

Transition to Kindergarten for Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Focus Group Study With Ethnically Diverse Parents, Teachers, and Early Intervention Service Providers

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Elizabeth M. Starr, PhD¹, Tanya S. Martini, PhD², and Ben C. H. Kuo, PhD¹

Abstract

Despite the stated importance of a successful kindergarten transition (TTK) for future school success, no research has addressed this transition for culturally/ethnically diverse families having children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). To address this gap, six focus groups (three with ethnically diverse parents, one with kindergarten teachers, and one each with early childhood resource teachers and early intervention providers) were conducted to elicit the experiences of these stakeholders regarding TTK for children with ASD generally, and the TTK experience for ethnically diverse families specifically. Four major themes relating to TTK emerged from the focus groups: Relationship Building, Communication, Knowledge, and Support. While these themes were relevant for all groups, parents who were relatively recent immigrants and for whom English was not a first language identified unique difficulties. Results are discussed within the context of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Recommendations to improve the experience for ethnically diverse families are explored.

Keywords

autism spectrum disorders, parent, transition, special education, multicultural issues

Research has consistently demonstrated that children's future school success is contingent upon the quality of the transition to kindergarten (TTK; McIntyre, Blacher, & Baker, 2006; Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005). Although TTK can be a stressful event for all families (La Paro, Kraft-Sayre, & Pianta, 2003), it can be particularly stressful and problematic for families of children with disabilities (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro Reed, & Wildenger, 2010). While there is a paucity of research concerning TTK for children with disabilities in general (Janus, Lefort, Cameron, & Kopechanski, 2007), there is almost none related to the transition of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In addition, no extant research has examined these experiences within the specific context of ethnically diverse families. Given the increasing ethnic diversity in Canada and the United States (Shrestha & Heisler, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2007), research exploring the TTK process for ethnically diverse families of children with ASD is imperative. In this study, we address this gap by exploring the TTK experience for ethnically diverse families of children with ASD using a qualitative focus group study method that involved multiple informants including parents, kindergarten teachers, early childhood

resource teachers (ECRTs), and early intervention (EI) providers (with the latter two groups hereafter referred to together as "service providers").

TTK for Families of Children With Disabilities and ASD

Studies examining kindergarten transition for children with disabilities have highlighted numerous stressors that may be experienced by parents. These include the "unknowns" related to transition (e.g., "What will the attitude of school staff be toward my child? Will the other children accept my child? Will my child be able to cope in the classroom?" etc.), the need to communicate with a new set of professionals and multidisciplinary teams after the transition (Podvey, Hinojosa, & Koenig, 2013), and moving from family-oriented and supportive

¹University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada

²Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Elizabeth Starr, University of Windsor, 401 Sunset Ave., Windsor, Ontario, Canada N9B 3P4.
Email: estarr@uwindsor.ca

preschool and EI programs to independent or public school systems (Janus, 2011; McIntyre et al., 2010). In addition, moving from the auspices of one government department to another (Janus et al., 2007) with different regulations and procedures and concerns about the adequacy of the educational program in the new setting can also be extremely stressful for parents (Seligman & Darling, 2007).

As an example, in a sample of 132 Canadian parents of children with special needs, Janus et al. (2007) found that almost all participants rated transition activities as being at least somewhat important. However, a sizable number of these parents were very dissatisfied with both the transition from preschool to school (32.6%), and with the availability of services offered for the children at school (44.9%; Janus et al., 2007). In a separate study with 40 families of children with disabilities, only 50% of parents felt that they had received the school-based services and resources that had been promised (Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron, & Hughes, 2008).

Though these concerns characterize families of children with diverse special needs, the unique nature of ASD may result in a particularly difficult transition and unique additional concerns for these parents (Forest, Horner, Lewis-Palmer, & Todd, 2004). ASD is a developmental disorder characterized by deficits in socio-emotional reciprocity and communication (verbal and nonverbal), as well as the presence of restricted interests and repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In addition, between 38% and 50% of individuals with ASD also have an intellectual disability (Centers for Disease Control, 2012; Volkmar, Lord, Bailey, Schultz, & Klin, 2004).

The transition literature indicates that there are a number of skills that children with special needs should demonstrate to increase the likelihood of a successful TTK. These include independent toileting, following instructions, and basic social and communication abilities (Chadwick & Kemp, 2000; Janus et al., 2007). However, these are precisely the areas of difficulty that characterize children with ASD. In addition, individuals with ASD tend to have extreme difficulty in generalizing learning, and thus skills learned in one setting (i.e., EI) are less likely to be transferred to the kindergarten setting (Forest et al., 2004). To underscore these issues, a study conducted by Quintero and McIntyre (2011) compared children with ASD and children with other developmental disabilities and found that teachers of these children reported greater concerns related to the transition of children with ASD. To date, however, it remains unclear how parents of children with ASD conceptualize a successful TTK and which elements of the TTK are experienced as positive or negative.

Cultural Context

In Canada and the United States, culturally and linguistically diverse parents of children with ASD face added and

unique TTK challenges and stressors. These challenges can include language barriers and cultural values and belief systems that may conflict with the educational priorities and goals of North American school systems (Dyches, Wilder, Sudweeks, Obiakor, & Algozzine, 2004). In North America, special education policy continues to hold Eurocentric views of individualism, equity, choice, and independence (Harry & Kalyanpur, 1994) despite increasing cultural and ethnic diversity in its demographics. These dominant values may very well conflict with the worldviews of non-European cultures holding hierarchical and/or collective values, such as Asian culture (Harry, 2002).

