was no relationship between class list receipt and transition practices involving coordination with preschool programs and the community.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings presented in this study indicate that the most common types of transition practices occur after the beginning of the school year and are aimed at the class as a whole. Transition practices that occur while the child is still in the preschool setting and those that are aimed at individual children and families are less common. Practices involving coordination with preschool programs and the community are also relatively rare. Thus, on average, transition practices are far from optimal.

Optimal transition practices are challenging to implement. Transition activities before the beginning of the school year require more preparation on the part of the teacher and school (e.g., class lists must be generated,

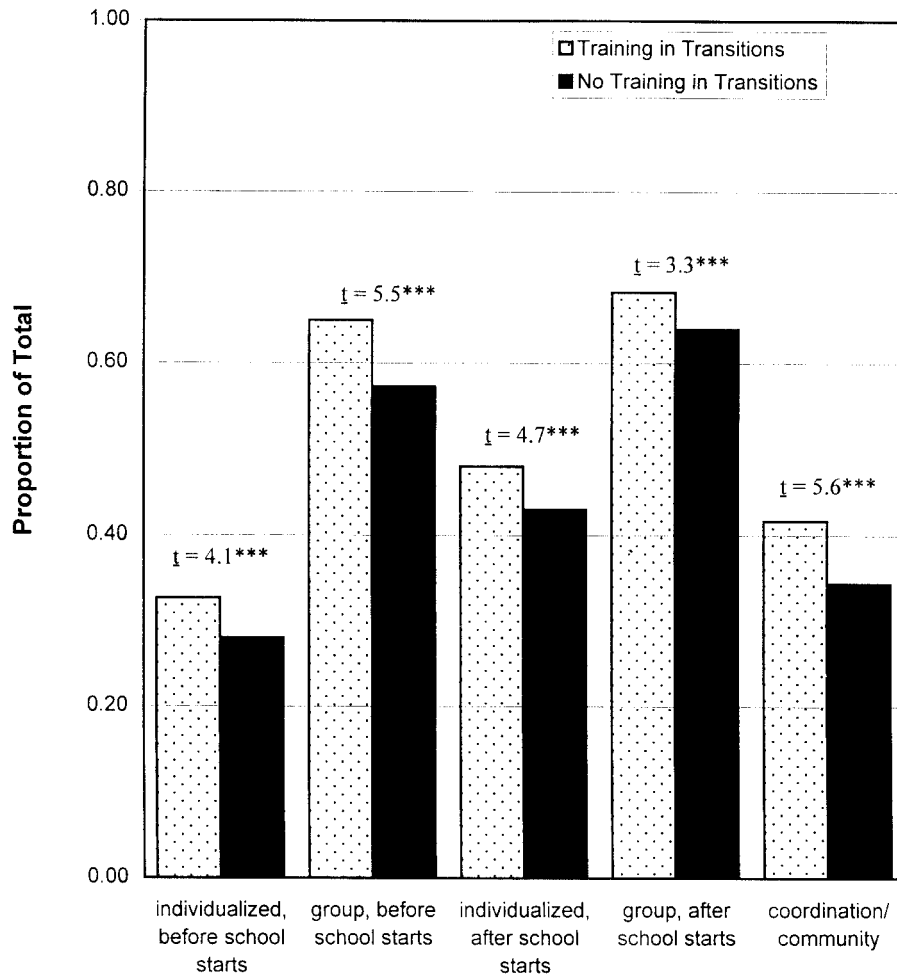


Fig. 2. Transition practice use by teacher training in transition practices. Note: ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, all t tests include over 3,000 df.

children and families phone numbers/addresses must be known) and either additional funds for teacher pay or unpaid time donated by teachers. Likewise, practices involving individualized interaction with a child or family require more time and planning than practices involving the entire class simultaneously. Communication and coordination with preschool settings is challenging because it requires knowledge of the incoming class and their preschool settings, time and willingness on the part of the preschool programs, and coordination with many different programs. Thus, it is not surprising that optimal transition practices are the least commonly employed.

The present data help us understand some specific reasons for the heavy reliance on practices aimed at the entire group that occur after the beginning of the school year. Teachers who receive their class lists late are less likely to use transition practices before the start of the

school year. The current survey also asked for teachers to indicate barriers they perceive to engaging in additional transition practices and "class lists are generated too late" was the most commonly cited barrier (Pianta *et al.*, 1999). The current finding indicates that teachers not only perceive this as a barrier, it is also related to their behavior.

The link between class list generation and transition practice use is surely the result of the logistical difficulty of contacting families and children prior to school with little or no notification of who those families are. It points to a systemic barrier preventing improved transitions for kindergartners. The school is requiring that the transition be an abrupt one. Although family mobility and late registration prevent schools from making early assignments for all children, if schools assigned at least some children to kindergarten classrooms earlier, teach-

