

2.6 The transition to school

Reflections from a contextualist perspective

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Introduction

The first day of school arrives. Some of the children enter in tears, others with excited looks on their faces, and yet others come into the classroom with tentative steps, a mixture of holding on to someone's hand and looking around to see whether there are friends to be made. For the teachers, too, the first day of the new school year can be a time of excitement, of challenge, or a feeling of 'same old, same old'. Although the first day of school may not be a good predictor of children's eventual success or failure, the transition to school itself is one of the most important changes that occur in the lives of young children. Children who make this transition smoothly may be on an easier road to success than those for whom the transition is more troublesome.

In this chapter we therefore reflect on ways in which to help children and teachers negotiate this transition. The vast majority of the research that has been conducted on this topic focuses on the transition to school from the school's perspective: what can be done to help children be prepared for school entry? Much of this research deals with issues of 'school readiness' or examines the nature and quality of children's preschool experiences. Other researchers examine the steps that can be taken to encourage parents to understand and support the school's goals, both before the children arrive in school and during the children's first years in school. Our primary goal, however, is to explain how a contextualist perspective may help both children and their teachers make the transition go smoothly. We therefore first describe what we mean by contextualism and briefly discuss two major contextualist theories – those of Lev Vygotsky and Urie Bronfenbrenner – before discussing how this contextualist perspective can be incorporated into the classroom.

The transition to school

There are various ways to think about children making the transition to school. Some people talk about 'school readiness', often thinking about children possessing the types of basic skills, particularly in literacy, that will enable them to succeed. Others describe the same concept, but from the point of view of the children's overall cognitive development, with less attention paid to specific skills. Yet others will focus on the children's social competence – are they ready to interact with other children and their teacher in appropriate ways, can they sit still and listen during story time and so on. Some will argue that preschool institutions should work directly to prepare children for the transition, by teaching them the types of skills that they will need once they enter school, and others will argue that the best way to prepare children for school is to allow them to play actively with interesting materials in conjunction with other children.

Alternative ways of thinking focus on the role that teachers can play in easing the transition; this often involves meeting parents and explaining to them what will be expected of their children once they are in school, and then trying to keep contact with the parents during the children's first years of school. It's also possible to think of changing what goes on in school to fit changing perceptions of children. This can happen both at the level of a specific classroom or school (individual teachers making changes because of the way they perceive the types of children who are entering the school) and also at the societal level, as when growing awareness of Piaget's views of children's development led to changes in the types of activities that commonly occurred in preschool and primary school classrooms.

These are just some of the possible ways in which we could think about easing the transition of children to school. It would be nice to say that research has clearly demonstrated that one of these approaches, or a combination of approaches, is the most effective. Then we could just apply it, and children would be much more likely to make an easier transition. One of the reasons why there is no such clear demonstration is that people disagree about what would count as a clear demonstration largely due to their basic assumptions about the world.

Our guiding assumptions

Within the areas of education, psychology and human development there are three basic assumptions, or 'world hypotheses' (Pepper, 1942), known as mechanism, organicism and contextualism. Each of these world-views differs in its set of beliefs about the nature of reality (ontology), about how one can know reality (epistemology) and how one can appropriately test that knowledge (methodology). Mechanists hold that there is a single reality that, even if it cannot be known, is testable in the sense that hypothetical aspects of reality can be tested and proved to be incorrect. (Mechanists believe that aspects of reality can never be proven, because some contrary fact may subsequently come to light, and so the 'best' theories or facts are those that have not yet been proven incorrect.) The methods used by mechanists generally emphasize tightly controlled experimental designs to allow the testing of cause-effect hypotheses or the use of forced-choice questionnaires. Pepper noted that the 'root metaphor' of mechanists is the machine, with its reliance on cause-effect relations.

Organicists, too, hold that there is a single reality to be known, but believe that it can never be known by carefully controlling relevant variables in an experimental design, because simple cause-effect relationships do not exist. Instead organicists talk about the 'emergent properties' of all aspects of reality; reality emerges in a systemic or dialectical way from the complex interplay of all relevant factors. Water is made up of hydrogen and oxygen, but what emerges from their interaction is something that is more than the sum of the two elements. In the same way, human development is a phenomenon that emerges from interaction between aspects of the developing individual and that individual's context, both social and physical. However, organicists believe that endpoints (or most mature aspects) of development can be specified and that development, particularly in the period from birth through adolescence, occurs in a specified order. The root metaphor that Pepper ascribed to organicism is the human body.