Cultural values and beliefs have been found to significantly affect the ways stressors are perceived and experienced, and thus affect the subsequent patterns of coping responses with these stressors (Kuo, 2011, 2013). They have also been found to shape individuals' attitudes and behaviors about the cause and course of various psychological disorders including ASD, the age of diagnosis, the emphasis placed on various symptoms, and intervention goals (Kuo, Kwantes, Towson, & Nanson, 2006; Mandell & Novak, 2005; Seligman & Darling, 2007). As a case in point, in many South Asian languages, there is no word for autism, and autism is regarded by some as a "Western" disease (Dobson, Upadhyaya, McNeil, Venkateswaran, & Gilderdale, 2001). These considerations have prompted several researchers to advocate for autism research among culturally diverse groups (Dyches et al., 2004; Mandell & Novak, 2005).

Theoretical Conceptualization of TTK From an Ecological Framework

Ecological models are considered to be particularly well suited to research with both multicultural and exceptional populations, including the study of TTK (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Sontag, 1996). An ecological framework is useful for conceptualizing TTK because it frames developmental phenomena as processes rather than discrete events, while accounting for multiple contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Podvey et al., 2013; Rous, Myers, & Stricklin, 2007).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979b) Ecological Systems Theory is dynamic, describing developmental outcomes as a function of ongoing bidirectional interactions between individuals' characteristics (e.g., temperament, social responsiveness) and their ecological contexts (e.g., cultural values, school-based protocols) over time. Briefly, Bronfenbrenner's taxonomy views the child's ecological context as comprised of a hierarchy of four nested and interacting systems that exert both direct and indirect influences on the child. The *micro-system* consists of children's direct relationships with significant others. In the case of TTK for children with ASD, this might include their relationship with early childhood education personnel, EI providers and kindergarten teachers,

as well as their relationship with their parents or caregivers. The *mesosystem* is made up of multiple microsystems and “comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (such as, for a child, the relations among home, school and neighborhood peer group . . .)” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979b, p. 25). The *exosystem* represents “the linkage and processes taking place between two or more settings . . . (e.g., for a child, the relation between the home and the parent’s work place . . .)” (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, p. 227). In TTK, the teacher–parent microsystem may affect parent–child or teacher–child interactions, both of which may be significant for children with ASD. The *macrosystem* denotes “the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystems characteristic of a given culture, subculture or other broader social context” (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, p. 227). This system is particularly salient for special education research involving ethnic and linguistically diverse families (Sontag, 1996). As mentioned previously, cultural attitudes, values, and beliefs of diverse families from collectivist cultures may conflict with the “mainstream” Eurocentric approach to special education in North America. These values are likely to impact families’ perception of the quality of TTK for their children.

The Present Study

As noted above, TTK scholars have observed that there is a critical need for research to identify salient factors associated with the TTK for children with ASD as well as those factors that are particularly unique to ethnic minority populations. Thus, research in this area must include ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse parents of children with ASD, and studies need to be carried out in languages appropriate for these parents. The purpose of this exploratory study was to conduct focus groups to gather information from critical, frontline stakeholders about TTK into the public school system for children with ASD. Using Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory as a framework, we collected and analyzed qualitative responses from ethnically diverse parents and professionals involved in the planning and facilitation of TTK, including EI service providers and kindergarten teachers.

Research Questions

This study proposed to address the following three broad research questions:

Research Question 1: What positive and negative experiences are associated with the TTK for parents of children with ASD?

Research Question 2: How do participants define a successful transition for their children?

Research Question 3: To what extent do parents’ TTK experiences vary according to their cultural values and beliefs?

On the basis of these larger research questions, specific questions were developed for the each stakeholder focus group to help address these issues. In particular, this research was intended to discern the extent of concordance or divergence between the views expressed by the teachers, service providers, and parents of children with ASD regarding their expectations of one another during the transition process. Parents spoke about their own TTK experiences, while other groups spoke about families that they had worked with and their personal experiences with TTK.

Although we did not have specific a priori hypotheses, given the exploratory nature of the study, we did formulate some general hypotheses based on the literature. We speculated that many experiences and concerns would overlap across all parent groups regardless of their cultural and linguistic diversity (such as concern about their child’s program, teacher knowledge about autism, school support for their child, and communication with kindergarten teachers). We also surmised that culturally diverse parents would experience additional, unique TTK situations and concerns because of their language and/or cultural differences. In addition, we believed that the specific roles of kindergarten teachers and service providers would afford them a unique perspective on issues related to TTK.

Method

Design

Focus group methodology was considered the most appropriate method to explore the TTK stakeholder experience for a number of reasons. First, researchers have noted that the qualitative nature of focus groups makes them a particularly appropriate methodology for eliciting individuals’ opinions and experiences (Halcomb, Gholizadeh, DiGiacomo, Phillips, & Davidson, 2007). Furthermore, focus groups are increasingly being used with individuals of culturally diverse backgrounds and from marginalized groups to overcome participants’ language and/or literacy difficulties (Halcomb et al., 2007), and their use has been recommended by a number of researchers (Huer & Saenz, 2003; Hughes & DuMont, 1993). Multiple focus groups, representing different stakeholder groups, were selected for this study to ensure that the perspectives from all the critical stakeholders were included. They also served as a means of triangulating results from multiple data sources to help enhance the credibility of the findings (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005).

