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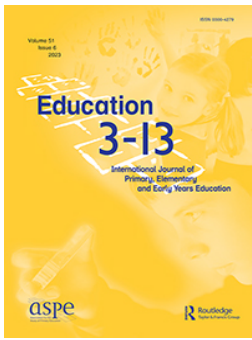


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Transition Class: A Bridge from Early Intervention to Early Childhood Special Education

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ABSTRACT

Transitions are widely acknowledged to present challenges for young children with special needs. In the US system, the transition from early intervention (EI; services for children aged 0–3) to early childhood special education services (ECSE; services for preschool children) is a process known to cause uncertainty and anxiety for families. This paper describes a transition class offered by a midwestern US EI agency; children receiving EI services are eligible to participate beginning at age 2;6. Agency personnel chart the children's progress each week. For this study, researchers reviewed de-identified weekly progress reports for the 40 transition class participants who attended at least 6 class sessions. Class participants demonstrated highly significant changes across time in their tolerance for separation from parents/caregivers and their participation in structured class activities. These preliminary findings suggest that a structured class with familiar service providers may support young children in acquiring skills they will need for a successful transition to ECSE.

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Early intervention; transition; early childhood special education; preschool

Braden's mother Gina looks worried when she greets the early intervention therapist. 'I was talking to my neighbor about what happened when her son aged out of early intervention and went to preschool', she says. 'She said he took the bus! I am not putting Braden on a bus. And even though he's been working hard with you in therapy, I don't know how he's going to do in a classroom with a bunch of other kids. A preschool teacher can't just follow his lead the way you do. I don't think this is going to go well'.

The therapist smiles. 'Today seems like a good day to talk about a program we offer at the agency', she said. 'It's called transition class'.

Why is transition challenging?

In the US system, early intervention (EI) service providers see children with developmental concerns until they are 3 years old, at which point they make the transition into the educational system, often receiving early childhood special education (ECSE) services. Many families receiving EI services share the anxiety described in this composite vignette about the transition process; these concerns are well-documented in the scholarly literature on transition (Brandes, Ormsbee, and Haring 2007; Coogler, Guerette, and Hanline 2013; Hanson et al. 2000; Lovett and Haring 2003; Mahurin-Smith 2022). The recommended practices of the US Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC) include information for service providers on supporting the families of children

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with delays and disabilities as they prepare for transition. Specifically, they recommend that (1) 'practitioners in sending and receiving programs exchange information before, during, and after transition about practices most likely to support the child's successful adjustment and positive outcomes', and (2) 'practitioners use a variety of planned and timely strategies with the child and family before, during, and after the transition to support successful adjustment and positive outcomes for both the child and family' (DEC 2014, 16).

These supports are important because the transition out of EI involves substantial changes: a family accustomed to home-based services must make the transition to school-based services; parents familiar with the process of developing intervention goals that reflect their family's own priorities may be taken aback by a school district's emphasis on educationally focused goals. For parents, the transition process can stir feelings of abandonment and anxiety which they are reluctant to discuss with their EI service providers (Lovett and Haring 2003). Coogle, Guerette, and Hanline (2013) reported that many parents in their study felt there was insufficient support available to them during the transition process. Many children with special needs struggle with transitions, a finding particularly prominent among (but not limited to) children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Scholars of transition have suggested that in pursuit of the goal of building these strong connections it is valuable for service providers to provide explicit supports to children and families who are preparing to exit EI and transition into early childhood special education (ECSE) classrooms. Some authors have proposed that personnel responsible for the EI/ECSE transition should directly teach children the skills they will need in a preschool classroom (Levy and Perry 2008; Rous, Teeters Myers, and Buras Stricklin 2007). According to Brandes, Ormsbee, and Haring (2007), these skills fall into four different categories: social skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, and pre-academic skills (205).

This paper reports initial results from a programme called transition class, designed in alignment with DEC recommended practices for the purpose of directly teaching the skills essential for transition. In a small-group setting, it provides explicit supports across multiple domains to prepare children and families for participation in ECSE classrooms.

What is transition class?

Gina laughs when she first hears about transition class. 'Listen, it would be great if Braden the Whirling Dervish would sit down and color with the other kids. But did you forget what happened the day Braden's big sister left her art supplies out? Remember when I wound up calling poison control and having to repaint that section of the living room? Braden doesn't really do sitting still or coloring'.

The therapist laughs in return, 'That was quite a day! But plenty of kids come to transition class who aren't big on sitting still or coloring. We understand that's a normal part of being 2, especially for kids with developmental concerns'.