Contextualists hold that there is no single reality to be known, but a variety of different realities, each of which depends on the specific social, economic, cultural and historical nature of the group under consideration. Like organicists, contextualists see reality as an emerging property of relevant factors (individual, context and time), but differ from organicists in that they believe that what counts as the 'endpoint' of development varies across different

contexts. Pepper's root metaphor for contextualism was the historic event. However, the world-view's name and its metaphor are misleading. Those who fit within this world-view clearly do not hold that context *determines* development, although it plays an important role; furthermore, what Pepper actually meant by 'historic events' are typically occurring activities. He noted that only verbs should be used in giving instances of the metaphor; children playing, adults preparing dinner, people talking with friends. Historic events include 'the event alive in its present' such as 'incidents in the plot of a novel' (1942, pp. 232–3).

Given the different ontological, epistemological and methodological positions that these three groups take it is not surprising that what counts as evidence from one of their world-views is not considered relevant by proponents of another. In other words, using mechanistic methods to 'test' some aspect of an organicist or contextualist theory makes no sense; nor does using contextualist methods to 'test' a mechanist theory. What counts as evidence for a successful transition to school is thus likely to vary considerably as a function of the world-view within which the research is being conducted.

Contextualism

We have written a good deal about the various assumptions of these three world-views because we want to show how contextualist theories can help us understand better the transition to school and improve the transition itself. Contextualist theories, of which the best known are those of Bronfenbrenner (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998, 2006) and Vygotsky (1987, 1993; see also Tudge and Scrimsher, 2003), have at their centre the types of activities that people engage in regularly (Tudge, 2008). However, the nature of the activities varies.

What types of activities do contextualists have in mind? Vygotsky is most widely known for his writing about activities that create a zone of proximal development, as when a child interacts with a more competent adult or peer. Bronfenbrenner also focused on activities likely to lead to success, namely 'processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment' (Bronfenbrenner 2001/2005, p. 6). He argued that these 'proximal processes' are effective when they continually regularly over time.

These activities, important though they are, vary according to the specific characteristics of the individuals who are engaging in those activities, the nature of the setting where the activities are taking place, and both the cultural and temporal contexts in which the activities occur.

What is meant by 'individual characteristics'? Vygotsky (1931/1937, 1934/1987, 1935/1994) argued that they are socially formed; however, he never viewed the social world as separate from but inclusive of the individual. Children's biological and behavioural attributes influence people around them to respond in certain ways, and vice versa, continuing a process of interaction that started with conception. Bronfenbrenner provided more detail about these personal characteristics, which he subdivided into demand, resource and force characteristics, each of which, in different ways, influences the surrounding context. And so, long before children start school, they both are influenced by the world around them and influence it because of the individual characteristics, socially formed, that they bring to any situation. The same is true, of course, of their parents and teachers.

Parents and teachers, as is true of any of the other individuals, objects and symbols with which children are in contact, are an important part of the context, but context, in any contextualist theory, is far broader than those people and things with which developing individuals have immediate and direct contact. Despite the amount of attention given by

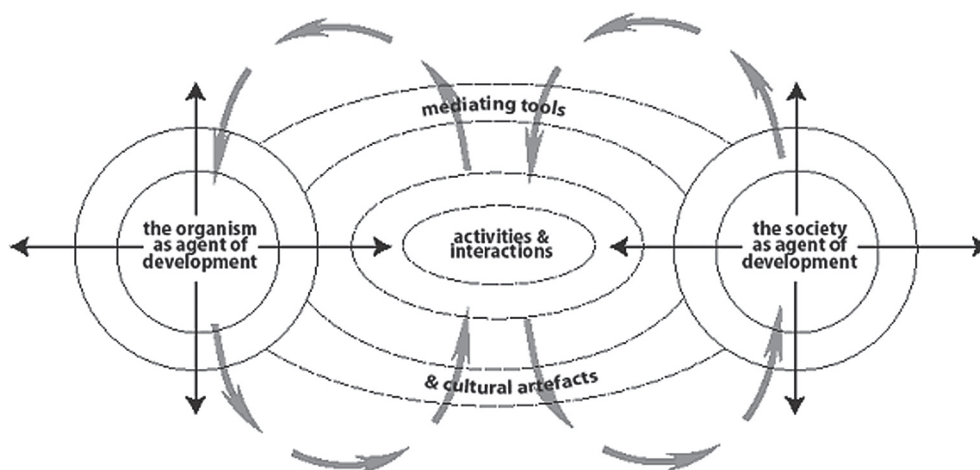


Figure 2.6.1 Lev Vygotsky's view of how both the organism (the individual, developing over ontogenetic time) and society (the socio-cultural world, as developed over historical time) interact via tools and artifacts (the skills and technologies available within the cultural context) in the course of activities and interactions. Adapted from Edwards (2007).