Participants

Parents, teachers, EI providers, and ECRTs were recruited for this study from three medium-sized cities in Ontario, Canada. Because this was an exploratory study, convenience samples were used in some cases, resulting in uneven numbers of participants across the groups. A total of six focus groups were conducted after institutional ethics board approval was granted: three groups with parents of children with ASD, and one each with kindergarten teachers, EI providers, and ECRTs. All participants (with the exception of one EI provider and one father) were female.

Parent groups. The three parent groups consisted of linguistically diverse parents of children with ASD who were English-, Mandarin-, and Arabic-speaking, respectively. These languages were selected because they are among the most widely spoken languages in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2008). Parents in the English group were recruited through their participation with one particular EI program. Other parents were recruited through English, Arabic, and Mandarin versions of brochures and emails distributed to potential participants via autism treatment and service agencies, a mosque, and through the “snowballing” or “chain referral” technique (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) whereby individuals known to the researchers and research assistants were encouraged to contact other people they knew who met the study’s inclusion criteria.

Eleven families participated in the study, including seven mothers in the English group, two mothers in the Mandarin group, and a mother, and both parents of another child in the Arabic group. The Mandarin- and Arabic-speaking parent groups were particularly small because of the difficulties encountered recruiting these language groups in the local community. English and Mandarin-speaking parents were included if they had a child with ASD who had transitioned into kindergarten during the previous 2 years. The two mothers in the Mandarin group immigrated to Canada from China and Taiwan in 1995 and 1996 respectively and knew each other prior to meeting for the focus group. For both, Mandarin was the primary language spoken at home. Because of the difficulties in recruiting Arabic-speaking participants in the local community mentioned above, and given the pilot nature of this study, parents of older children (M age of children = 11.9) were included for the Arabic group. The Arabic-speaking families did not know each other prior to meeting at the focus group. Of this group, both families immigrated to Canada in 1991. Overall, all of the parents had a high level of education, with all but one mother having at least a community college diploma. Five mothers had graduate university degrees.

Service provider groups. The service provider group included two EI providers and 16 ECRTs. These participants were recruited through personal contacts of one of the authors.

The EI providers and ECRTs had a mean of 12.7 years of working in EI ($SD = 7.39$, range = 5–30) and 12.6 years working with children with ASD ($SD = 6.0$, range = 5–23). All had worked with ethnically and linguistically diverse families. The majority of ECRTs had community college diplomas in early childhood education, but one had a bachelor’s degree and two had master of education degrees. Four of the ECRTs did not have any autism-specific training, while the remaining ECRTs had attended many workshops and short training courses.

Both EI providers had undergraduate and graduate degrees in education. The EI providers were both highly trained in intensive behavioral intervention (IBI) techniques and had extensive autism-specific training.

Teacher group. The kindergarten teacher group ($n = 6$) was recruited through an email sent to all kindergarten teachers in the public school board of one city, and were included if they had ever taught ethnically diverse children with ASD in their classes in the past. The teachers had a mean of 14.5 years of teaching kindergarten with a range of 3 to 31 years. All teachers held a bachelor of education degree, and two had additional special education qualifications. Regarding autism-specific training, five of the six teachers had attended at least one half-day workshop, with four having attended a few full-day workshops. Two teachers had attended a full-week workshop. None had taken any autism-specific university courses.

Procedure

The first author moderated four of the groups in English. The third author (who is a native Mandarin speaker) moderated the Mandarin parent group. A research assistant fluent in Arabic moderated the Arabic parent group. The assistant moderator for each group was a research assistant fluent in Mandarin or Arabic, or the second author. Approximately 12 questions were posed to the participants in each group with additional probes or clarifying questions being asked whenever appropriate. Topic guides for each group are provided in the appendix. Each focus group session lasted approximately 2 hr.

Data Analysis

Digital audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed verbatim in the language used in the focus group and double-checked for accuracy. In the case of the Mandarin- and Arabic-speaking parent groups, one research assistant who was a native speaker of these languages then translated the transcripts into English and either the Mandarin-speaking coauthor, or the other research assistant fluent in the language concerned, checked the veracity of the translation.

After transcription and translation, the analyses of the qualitative data were conducted adhering to the procedures

recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The data were examined at three different levels involving open coding, axial coding and selective coding. That is, each transcript was first reviewed line by line and initial codes were derived (open coding). These codes were then subsumed into broader categories (axial coding). Finally, the main categories of interest for this study were selected (selective coding) and subsequently organized into the overarching themes for the results (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To ensure credibility and reliability of the codes and categories, each transcript was reviewed and coded independently by the first author, at least one coauthor and a research assistant. Codings, categories, and resulting themes were then discussed among the authors of this article to reach a consensus.

Results

Four overarching themes emerged from the open, axial, and selective coding process. These were labeled *Relationship Building*, *Communication*, *Knowledge*, and *Support* respectively, and are summarized in Table 1. Related to these themes were parents' and teachers' concerns about the unknown and the barriers that either did impact, or had the potential to impact, the effectiveness of the kindergarten transition and resulting outcomes. For example, parents worried about whether their child would have friends at school and peers' tolerance of the different behaviors of their child, whether their priorities were being enacted by teachers, and the kind of support their child would receive from the school system. As expected, although TTK experiences for culturally and linguistically diverse families were similar in many respects to those described by Caucasian English-speaking families, these parents also experienced unique and specific challenges and concerns when navigating the TTK.