The transition class described in this paper is sponsored by an EI agency in a small city in the state of Illinois, in the midwestern US. When local EI participants reach the age of 30 months, they become eligible to participate in the class. Families are not required to participate, but if they opt in, their child attends transition class once each week for up to 6 months in one of the agency's classrooms. Typically, the agency offers classes on two different mornings each week to accommodate a larger number of transitioning clients and to offer some schedule flexibility to families. Almost all transition class participants are between the ages of 30–35 months, because most children discontinue their transition class participation when they turn 3.¹

Transition class offers a bridge between the home- or childcare-based setting that EI clients are used to and the preschool classroom they will shortly attend, with a focus on the domains that represent concerns for many families approaching the EI/ECSE transition. Agency staff track target behaviours across each class session to monitor growth across time. For example, one of these targets is separation. Separation anxiety is common in toddlers and preschoolers; it can be more challenging

to manage in children with language and/or cognitive delays, who may be less able to understand a preschool teacher's encouragement that their parents will be back in a few hours (Klette and Killén 2018; Mian et al. 2012). It is common for parents of children exiting EI to express concerns about leaving a child with developmental delays in an unfamiliar building with unfamiliar staff for multiple hours. Transition class targets smooth separations by encouraging regular brief opportunities for separation practice: the clients come to the agency once per week and leave their parents in the waiting room for 75 minutes. The separation process is facilitated through the presence of familiar staff and toys. Many of the transition class teachers have been visiting the families' homes or child-care centers as EI therapists for months prior to the transition class. By incorporating trusted adults and familiar objects within the transition class environment, children can focus on learning the new routines and expectations of the classroom environment, allowing better preparation for the official transition to an ECSE classroom.

A second important behavioural target in transition class is active participation in classroom routines. Transition class offers a blend of structured activities and free play, which can be helpful for EI clients who are accustomed to therapy sessions that feature a preponderance of child-led activities. While children are arriving, they can choose appealing toys to play with. Once everyone is present, they engage in a circle time activity. Here they practice greetings, using whichever communication modality is most effective for them (i.e. spoken language, sign, or an AAC device). Class time also typically includes a simple craft, tailored to the fine motor skills and the attention spans of the 2-year-old participants, and a snack. Interspersed among these more structured activities are opportunities for additional free play. The teachers keep track of children's participation in these routines, noting whether they move from one activity to another independently or require assistance to shift their focus.

A third behavioural target addressed in transition class, as described in Brandes, Ormsbee, and Haring (2007), is effective use of social language for problem-solving. Mahurin-Smith (2022) reported that many transition class clients are simultaneously tackling social language goals in therapy, and that their parents found these new skills to be especially helpful. Transition class offers EI clients the chance to practice social language skills with peers while receiving support from a trusted adult. If two transition class clients are squabbling over a toy during free play, for instance, one of the teachers can facilitate a negotiation, modeling responses with simple, appropriate language (e.g. 'my turn now?' or 'trade?' or 'no thanks') and intervening promptly to minimise escalation. Transition class affords many opportunities for teachers to model social language in their interactions with each other and with other children, providing many chances for children to see the power of simple phrases or signs in making their preferences known and improving temporarily frustrating circumstances.

The benefits of a transition class extend beyond the children; transition classes for children in early intervention have been found to benefit their parents as well (Hartle, Lorio, and Kosharek 2021; Mahurin-Smith 2022). In a qualitative study of parents receiving transition services through the same EI agency included in the current study (Mahurin-Smith 2022), an unexpected finding surfaced: multiple parents stated that the 75-minute waiting room time was valuable for them. One said, 'the nice thing is is when they're in the transition class, you're able to sit there and talk with the other moms, so I already felt, you know, included'. Parents reported that it was an opportunity for them to build relationships with other families whose children were heading into ECSE classrooms. Parents were able to connect over shared anxieties and offer encouragement, support, and suggestions to each other.

Tracking transition class outcomes

Gina looks worried as she brings Braden to his fifth transition class. 'I don't know how this is going to go today', she said. 'I'm a little embarrassed to see that other kid's mom in the waiting room after Braden flipped his lid last week. How long does it take for them to settle in?'

The therapist is reassuring. 'One of the important parts of transition class is teaching kids how to handle disagreements with others. He's making good progress.'

Gina isn't convinced. 'It seems to be a little better and then a little worse, a little better and then a little worse. Sometimes it's hard to be patient with the process'.

'Yep', says the therapist. 'That's why we keep track of how they're doing every time, so we can see the big picture'.