scholars to Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development, Vygotsky's theory is termed a *cultural-historical* theory because interactions within the zone of proximal development can only be understood by taking into account the culture, as it developed over historical time, within which those interactions are taking place (Cole, 2005; Daniels, 2005; Tudge and Scrimsher, 2003). From the moment of birth infants are enveloped in a social world that includes the various objects and technologies (mediating tools and artefacts) that are available in the culture (e.g. pram, crib, cradleboard or carrying cloth, for keeping infants secure, participating in storytelling, reading books, or watching DVDs, as ways of learning the culture). Figure 2.6.1 provides a view of the active and interactive nature of the relations between individual and social world as envisioned by Vygotsky.

Bronfenbrenner's theory makes these varying aspects of the social world somewhat more explicit than did Vygotsky. Bronfenbrenner's view of the spatial context included the microsystem (the contexts, such as home, school or workplace, in which activities and interactions take place), the mesosystem (relations among two or more microsystems), the exosystem (a context in which the developing individual is not situated, but which nonetheless has an important indirect effect) and the macrosystem (cultural groups and societies). Bronfenbrenner did not describe the temporal context, or chronosystem, in as much detail as he did the spatial context, but clearly it reflects the fact that cultures and societies are always undergoing change: historical events are interrelated with shifting values and beliefs, which are then expressed within microsystems. A representation of a microsystem, in which the active individual interacts with available people, objects and symbols, and how the microsystem fits within the other 'systems' in Bronfenbrenner's theory, is provided in Figure 2.6.2.

The macrosystem, for Bronfenbrenner, as is true for culture in Vygotsky's theory, plays a critically important role. He defined the macrosystem as a context encompassing any group ('culture, subculture, or other extended social structure') whose members share value or

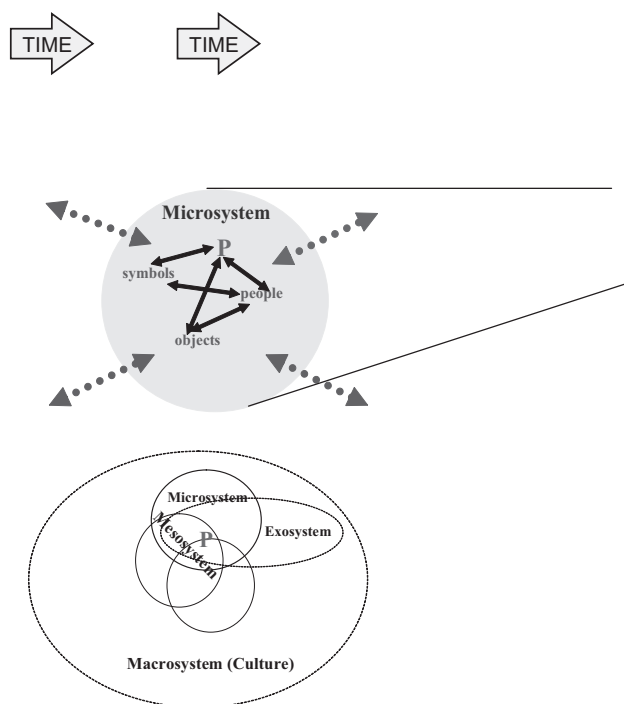


Figure 2.6.2 Urie Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model. The active Person (P) engaging in Proximal Processes with people, symbols and objects within a microsystem, in interaction with other Contexts, involving both continuity and change over Time. Reproduced from Tudge (2008).

belief systems, 'resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options and patterns of social interchange' (1993, p. 25). Why is culture so important? Weisner (1996) wrote that if we want to know how a child will develop the most important thing to know is his or her cultural group, because once we know that we can make inferences about the types of values and beliefs that child will be exposed to, the typical range of activities, access to resources, institutions with which he or she will interact, social relationships and a whole range more. Is it considered appropriate, in the given cultural group, for an adult to play with a child? Are books widely available, are the adults typically literate, and is schooling or literacy considered important for children? Are the adults physically and emotionally available to their children, or are they too pressured by the demands of multiple jobs (or the need to find some sort of work) to play with or read to their children? Are the prevailing beliefs such that older siblings are given primary responsibility for caring for those who are younger? These questions are all relevant to culture.