Relationship Building

All participants mentioned the need and desire to build trusting relationships between the stakeholders even before the actual transition transpired. Although the extent to which this happened appeared to be quite variable and school-dependent, all participants believed that it was important for facilitating a successful transition. Both parents and teachers expressed the desire to meet informally prior to the multidisciplinary case conference that customarily occurs before the beginning of the kindergarten, to start building a good working relationship. Parents, in particular, felt that establishing the relationship with personnel in the new school made a difference in terms of relieving some of the stress they felt about the transition:

I think what helped us was the relationship that I ended up building with the SERT [special education resource teacher]

Table 1. Focus Group Emerging Themes and Subthemes.

Theme	Subthemes
Relationship building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships between stakeholders • Building of trust/rapport between teachers and parents • Cultural differences in handling parent/teacher relationship • Adversarial relationships • Effective collaboration
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy • Frequency of communication • Language barriers • Cultural differences • Openness of teachers to suggestions from parents • Lack of communication • Changes in communication style/frequency between EI and school • Content of communication • Communication from administration to teachers about incoming students with ASD
Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for parental and teacher knowledge • Teacher specific knowledge needs • Parent specific knowledge needs
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental supports • Lack of supports and knowledge about supports • Difficulty accessing services and support • Formal supports • Informal supports • Teacher supports • Administrative support • Educational supports

and the teacher . . . I had talked quite a few times to the SERT and she knew that I was extremely anxious and she was saying all the right things and the teacher was, like, "anytime you want to come" . . . very welcoming to me and my suggestions, and just constantly saying, "come in, be a parent helper, do whatever," and that's what really helped. (English-speaking parent)

Where informal meetings happened, parents valued the teachers becoming acquainted with their child in addition to the sharing of information. Teachers also expressed the desire to meet the children before the school year in informal meetings primarily to reduce their own anxieties about the child, but acknowledged that that rarely happened. As one teacher commented,

When you read all that paperwork ahead of time and you've never met the child, you're reading it and on paper, it's scary, cause you're, like, 'oh my goodness they did this, they did that,' but then you meet them and their personalities are more than just paper.

Teachers also recognized the need for relationship building with parents. However, teachers found that relationships with families could be stressful when parents constantly questioned what was being done in the classroom and frequently addressed their concerns to school administrators.

In addition, participants noted the importance of the relationship between the daycare, preschool, or EI setting from which the child was coming and the child's receiving school. Parents and teachers felt it was important that the kindergarten teacher observe how the child was functioning before transitioning into the new classroom. As an ECRT commented,

Those schools that are welcoming and encourage that receiving [kindergarten] classroom teacher, if they come on their [professional activity] day in June to the daycare, [or] to the childcare center to meet the child in their own environment that they're comfortable in—all those little relationship building strategies. When we have those in place it works really well.

EI providers echoed this sentiment, and also commented on the importance of the principal from the receiving school in transitions noting that the best transitions occurred when "everybody was collaborative." However, both groups of service providers expressed considerable frustration when these relationships were absent, and receiving schools did not desire their input.

Teachers also expressed the need to have a relationship with the transition team and stated how they were frequently excluded from the transition process. These teachers were often only able to come to planning meetings if they happened to be available rather than being purposefully included as a valued participant. As a result, they often did not meet the child or family prior to the start of school. One teacher commented on the resulting feeling of unpreparedness:

I'm not sure where we fit sometimes because . . . I have found that those children who are involved with [the regional intensive behavior intervention provider] are very well-prepared . . . Parents know what to expect, what's going to happen, but I really feel frustrated as a teacher because I'm not prepared. Because the school may know that the child is coming, they have all this paperwork and I'm given a few notes. And it's "Oh yes, by the way we've, you know, you should know this." And I feel frustrated with that. (Kindergarten teacher)

While being understanding, the general feeling expressed by the teachers was one of frustration and not feeling valued because of their exclusion from the transition process. A few teachers commented that the extent of their inclusion in the process varied depending on the school and its administrator.

Communication

Closely related to *Relationship Building*, *Communication* also emerged as a dominant theme. All parents talked

extensively about persistent advocacy for their child to ensure that the child's needs were met, and necessary resources were provided. Teachers and service providers echoed this sentiment. As evident in the parents' comments, however, such advocacy was often adversarial in nature and described in terms of being a "battle." As a Mandarin-speaking parent stated,

Now I feel that the schools are more like our enemies than our friends . . . I feel tired of fighting with schools all the time instead of spending time on fighting for IEP plans with each other. We should both focus more on improving the well being of the children.

Sometimes the advocacy resulted in protracted discussions involving senior special education administrative personnel.

Parents with limited English skills were particularly compromised in their ability to advocate for their children or communicate with the teachers, and they often felt powerless in the face of these challenges. As one Mandarin-speaking parent poignantly expressed, "I was like a frog trapped in a deep well. I don't know about the outside world. I feel very helpless." Arabic and Mandarin-speaking parents, teachers, and service providers all emphasized the difficulties that arose when language barriers were present.

Parents also commented on their impressions of having to be very careful about what they said to teachers and how they phrased things. However, they also realized the importance of keeping the communication channels open, as expressed by an English-speaking mother: ". . . and you just want to say what you really think but you feel like you have to phrase it all . . . Because you don't want to burn any bridges . . . you gotta stay involved." There was consensus among the English-speaking parents regarding the need to phrase things in a "more professional" way that they found stressful and emotionally exhausting. Similarly, parents were concerned about which "battles" they should fight with the school given their concern about how confrontations with school personnel might affect their child's program.