Transition class teachers chart children's progress across time, tracking multiple outcomes for each child during each class. Their charting system is flexible, allowing for some variation in which items are charted to reflect children's varying needs. They use fairly simple numerical ratings, with additional brief written comments as needed. For example, separation from parent is rated on a 3-point scale (1 = easy, 2 = sad, 3 = crying).

Unsurprisingly, reactions to the transition class vary widely both within and across children. A child might separate easily on the first day, not knowing that they were about to spend 75 min away from a parent, and struggle more with the separation during the second and third weeks. Across time, transition class teachers typically observe improvement in the domains under consideration. As with many emerging skills, progress can be slow and uneven, with changes representing progress rather than mastery. Transition class staff know that it is not unusual for class participants to need some continued supports even after regular class attendance. This observation could be helpful for parents who wonder why their child continues to experience occasional separation difficulties or issues with following a classroom routine, and to assist with setting reasonable expectations for the adjustment to the ECSE setting.

Method

This study included analysis of de-identified, retrospective data from multiple transition classes conducted by a local EI agency. After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval for this study, the first author and a team of student research assistants collaborated with the EI agency staff to retrieve de-identified records for all recent transition class participants. Because these records contained no identifying data, participant consent was not obtained.

The data from 40 children who attended at least 6 transition classes through the EI agency were included in the current study. Among these 40 children the mean number of classes attended was 10.7 (SD = 5.1; range = 6-26); the median was 10. The data on the children's ability to separate from their parents and their ability to follow classroom routines were extracted from each participants' record.

Initial data collection

The data included in this study were originally collected by transition class staff during class activities. Although staff collected data on multiple developmental outcomes for each child, the current study included only two specific measures that are known to be associated with skills needed for smooth transitions to preschool classrooms (Appl, Hoffman, and Hughes 2017): separation from parent, rated on a 3-point scale (1 = easy, 2 = sad, 3 = crying), and following routine, assessed on a 4-point scale (1 = independent, 2 = verbal cues required, 3 = visual/picture cues required, 4 = direct assistance). Transition class staff record their ratings on paper evaluation sheets, which were later de-identified by agency staff and provided to the research team for data extraction.

Data analysis

Preliminary review of the extracted data indicated that children's reactions to the transition class varied widely from class to class. For this reason, the data for separation across the first three classes and the last three classes were averaged. To assess changes in children's ability to follow the class routine, where missing ratings were more prevalent, the data across the first two classes

and the last two classes were averaged. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to assess for change across time.

Results

Across the 40 children who attended at least 6 transition classes, the mean rating for separation across the first three classes was 1.67 (SD = 0.69) on a 3-point scale where 1 = easy, 2 = sad, and 3 = crying. The mean rating across the final three classes was 1.22 (SD = 0.47). A Wilcoxon signed rank test yielded highly significant results, $V = 312.5$, $p = .003$. The mean initial rating across the first two classes for following classroom routines was 1.99 (SD = 0.73) on a 4-point scale where 1 = independent, 2 = verbal cues, 3 = visual/picture cues, and 4 = direct assistance. The mean final rating was 1.68 (SD = 0.47). Here, too, a Wilcoxon signed rank test yielded highly significant results, $V = 215$, $p = .004$.

Discussion

Transition class participation was associated with highly significant changes in children's ability to separate contentedly from their parents and participation in structured classroom routines. Although data on other developmental outcomes were not analysed in this study, the child's ability to separate from a parent and then participate in classroom routines are critical to benefitting from interventions for other developmental skills in a classroom setting. By quickly separating from the parent and joining the classroom routine, the child has more time to focus on building more advanced skills through their interactions with classroom staff and peers. The tactic of identifying foundational skills needed in the preschool setting (e.g. separation for parents and participation in routines), and then teaching those skills explicitly to children prior to entering an ECSE classroom is supported by the existing literature (Levy and Perry 2008) and may prove useful for other EI agencies as they facilitate families' transitions into a school-based setting.

Designing a transition class

There are many ways to design and implement a transition class, and for some, the transition class will depend on the specific needs of the enrolled children. We recommend designing a transition class that highlights the needs of both the child and their family, focusing on skills the children will need in a preschool classroom and strategies to lessen the burden of the transition process on the family. The transition class described here provides an incremental strategy for addressing some of the difficult aspects of EI/ECSE transition identified by Brandes, Ormsbee, and Haring (2007). Specifically, these authors wrote about the impact on families due to changes in (1) where therapy is conducted, (2) how families are involved, and (3) what service providers expect. With regard to the first difficulty, although the services are center-based rather than home-based, the service providers themselves are often familiar to participants and families in the transition class. This familiarity may lessen the impact of the new environment outside the home, allowing the child to focus on building skills needed for their participation in an ECSE classroom. Second, although parents are not in the room for transition class, they are nearby in the event of prolonged separation difficulties. The small class size and short class duration allow service providers to provide families with a thorough and individualised debriefing about the day's activities and the child's engagement, which maintains the family's continued involvement in their child's interventions.