It is probably easy to see the likely influence of culture on activities and interactions when thinking about society-wide differences – our own research, for example, shows that preschool-aged children in the United States, Kenya and Brazil have some clearly different patterns of activities and interactions (Tudge *et al.*, 2006). However, it is just as important to examine within-society cultural differences, such as race (a term we are using to

denote a social category linked to skin colour), ethnicity or social class; in the research just mentioned, the intersection of race and class was necessary to make sense of the differing patterns of activities and interactions that we observed. Moreover, in related research, the activities and interactions of preschool-aged children of middle-class and working-class backgrounds in the United States, Russia and Estonia had differential effects on their teachers' perceptions of their competence once they had entered school (Scrimsher and Tudge, 2003; Tudge *et al.*, 2007).

Our definition of a cultural group is a group that shares similar values, beliefs, social institutions, access to resources and sense of identity, and attempts to pass on those values, beliefs and so forth to the next generation. Ethnic groups and social class groups within any given society can thus be considered cultural groups to the extent that they fit this definition. The situation becomes more complex, therefore, as individuals cannot be thought of as being part of just one cultural group but of several – English, working-class, of Punjabi background – with their sense of identity at any given moment influenced by the current comparison group (English, when thinking about Punjabi friends who immigrated to Canada; Punjabi, when thinking about Gujeratis; working class, when comparing with Punjabi middle-class individuals).

Weisner (1996) could have added, of course, that knowing the historical period is equally important, given that cultures are not static phenomena. As we noted above, values about schooling and beliefs about the types of experiences that young children should get in school have changed dramatically over the course of time in any given society (Beatty, 1995; Freitas *et al.*, 2008; James *et al.*, 1998; Tudge, 2008). This is why contextualist theories involve a dynamic interaction between individual and context, with context viewed in both spatial and temporal terms.

Development of our position

Our position has become increasingly dynamic and interactional, if not dialectic, as we have thought more about the implications of contextualism. We would like to show the ways in which contextualism can help us think better about the transition to school and, in the process, make that transition easier for more children. First, however, it would be worth examining at least some of the research literature on this topic. In what follows we will rely primarily on research conducted in the United States. Given our theoretical position, we clearly do not believe that the American context is applicable elsewhere, but will use it simply as illustrative of the situation in a specific geographical and temporal context.

As Mangione and Speth (1998) argue, we can think of the transition in terms of horizontal and vertical continuity or discontinuity. A good deal of research in the United States has focused on the vertical axis, or trying to arrange continuity between children's prior-to-school experiences and those they will encounter in school. Much of that work has focused on children's experiences in child care, and specifically child-care quality. Some of this research has focused on the impact of structural characteristics, such as age and sex, group size, teacher-child ratio, as well as teachers' training, experience and length of time within the child-care classroom (e.g. Gullo and Burton, 1992, 1993; Magnuson *et al.*, 2004). Other researchers have tried to assess what actually occurs within classrooms, such as the nature of adult-child and child-child interactions, and the ways in which children are encouraged to become involved in activities (e.g. Cassidy *et al.*, 2005; National Institute for Early Education Research, 2005). The research evidence seems clear: the higher the quality of the child-care experience, the better children do following school entry (Barnett, 1995; Field, 1991; Howes, 1990; Howes *et al.*, 1992; NICHD Early

Child Care Research Network, 2003; Phillips *et al.*, 2000; Ramey *et al.*, 1999; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000).

A second approach to vertical continuity is to focus on aspects of the home environment, examining the links between such things as child-rearing practices and subsequent school performance. The literature on the transition to school has dealt far less with the home environment than that of earlier child-care experiences, but the results are similar. There appear to be clear links between aspects of the child's home life (such as authoritative parenting, children's autonomy, the quality of the parents' relationship, both with one another and with their children, and the children's perceptions of those relationships, access to books, children involved in conversations with adults, and so on), and the children's transition to school (Bradley, 1995; Christian *et al.*, 1998; Clarke and Kurtz-Costes, 1997; Cowan *et al.*, 2005; Dickinson and Tabors, 2001; Hart and Risley, 1995, 1999; Parker *et al.*, 1999; Snow *et al.*, 1991).

Horizontal continuity, as the name suggests, deals with concurrent links between home and school, the idea being that when teachers and parents are working towards the same ends and using similar approaches children will do better making the transition to school and succeeding in school than when parents are unaware of what their children's teachers are doing and/or working at cross-purposes. Horizontal continuity may be achieved by such things as parents being encouraged to take an active role (at least up to a point) in their children's schooling, helping their children with homework, coming to meet their children's teachers both on designated times ('open house' nights) and when their children are perceived as having problems or needing extra help. There is not a good deal of literature on this subject, at least in the United States, but what there is describes the clear value in such continuity (see, for example, Comer, 1993; Comer *et al.*, 1996; Epstein, 1986, 1996; Gutman and McLoyd, 2000; Haynes and Comer, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995; Pianta and Cox, 1999).