It was evident from the participants that there can be a "disconnect" between school personnel and parents when it comes to the type and frequency of communication, and this too can impact TTK success. On one hand, parents described a desire to have the type of extensive daily communication with the teacher that they were able to have with EI personnel. On the other hand, while teachers acknowledged this difference between the settings for the parents, such daily discussions were not possible in the kindergarten setting given the number of children. Unfortunately, this situation has led, in some cases, to adverse relationships between home and school.

Knowledge

The third theme to emerge from the data was *Knowledge*. This theme encompasses parental knowledge regarding the school system and special education legislation and procedures, and the teachers' knowledge about autism and teaching children with ASD.

Because kindergarten is the usual point of entry into the school system, parents first encounter Ministry of Education special education legislation as they get ready for kindergarten entry. Many parents found learning the "jargon," legislation, and procedures "overwhelming." In some cases, parents acquired the knowledge on their own through workshops that were offered by outside organizations or their EI providers. In other cases, the school provided the information through a meeting with the principal and special education teacher. In one situation, the EI provider provided a helpful binder with necessary information. Acquiring this knowledge proved particularly difficult for parents with limited English proficiency, not only because of the language barrier but also because of culturally different understandings of autism. As a Mandarin-speaking mother expressed,

At that time I knew nothing. I only knew that this child is particularly active and his language ability developed slowly. But I didn't [think] that there was anything wrong with his language ability, since many people say that boys usually develop language skills late. I didn't know what "autism" is. I had no idea about it . . . I remember . . . I asked my husband "what is autism?" He explained its meaning in Chinese to me. I had no idea what its symptoms are, how it will develop in the future.

Similarly, an Arabic-speaking parent commented,

The first time they gave me the IEP [in kindergarten], they told me "we're going to provide it to your son, and you have to sign it." I signed it . . . I didn't even know what an IEP was . . . I went home and read it, but I didn't understand anything . . . I didn't know what Modification or Accommodation meant.

Participants in all focus groups, including the teachers, believed that teachers were lacking in knowledge. The EI providers, however, indicated that the problem was more pervasive than simply lack of training for teachers:

I think that it's a . . . lack of autism training at all levels right now in education and that impacts transition everywhere. Pre-service teachers aren't getting it, teachers aren't getting it, EAs aren't getting it, SERTS aren't getting it . . . there's a breakdown with the transition right from the start." (EI Provider)

A common concern expressed by many participants was that because of a lack of training and knowledge on the part of teachers, expectations for the children were lowered and

children "got away" with doing things at school that did not happen in the EI settings:

To get a student to a certain level and they can perform and do all the tasks that are being asked of them and then, [they go] into [kindergarten] where there's such a reduction in expectation because there's a lack of knowledge from the front line, people not knowing what to do with the child so it's easier just to reduce it and keep things calm and easy to get through the day rather than keep the expectations. (EI provider)

As a result of lowered expectations, parents, EI providers, and ECRTs were understandably concerned at the potential for regression of skills and behavior in the children.

Support

The concept of *Support* also emerged as a theme during the focus groups. Participants experienced very different levels and kinds of support through the kindergarten transition, and their presence or absence influenced the success of the TTK. For parents, supports were both formal (e.g., school personnel, EI providers) and/or informal (e.g., family, friends or other parents).

EI service providers generally serve as a liaison between the families and the school during this transition period, and all parents mentioned the need for, or reliance on, this source of support while negotiating the TTK. Part of the need for formal support for parents is to help them adjust from the "family-focused" orientation of EI services, to the "school-focused" orientation of kindergarten, which has been frequently mentioned in the literature (e.g., Daley, Munk, & Carlson, 2011). As an ECRT commented,

A lot of the stress is letting us go: where we . . . provided such a comprehensive wraparound process from the time they walked in the door which could be a year, 18 months [of age] all the way up until they're 5 and 6 years old and now that whole transition to something completely different . . . They feel like they're free-falling is what a couple of parents have said to me . . . "I don't know where the bottom is. Where is somebody going to catch me?"

It is evident that parents whose children had EI came to rely on the support that was provided and regarded the transition with trepidation. The EI providers experienced similar reliance on them by families and discussed how they received daily "crisis calls" from parents asking them to intervene with the school. Such situations reinforce the need for parents to establish relationships with school personnel early in the transition process so that reliance on support from the service providers can be faded. The reliance of parents on formal support from the service providers was also closely related to the perceived knowledge and

expertise of school personnel: The less knowledge about autism and interventions, the more parents (and the teachers) relied on the service providers.

Informal supports, particularly in the form of community organizations, were also important for parents, especially the Mandarin and Arabic-speaking parents who were completely unfamiliar with the Ontario school system. It was often these community organizations that informed parents about how the special education system worked and parental rights and responsibilities:

Canadians come from this culture . . . they know the laws and regulations; I mean I don't know all these. I didn't know that I can force the school to go with my decision. I learned from [the community organization] that it's the parents' decision . . . [if you don't want your son to be in a different classroom, this is your choice. This was . . . the most important thing [I] learned there. (Arabic-speaking parent)

An EI provider commented on how the families in their program were “a social and support network for one another,” and it was by talking with one another that they would often find out about what was available. Teachers, too, noted the lack of informal supports particularly for new immigrants and the resulting stress experienced by these parents.

The lack of available informal support can even lead to extreme decisions for families, as exemplified by an ECRT discussing a family with three children with special needs (one with autism) that was contemplating moving back to Iraq because of the presence of family, despite the lack of opportunities for her son there.