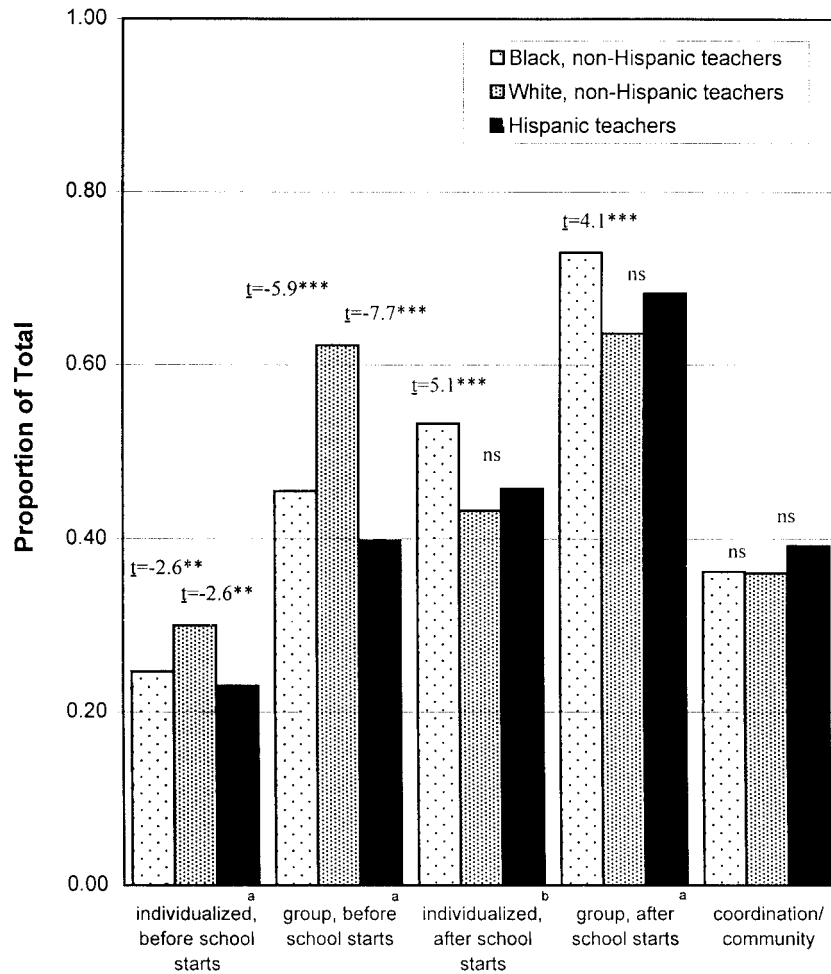


Fig. 3. Transition practice use by teacher race/ethnicity. Note: The *t* tests and associated *p* values comparing each pair of neighboring subgroups are indicated above each pair. The *p* values for *t* tests comparing Black, non-Hispanic teachers with Hispanic teachers are indicated in the footnotes: ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001.

^aNo significant difference between Black and Hispanic teachers.

^bSignificant difference between Black and Hispanic teachers, *t*(435) = 2.7, *p* < .01.

ers would be more able to create a transition process, rather than a transition event.

Class size is also related to the timing of transition practices. Teachers with more students use fewer practices before the beginning of the school year, probably because of the strain associated with larger classes. Initiating transition activities before the beginning of the school year requires more effort and planning; large classes also require more effort and planning. Teachers with large classes elect not to engage in optional extra work prior to the beginning of the school year, possibly because their required preparation is already so taxing.

Strikingly, the largest between-group differences were between teachers who had and had not received

training in transitions. Teachers with such training were more likely to use all types of transition practices, apparently seeing some value in approaching transitions from a variety of angles. They start before the beginning of the school year, creating a longer transition period. They make efforts to use individualized practices as well as group-oriented events. They involve the child's pre-school setting—using the information provided by that setting and coordinating curricula and goals with that setting. Few teachers have such training, but these data indicate that it may be valuable in encouraging more comprehensive transition practices.

Some differences were found when the transition practices used by White teachers were compared to

those of Black and Hispanic teachers, while comparisons between Black and Hispanic teachers yielded few differences. White teachers were more likely to use both group and individualized practices before the beginning of the school year than either Black or Hispanic teachers. The significant differences in transition practices between White and Black/Hispanic teachers may be a result of the different contexts in which they teach. Using data from the same national survey, Early *et al.* (1999) found that Black and Hispanic teachers are more likely to be teaching in high-needs, low-resource, urban environments than their White counterparts. Pianta *et al.* (1999) reported that schools with few resources are least likely to engage the high-intensity practices that would likely facilitate the smoothest transitions for children. Interpretations of the effects of teacher ethnicity on transition practices must consider the reality that economic and social conditions vary across settings and are likely to influence teacher attitudes and behaviors.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Optimal transitions to kindergarten for children are best supported by practices that are individualized and engage the child, family, and preschool setting prior to the first day of school. Unfortunately, these high-intensity practices are also the most time consuming and least likely to be used by kindergarten teachers. Encouragingly, teachers who have training in transitions are more likely to use all types of transition practices and teachers who get their class lists earlier and have smaller enrollments are more likely to use the higher intensity practices. Thus, teacher training, earlier class list generation, and smaller classes are all avenues to explore for improving transition practices. Other researchers have documented that how children adapt to their earliest school experiences has long-term implications for cognitive and social development and for high school dropout (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992). The findings from this study point to clear areas for intervention

for schools attempting to create more “ready” environments for children entering kindergarten.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The work reported herein was supported under the Educational Research and Development Center Program, PR/Award Number R307A60004, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, or the U.S. Department of Education, and endorsement by the Federal government should not be assumed. Portions of this manuscript were presented at the April 1998 meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.

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