Third and finally, these classes provide children with the opportunity to work in small groups towards joint goals with individualised support from service providers. Children can learn what their future ECSE teachers will expect from them in the classroom setting, and these expectations can be shared with families as well. For example, during circle time, each child is invited to share his/her name with the other class participants. For children with stronger language abilities, this

expectation is straightforward. For children with communication impairments who rely on augmentative/alternative communication (AAC) devices, the facilitator can provide aided language modeling (i.e. asking 'what's your name?' on the child's device) while also offering any necessary assistance to a child who may still be learning to provide prompt responses. As they will in a preschool classroom, participants respond to a shared expectation with individualised supports, and through the transition class, children and parents can learn these expectations and prepare as needed.

Limitations

There is minimal research on transition classes for children aging out of early intervention. As such, this study contributes to this limited literature base and provides the field with suggestions for designing and implementing transition classes in community-based settings. However, limitations exist in the current study and must be acknowledged. First, this study relied on data collected as part of service provision at an EI agency. Since timely and equitable access to services is part of the agency's mission, it was not possible to include a control group; thus, no definitive conclusions can be drawn about whether the changes observed in transition class participants were the result of transition class programming or were merely a function of maturation. Furthermore, the implementation of the transition class was not guided or monitored by a research team; therefore, measures of implementation fidelity (i.e. fidelity of the EI agency staff's implementation of the transition class) and inter-rater reliability measurements (i.e. reliability of staff's ratings of children's separation from parents and following routines) were not collected. Additionally, these findings are restricted to the subset of 40 children who attended at least 6 transition classes. Consequently, any children who found separation from their parents or the fairly structured nature of the class to be overwhelming may not be represented here.

Future research

The results of this study highlight multiple areas for future research. Given the success noted with the children's separation from parents and their ability to follow classroom routines, future research should analyse these outcomes alongside other developmental skills (e.g. language, fine motor skills, etc.) that are being targeted in the classroom setting. Analysing how a child's ability to separate and follow routines correlates with their other developmental skills may support the need for opportunities like the transition class described in the current study. Building a child's ability and confidence to separate from their parent and follow routines prior to entering an ECSE classroom may better prepare them for the official transition, allowing them to quickly acclimate to the new classroom environment and engage in activities that support their overall development. Future research should monitor children's progress beginning from early intervention, through a transition class, and finally within the ECSE classroom to better understand the impact of a transition class.

To increase access and possibly funding for transition classes, researchers may also consider analysing the impact of a transition class conducted at a school site instead of at the EI agency site. Facilitating a transition class at the school the child will be attending may improve the final transition to the ECSE classroom because the child will get hands-on experience within the environment in which they will eventually transition. A transition class that includes the ECSE teachers may also be beneficially, allowing the child to meet and establish trust with their new teacher prior to transitioning to that classroom. There are currently no set guidelines for conducting transition classes or facilitating the transition from EI to ECSE. With continued research, the field can identify best practices that are aligned to the specific, individualised needs of each child and their family.

Conclusion

Gina greets Braden and his developmental therapist at the end of Braden's last transition class. His third birthday falls later in the week, and he will begin ECSE services shortly thereafter. 'He did so well today', says the DT. 'We have a new boy in class who was pretty worried about where his mom had gone. Braden said, 'Mama be back soon!' and patted him on the arm'.

'I would not have expected to hear that six months ago', Gina laughs. 'He's come such a long way!'

This paper has reviewed the purpose, the structure, and the impact of a programme called transition class, designed to teach EI clients some of the key skills they will need for a successful transition into preschool. For EI agencies, school districts, and service providers interested in offering explicit supports to EI clients preparing to enter ECSE classrooms, the strategies described here may prove useful in meeting the needs that have been well documented in the literature and assisting children in making smooth transitions into their new learning environments.

Note

1. A small number of children, however, do continue to attend for a short time as 3-year-olds. For instance, a child with a June birthday who cannot attend ECSE classes until the fall might continue to participate in transition class over the summer.

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Disclosure statement

In 2007–2008, the first author was employed by the agency described in this paper.

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Data availability statement

Data analysed for this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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