The theme of support at the school level was a prominent one for the kindergarten teachers as well, and they believed that its presence or absence influenced TTK success. A number of teachers commented that school administration often does not understand or value what transpires in kindergarten classrooms, and that decisions made by administrators can have a significant impact at the classroom level. Physical environments have also impacted the teachers' ability to provide instruction. Sometimes the teachers taught in “open concept” classrooms where no physical walls or doors separated classrooms from each other, but rather each “classroom” was an area within large space containing a number of classes of different grade levels (common in the community where the teacher focus group was held). This proved problematic when a child with ASD was in the class and the child tended to run away or have “meltdowns” that disrupted multiple classes.

Kindergarten teachers also discussed the need for instructional supports including the use of educational assistants (EAs). Both parents and teachers felt that given the significant needs of some of the children, there was not sufficient EA support if children were to be in general education

classrooms. The teachers also expressed frustration that there often were insufficient resources at the school level for use with the students.

It's frustrating when I can't find the one and only copy of “Board Maker©” and “Writing With Symbols©” that's somewhere in some other room. The printer is at the opposite end of the school . . . and I find that's frustrating and you're speaking about resources. Then why isn't it in my classroom? That program with that color printer, that's important. I mean, visual schedules, [pictures], you know, like, “I'm Working For . . .” “Choice Boards,” all the “First, Then,” all those things that they need. Those are their tools, their strategies . . . and there's *one* copy. (Kindergarten teacher)

Teachers felt that if a child needs those supports and resources, then they should be readily available.

Unique Cultural Aspects and Barriers

Although many experiences and challenges related to TTK were similar for all families, not speaking the dominant language and coming from “non-mainstream” cultural backgrounds tended to magnify the difficulties that were discussed above. In addition, these families faced unique challenges—ones not experienced by the “majority” culture families.

The frequent reluctance of parents from collectivist cultures to question authority or to discuss their child's difficulties outside of the family sometimes resulted in fewer supports or services for their child. For example, both the EI providers and ECRTs commented on the perception that ethnically diverse parents are sometimes taken advantage of:

A lot of times [they] come conditioned to put a lot of trust in the educator's hands and the system, and don't even think that they have room to have a voice with them in terms of asking questions . . . and I think a lot of times, not that they're being silenced, but there have been options where I've seen where parents have been taken advantage of because they're not able to ask those leading questions. Nobody's even letting them know what needs to be asked, or they can push something out of sight and not even bring it up because these parents aren't threatening. “They're not going to ask us anyways.” (EI Provider)

The Mandarin- and Arabic-speaking parents themselves also felt that they received differential treatment in the form of discrimination when dealing with the school system compared to “mainstream” parents: “You feel that there is discrimination, just because we're wearing the hijab. They think we don't know what's best for us or for our child” (Arabic-speaking parent). In addition, one service provider observed,

There may be a different approach to certain cultural backgrounds. That there is an ethnic intolerance as well, and that it's not spoken, but [when] you deal with different agencies with a multitude of different families, sometimes you can see the differences. [And you say] "That's interesting that they just approached that family in that way because that's not typical of how they would do that." (ECRT)

Cultural differences in parenting style may also affect the type and amount of information that gets communicated in school meetings and may subsequently affect a child's services or support, and this was reflected by teachers and service providers. For example, in many patriarchal cultures, the mother is the primary caregiver, but it is the father who speaks for the family. However, as an ECRT pointed out, "sometimes he doesn't have the questions, he doesn't have the answers to say, he doesn't ask the appropriate questions, and even though the Mom may know all those answers, she's not allowed to speak about that." As a result, incorrect information may be communicated to school personnel that may subsequently affect the child's program. Furthermore, the teachers and service providers commented on how children of many families who have recently immigrated to Canada are less likely to have been identified prior to kindergarten entry. The service providers felt that these parents tend to be more reluctant to acknowledge or discuss difficulties their children are having with professionals, which may result in a delay of services and a more challenging TTK.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the TTK process for culturally and linguistically diverse families having children with ASD from a variety of stakeholder perspectives using focus group methodology. Bronfenbrenner's (1979b) Ecological Systems Theory was used as a framework to identify stakeholders' positive and negative experiences with the process, stakeholders' perceptions of what a successful transition looks like, and how families' experiences may vary depending on cultural beliefs and values. Although the themes that emerged (*Relationship Building*, *Communication*, *Knowledge*, and *Support*) have been noted in the general literature concerning the experience of parents of older children with ASD in the school system (e.g., Starr & Foy, 2012; Whitaker, 2007), it is during the TTK process that they first emerge as salient concerns as evidenced in the present study.

Inconsistency seems to be the hallmark of the TTK experience for all participants in this study although that does not appear to be unique to these participants (e.g., Podvey et al., 2013). The majority of parents had a very difficult time with the kindergarten transition because of challenges at each of the micro-, exo-, meso-, and macrosystem levels. However, a few parents reported positive experiences when

relationships with school personnel were established early, good communication was in place, formal and informal supports were available, and when parents understood the special education system and were able to work with knowledgeable teachers. When all of these aspects were in place for the teachers and EI service providers, the TTK experience was a positive and successful one for them as well.

As children with ASD begin kindergarten, it is likely that the majority of them have more contacts and experiences with various microsystems than do children without special needs. Besides their parents, they may also have relationships with childcare providers, EI providers, and multidisciplinary therapists. Each one of these microsystems is influenced not only by the child's temperament and social responsiveness but also by the perceptions of other people about the child (Sontag, 1996), and thus each can be a source of stress for families. For example, a few teachers reported being very anxious before meeting the child because of what they read regarding the child's behavior on paper. However, when the teacher had the opportunity to meet the child, their anxieties were relieved. This helped not only at the microsystem level but also at the mesosystem level since parents and teachers were able to establish a relationship before the school year began. The parents who reported this happening experienced a positive transition.

