



Research Grants Final Report Form

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- Institution: University of Edinburgh
- Project title: Supporting migrant, refugee and BME children's transitions to primary school
- Project start date: April 2017
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1) Overview.

This study used a mixed methods approach to investigate the primary school transition experiences of black and minority ethnic (BME), migrant and refugee children and their families in one large urban setting in Scotland. The study was undertaken in partnership with a local charity called the Multi-Cultural Family Base (MCFB). The study aimed to identify the challenges faced by this group of young children and their families as they transition from early years to primary school. It also explored the approaches used to lessen these challenges. The study found there was little awareness among staff about Froebelian principles. However, we were able to identify that some of the key Froebelian principles were being used, although this was not always recognised by workers and organisations. The most prominent principles were: respect, community, and learning and development (with an emphasis on relationships). The data collection for the study involved mixed qualitative methods including: 10 observations of 3 different transition groups, interviews with 8 families (3 families had children with disabilities), interviews with 5 children (1 child had a disability), 1 parent focus group with 6 mothers (3 of these mothers had disabled children), 1 child focus group with 8 children, 11 professional interviews (ESL, schools, nurseries, voluntary sector). The study found that BME, migrant and refugee children experience multiple, complex and concurrent transition experiences which significantly increase the stress and anxiety associated with starting school. Families and professionals had a range of suggestions about best practice in transition support including: peer support for parents, enhanced enrolment and support for children to make friends. Recommendations for change included: increasing the diversity of parent councils, ensuring more shared pedagogical approaches and philosophies between early years and primary; developing a stronger policy focus for transitions; better planning and support for children with disabilities and to understand better intersecting challenges and strengths for families; bringing insights from Froebel into transitions work with an increasing focus on creativity, and environment.

2) The Grant. Please provide a summary outlining what you have achieved during the grant period, and assessing the progress of your research in comparison to your original proposal, detailing any changes in objectives, procedures or locations.

Our original plan was to follow a cohort of 6 to 8 BME and migrant children who were accessing MCFB transition support over a 9 month period. Although we did embed a participant observer in three different transition groups for six months, staff changes and delays did not allow us to follow all of these children up through play based interviews and interviews with their parents two months after they had moved to primary school. We also planned to follow up children who had come through the transition programme in the last two years in order to obtain a further sample of 5

children. In total our study aimed to involve between 10 to 15 migrant and BME children and their families.

Although we were not able to obtain these two distinct and discreet samples we were able conduct interviews with 8 families (3 families had children with disabilities), interviews with 5 children (1 child had a disability), 1 parent focus group with 6 mothers (3 of these mothers had disabled children), 1 child focus group with 8 children.

We also planned to carry out 7 interviews with professionals working in the both early years and primary school settings. In the end we interview 11 professional and included a wider range of professionals that we originally planned. We responded to the discovery during the research that we needed to look beyond just those working in schools and nurseries to those in ESL, early years policy, and the voluntary sector.

3) Research activity. Please detail the specifics of the research undertaken, including sources and/or methods used, and problems encountered.

As detailed in the summary and previous section. We used all of the methods originally planned for. However, to facilitate greater engagement with parents we also included a focus group with 6 mothers and a play based focus group with 8 children.

4) Conclusions and achievements. Please describe the extent to which objectives were met, the conclusions reached, the degree to which an original contribution to theoretical and/or practical knowledge has been achieved, and an assessment of the significance for other research in the field.

Our initial review of the literature had identified that little is known about the transition experiences of BME, migrant and refugee children. Our further review of the literature during the study period confirmed this fact, supporting our initial hypothesis that this is a group of children and families whose experiences of transition need to be better understood (Brooker 2002; Candappa et al. 2007; McBride 2018).

The key objectives of the study were to:

1. Develop understanding of the transition needs of children from migrant and BME communities

As highlighted in the overview, our study was able to explore in depth the transition needs of this group of children and their families. The range of concurrent transitions experienced by families during the transition to primary school included: adjusting to a new culture, insecure and inappropriate housing, problems with travel and getting to and from school, changes to family configurations and family conflict, adjusting to a new and unfamiliar language. These transitions were further complicated by the fact that many families faced: concerns about their immigration status and their future in the UK; experienced racism and in some cases violence in the community; were experiencing grief associated with separation from wider family and were worried about friends and family not in the UK; and for the refugee families many were experiencing post-traumatic stress and/or mental health difficulties.