Concerning the mesosystem, Bronfenbrenner (1979a) indicated that the developmental potential of any given setting for the child "is increased as a function of the number of supportive links between that setting and other contexts involving the child" (p. 848). In the TTK context, then, the likelihood of a successful transition is increased when the child receives *consistent messages* in each of these significant relationships, and when there are *strong connections* between the child's microsystems (i.e., child-teacher, child-parent, child-EI provider). These elements of the mesosystem are clearly evident in the identified themes in the study, particularly *Relationship Building*, *Communication*, and *Knowledge*.

In terms of providing consistent messages, an important theme was *Knowledge*, particularly teachers' restricted knowledge about autism. According to parents and EI providers, the consequence of teachers' limited understanding of ASD was that students received contradictory messages from teachers, EI providers and parents with respect to behavioral standards and expectations resulting in inappropriate behaviors emerging in the school environment. These behaviors have the potential to interfere with a successful transition because they prevent students from fully engaging in the kindergarten classroom and, in extreme situations, result in parents being called to pick up their children from the school.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979a), connections can take the form of shared activities and clear communication among units in the microsystem. With regard to shared

activities, important themes included *Relationship Building* and *Communication*. Participants in all groups suggested that positive TTK was facilitated when teachers took the time to build relationships by meeting with the child before school began or visiting the EI setting to do an observation. In terms of communication, differing perspectives between teachers and parents regarding the appropriate amount of communication and the different sources of stress experienced by both regarding communication (i.e., teachers stressed by parents “constant questions” and parents’ stress from the need to be “politically correct to avoid negative consequences) can weaken the mesosystem (Podvey et al., 2013). These issues can also strain the connections between microsystems rather than strengthen them, thus compromising the TTK.

Communication between school personnel and EI providers also appear to have some influence over the success of a child’s TTK. The EI providers noted that open communication with school personnel (particularly principals) facilitated transitions because it allowed for a beneficial exchange of child-specific information that would avoid behavioral problems and maximize the child’s likelihood of success. Similarly, teachers spoke of the principal’s role in co-creating optimal physical conditions for the TTK to occur (e.g., helping to make instructional resources easily accessible for kindergarten teachers whose classes include children with ASD).

Relationships between parents and EI providers also have the potential to impact on a successful TTK as EI providers can educate parents about what to expect during the transition process and the resources that are available through the school board.

As discussed earlier, the exosystem concerns the environments that are “external” to children (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), but which nonetheless impact on their development. In the present research, parents and other service providers noted the importance of support systems for parents, particularly family-based supports as a critical part of the exosystem. Participants indicated that the emotional and instrumental assistance that often comes from family members is beneficial not just in terms of navigating the TTK, but more generally for coping with raising a child with autism. Similarly, school boards that provide more professional development opportunities, and emphasize the importance of improving teachers’ understanding of ASD, have an indirect influence in facilitating a more positive TTK for children with ASD.

The influence of ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity—the macrosystem within which families exists—also exerts an influence on TTK success as seen in the present study and noted in previous research. However, language barriers that impede communication and relationship building are not the only aspects that affect the quality of the micro-, meso-, and exosystems related to TTK. Cultural differences in communication styles (e.g., deference to authority) can also lead to misunderstandings between the

stakeholders (in terms of perceived desire for involvement) and to parents being taken advantage of (as seen in the current study, and as articulated by Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Culturally determined parenting styles and the reluctance to identify disability in many cultures due to associated stigma often clash with the Eurocentric values of the school system. These culturally shaped dispositions may adversely affect the development of relationships and effective communication between parents and other stakeholders and the implementation of interventions and supports.

Implications for Practice and Research

As previous research has demonstrated, TTK needs to be viewed as a process rather than a discrete event (e.g., Podvey et al., 2013), one that begins the year before, and continues well after the new school year has begun. It is within this process that needs and gaps in each of the four identified areas of *Relationship Building*, *Communication*, *Knowledge*, and *Support* can be addressed to ensure positive transition outcomes. As Podvey et al. (2013) pointed out, recommendations regarding transition practices have been in the literature for the past two decades. However, they are often not translated into positive transition experiences for children with special needs. The nature of ASD, in particular, presents some unique challenges and needs (Forest et al., 2004). On the basis of the findings of the current study, we suggest four recommendations to supplement those found in the literature.

First, there is a need for consistency in the TTK transition process within school boards. Teachers in the current sample—all from a single school board—reported great variability among schools. All school boards would benefit from developing a comprehensive and consistent TTK plan.

Second, the TTK plan needs to build in time and money for teachers to know as early as possible they will be receiving a student with ASD, and allow them to attend the relevant transition meetings. As participants pointed out, teachers need to be able to visit EI settings to observe the child and meet with service providers to determine appropriate expectations, as well as visit the child and parents at home to begin developing a trusting relationship and positive communication. This practice would seem to be particularly important where ASD is concerned given the importance of program consistency and maintaining gains made in the EI environment.

Third, all participants agreed that teachers require additional pre-service and in-service training in understanding ASD and educational interventions for this population, a finding consistent with much research (e.g., Starr & Foy, 2012; Whitaker, 2007). This can go a long way toward dispelling fears and anxieties of both parties. Despite the investment needed for these procedures, it may reduce costs in the long term by preventing adversarial relationships and communication, and increasing school success for the child.