2. Identify what theories and practice methods are being used in transition work with these children and to what extent these incorporate Freobelian principles
3. Identify which of these practice methods are seen by children, their families, early years workers and primarily school teachers to be most effective

Despite the many challenges experienced by these families during transition to school, our study found that many of the children and families had very positive experiences of transition support and spoke highly about support from a range of services (including nurseries, schools, EAL services support, and the charity MCFB). Many remarked on the respect they were shown and how this was different to what they had experienced in their home countries. However, parents of children with disabilities and additional support needs had a much more difficult time and felt let down by nurseries, schools and social work. They identified significant problems with: delays in diagnosis; lack of appropriate or adequate disability support in nursery and school; stress, anxiety and grief related to the child's disability and stigma in the community because of their child's disability; cases being closed too soon by social work. It proved harder than we imagined to illicit detailed feedback from children about their experiences of transition. However, the one issue children did speak about a great deal was friendship and the importance of friends in helping them to settle into school. Families identified the following practices as 'things that make transitions easier':

- an awareness by families and staff that transition takes time and every child will have a different transition process
- moving from a nursery that is on the same site as the primary school; visiting the school and meeting the teacher and other staff multiple times
- regular feedback from the school and opportunities to ask questions
- enhanced registration which included: individual meetings with staff from the school to discuss the child, information about other supports including language classes, parenting support and health advice
- peer support from other parents
- child planning meetings
- being flexible and individualised in planning for children and considering the whole child, not just their educational needs
- listening to and including parents, they know their children and they may need support to support their children
- fostering friendships among all children (buddies, group work, clubs and after school support were all said to be helpful for this)
- language support for children and parents
- sensitivity to the trauma children and families may have experienced;
- addressing racism and bullying inside and outside of school.

5) Learning. Please provide your personal evaluation of the research project, including any lessons learned, which elements have more successful and which have been less successful.

It is a challenge to discuss transition experiences with children who are often very focused on the present moment. Our original methodology, which planned to follow a group of children during their transition, would probably have allowed a greater depth of data from the perspective of children themselves. We regret that not all of these children could be followed up due to changes with staff and the mobility of the group of children themselves. McNair's (2016) small scale longitudinal study of transitions was inspiring in its approach and we plan to write in detail about the strengths and weaknesses of our methodology for studying transitions in a future journal article. We also feel that observations in early years and primary school settings would also been helpful in capturing direct practice with children.

Despite these methodological limitations, we were still able to gain a great deal of rich material, particularly from parents and professionals, about the challenges of transition and what seems to mitigate these challenges.

Engagement with our knowledge exchange events has been excellent and the feedback we have received suggests that this study has already raised awareness about the needs of this particular group. The specific detail about how Froebelian theory might enhance practice needs further development and the project team plan to carry out a further workshop with MCFB in April to reflect on the operation of the transition groups and consider how they might be enhanced and developed with reference to Froebelian principles. We will also be writing up our reflections on this for publication in an academic journal.

6) Ethical issues. Did you encounter any ethical issues during the grant period, and if so, how did you overcome these?

We worked closely with MCFB and translators to ensure children and families will informed about the aims and purpose of our research and were enabled to make an informed choice about participation. It was also very helpful to have MCFB involved with the families to offer ongoing support as many of the situations and challenges they described were very concerning.

7) Implications. What are the implications for this work? Please include details of any anticipated changes to policy and/or practice as a result of this research.

Our key recommendations for developing transitions practice, based on interviews with all respondents and our observations, include:

- ensuring more even availability of transition support, practice varies throughout Scotland;
- better evaluation is need of transitions work with parents and (crucially) children
- improving reflection upon and evaluation of transitions practice – are we focused on children who are ‘ready’ for school or schools that are ‘ready for children’?
- increasing the ethical and cultural diversity of Parent Councils and teaching staff
- ensuring more shared pedagogical approaches and philosophies between early years and primary – playful learning that ‘extends thinking’
- developing a stronger policy focus for transitions;
- better planning and support for children with disabilities and to understand better intersecting challenges and strengths for families;
- bringing insights from Froebel into transitions work with an increasing focus on creativity, and environment.

Our study has identified the complexity of transition experiences for this group of children and their families, making it very clear that there is an ongoing need for holistic support. Examples of good practice such as enhanced enrolment exists and could be rolled out across Scotland, but the value and importance of this work needs to be shared more widely. At the moment provision continues to be very dependent on where you live.

As already discussed in the overview, Froebelian theory was not well known among the practitioners we spoke to. This suggests to us that there is a real need to explore the contribution of Froebelian theory and practice in transitions work more generally and we believe this would be an excellent way of introducing more primary school practitioners to a theorist who is best known among early years practitioners.

In parts of Scotland there is a major move towards a more play based pedagogy for P1 pupils. This was introduced in Edinburgh during the period of our study. This is an interesting development and links to one of our key recommendations: ensuring more shared pedagogical approaches and philosophies between early years and primary. While this is exciting, many primary school practitioners we have spoken to have identified that they have had little training in play based approaches to learning. Brooker (2002) rightfully highlights that playful learning must be purposeful and 'extend thinking'; this requires training and opportunities for critical reflection on practice. We have made this point at all three of our knowledge exchange events and will engage further with staff at Moray House School of Education to share our findings and suggestions.

We also plan to seek follow on funding to further explore the needs of children with disabilities from BME, migrant and refugee communities. Our small study has highlighted the plight of some of these families, but further work is needed to understand the challenges they face and capture examples of good practice.

8) Other funding. Have any other funding bodies supported this research project? If yes, please provide details.

The ESRC Festival of Social Science provided £1,000 for the knowledge exchange events we held from the 3rd to the 10th of November 2018. This raised the profile of the research and made it accessible to a wider audience including BME, migrant and refugee families and their children.

9) Publications and other outputs. Please provide a list of any publications which have already appeared, been accepted for publication or are to be submitted for publication and give details of any other sort of dissemination of the results of the research, which has taken place or is planned (i.e. lectures, seminars, conferences, exhibitions). Copies of publications should include acknowledgement of Froebel Trust support and should be sent as attachments with this report.

So far we have had three Knowledge Exchange events to disseminate the findings of this research.

The first was a public exhibition of children's art work, and a public lecture and lunch with parallel play activities for children at the MacDonald Road Library in Edinburgh funded by the ESRC Festival of Social Science (3-10 November 2018). 25 adults and 16 children attended the public lecture and arts activities. 5160 people passed by the exhibition that was in the foyer of McDonald Road library (they have a football counter at the door). Feedback from participants on the day was very positive. One parent, who had participated in the study, was tearful and thanked me for sharing this research with her and other parents and with the wider community. There was good coverage of the event on social media.

The second event was at the Scottish Parliament, 50 policy makers, practitioners, family members and several politicians attended. The feedback on the event was excellent, with good coverage on social media.

The third event was a seminar at the University of Edinburgh, attending by 30 practitioners and researchers from across Scotland. Feedback was very positive and participants suggested they would appreciate further input related to the research.

10) Future plans. Please describe any future research plans in this field for those involved in the project.

The findings of the study will be shared further at a three-day international conference on Children's Wellbeing at the University of Stirling in September 2019.

The authors are currently working on what they hope will be the first of several publications related to the findings of the study on the theory and practice of transitions work, drawing on Froebelian theory and principles.

The project team also plans to support MCFB in a bid to undertake further training in the Froebelian approach and we will be undertaking a workshop with their team to initiate further reflection on their practice and help them plan their next steps.

As noted previously, the project team hope to secure funding to investigate further the needs of children with disabilities from a BME, migrant and/or refugee background. The work would also consider the interface between early years policy and practice and social work policy and practice, an area that has been neglected in research, policy and practice.