Finally, given the magnified difficulties encountered in the TTK process by the Mandarin and Arabic-speaking families identified in the current study and from other research (e.g., Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999), it is clear that the time has come to reevaluate the Eurocentric values that are deeply entrenched in the North American special education system, and to find new and culturally responsive ways of individualizing the TTK process. The multicultural demographics of the North American school population dictate that much more awareness of, and sensitivity to world cultures, differing interaction and parenting styles, and beliefs about disability and ASD is crucial for school personnel to be able to provide an effective TTK for students with ASD. Kalyanpur and Harry (1999) suggested that building capacity means that educators need to develop an attitude of “cultural reciprocity” to enable them to identify the cultural values embedded in their interpretation of behavior or intervention recommendations, and understand and respect any cultural differences and how the family’s view may differ from their view. Then, through discussion and collaboration, teachers will be able to determine the most effective way to adapt their recommendations to the value system of the family.

Although the current study provides some valuable insights into the understanding of TTK for families with children of ASD, much research remains to be done. In addition, larger qualitative and quantitative studies that specifically include families of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds along with the other TTK stakeholders would lend further credence to and extend the current findings. Studies conducted in multiple languages would be particularly valuable to ensure that parents often underrepresented in autism research would have the opportunity to participate. Despite the challenges of undertaking such research in terms of participant recruitment, and language and translation issues, it is evident from the current study’s findings that non-English speaking families of children with ASD have unique TTK experiences that deserve consideration. Finally, additional research within an ecological framework as recommended by Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) and Sontag (1996) would help elucidate the complexity of the interrelationships involved in the TTK process.

Limitations

The findings of the current investigation should be interpreted with caution in view of a number of limitations. First, this study was based on volunteer participants and convenience samples, and thus it is not clear whether the views of the participants represent the TTK experiences of the larger population. Second, because of the difficulty in recruiting Mandarin- and Arabic-speaking parents, these parent groups were particularly small in size. This may be due, at least in part, to the stigma generally associated with disabilities in these cultures. Thus, the results cannot be

generalized to parents of these cultural and linguistic backgrounds with confidence at this point. Third, with the exception of one Arabic-speaking father, all the parent participants were female. Therefore, the extent to which the current findings represent fathers of children with ASD is not clear. Finally, it is important to note that the educational level of parent participants in this study was quite high. This too might have played a role in the experiences and perceptions of the current participants.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this study is the first to specifically recruit and conduct focus groups with parents of children with ASD from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. As such, it provides an important, initial window into the TTK experience of culturally diverse families.

Adhering to suggestions by a number of researchers (e.g., Hennink, 2007), the parent groups in this study were conducted by moderators from the parents’ own ethnic/cultural background who also helped shape the questions which helped to ensure a culturally appropriate and sensitive approach to the topic. Moreover, the present study contributes to the existing ASD literature by including multiple perspectives from various TTK stakeholders and by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the TTK process. Overlapping themes, comments, and issues brought up by the various stakeholder groups help triangulate and give confidence to the findings of the present study. Finally, the present study has bridged theory to empirical examination of TTK with the application of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory—a timely and critically needed approach in the current literature (Sontag, 1996). We hope this present study will serve as the basis to stimulate many more theoretically driven and culturally informed research and discussions about TTK for children with ASD in the future.

Appendix

Topic Guide for Focus Groups

Parents

- A. Description of first contact with school
- B. Transition process for parents from school registration to beginning of school following September
- C. Child’s adjustment to school
- D. Most and least helpful things school did to facilitate transition
- E. Most and least helpful things school did after child began kindergarten
- F. Parental concerns and worries leading up to beginning of school and when school began
- G. Most difficult aspects of transition overall

- H. Parental involvement in Individual Education Plan development
- I. (Ethnically diverse parents only) Aspects of language barriers or cultural background that influenced transition
- J. Aspects parents would do differently or like school to do differently if they were to go through transition again

Kindergarten teachers

- A. Overview of transition process in school/district
- B. Timelines of aspects of transition process and involvement of school support team
- C. In teachers' perspective, how the transition process has worked for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and their families
- D. How the transition process has worked for the teachers
- E. Most rewarding and challenging aspects of transitioning children with ASD into kindergarten
- F. Particular sources of stress related to transition of children with ASD into kindergarten
- G. Particular challenges experienced when transitioning ethnically diverse children
- H. How cultural/language background of families contribute to transition experience for families
- I. How kindergarten transition might be made easier for families of children with ASD and specifically for ethnically/linguistically diverse families
- J. How kindergarten transition for children with ASD of majority and minority cultures/languages might be made easier for teachers
- K. How an ideal transition to kindergarten (TTK) for children with ASD would look

Early intervention (EI) providers and early childhood resource teachers (ECRTs)

- A. Role played when transitioning children into kindergarten
- B. Contributing factors to best and most challenging transitions
- C. Perspective on the stressors and challenges experienced by parents regarding TTK
- D. Unique challenges encountered when transitioning ethnically diverse children with ASD
- E. Challenges related to English proficiency among ethnically diverse parents.
- F. How cultural/language background of families influenced transition experience for the families
- G. Given current framework, how might kindergarten transition be made easier for parents of children with ASD and for ethnically diverse parents

- H. Most rewarding and challenging aspects of transitioning children with ASD into kindergarten
- I. How an ideal TTK for children with ASD would look

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