The central goal behind the vast majority of this research is to suggest ways of making the transition to school easier by ensuring that children are ready for school – by supporting or changing the types of experiences that they have in the years before they go to school and those they have in their first years of schooling. In other words, the approach is what has been termed 'top down' or 'schoolcentric' (Doucet, 2008; Graue, 1992; Graue *et al.*, 2001; Lawson, 2003). This approach received a significant boost from America's first President Bush, in 1989, when six goals for education were set forth, the first of which declared that 'by the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn' (Action Team on School Readiness, 1992, cited in Shepard *et al.*, 1998, p. 128).

It is difficult to know how such a goal can be achieved by legislative effort alone, and the fact that the new century arrived without any significant alteration in children's school readiness should make us view the statement with caution. It is also worth pointing out that the wording of President Bush's panel could have been reworded to state: 'By the year 2000, all schools will be ready to learn about the children who populate their classrooms and the families that raise those children' (Doucet and Tudge, 2007, p. 314). Perhaps we should be thinking more about 'ready schools' than 'ready children' (National Education Goals Panel, 1998; see also Murphey and Burns, 2002; Pianta *et al.*, 1999). However, rather than taking a position either of modifying children to fit them into schools or of modifying schools to fit them to the children it surely makes more sense to use an approach that incorporates both positions. And that is precisely what a contextualist perspective allows us to do.

How to understand the transition to school from a contextualist perspective

As described above, at the centre of any contextualist theory are the activities that typically go on between the developing individuals of interest (children entering school) and the other important people with whom those individuals interact (e.g. other children, parents, relatives and teachers). The nature of the activities and interactions can only be understood by taking into account the individual characteristics of the people concerned and aspects of the context – local, cultural and temporal. We will consider each of these aspects in turn, although all aspects are necessarily intertwined from a contextualist point of view.

What, then, are the typical activities and interactions in which a child, a young boy for example, participates soon after entering school? Mostly they will be activities that his teacher has organized, depending (in part) on her views of what is appropriate for children of this age and what it is that she hopes to accomplish. The same is true, of course, for the types of interactions that she wants to encourage, both between her and the children and between the children themselves. In other words, her own background, experience, likes and dislikes, comfort level and so on play a key role in arranging these activities and interactions.

At the same time, the way in which these activities and interactions occur are related to the background, experience, likes and dislikes and so on of each child. What experience does this boy have with the types of activities that his teacher has prepared? If he has had some experience, has he enjoyed it, found it too difficult, or been bored by it? Is he ready for the activity, cognitively speaking, or is it too simple? And as for the interactions, what are his prior experiences with such things as sitting in a large circle, waiting his turn to talk or listening while his teacher speaks? To what extent has he been accustomed to being told exactly what he has to do, been used to responding to questions the answers to which are obvious to the questioner, or learned that ‘I’d rather that you didn’t ...’ means ‘Don’t’. Has he had many prior experiences playing with many other children, and what has been the nature of those experiences? Is he an active type, eager to engage in different activities and engage with the other children, or is he more passive, one who waits to be drawn into activities and interactions?

It is impossible to answer these questions by focusing simply on the personal characteristics of the individuals involved, but we need to consider their contexts, both local and cultural. The school itself is a good place to start – where is it situated, how old is it and how old are the materials in it, how much money is available for teachers’ salaries, new materials and so on? From the British point of view these may seem odd questions – but in the context of the United States they are far from odd, given that some schools have more than twice the funding, per child, than do others, with similar differences in teachers’ salaries across different school districts even within the same region of the country (Kozol, 1992, 2005). Children’s involvement in activities and interactions, both with their teachers and their peers, is likely to be different in a school that is well equipped, in a pleasant neighbourhood, with small class sizes, with teachers who feel themselves well paid than in a poor, run-down school, bursting at the seams, with inadequate facilities and poorly paid teachers.

But equally one has to consider the homes from which the children come. Is the setting one that allows time for joint play, storytelling, or reading? Is the environment chaotic or calm? Are the available adults involved in another activity (preparing a meal, watching television) while their children want to engage with them? If so, are the children encouraged and invited to participate in the adults’ activities? Are reading materials easily available in the home? Are the adults interested in reading with their children and, if so, in what way? Do

children and adults exchange stories about the day or about past experiences? Setting characteristics, as well as individual characteristics, are clearly important in influencing the way in which activities and interactions occur.

So too are the broader aspects of context. Even staying within the confines of a single country, given the way in which we defined culture earlier, we could discuss variations among different ethnic groups, racial differences, recency of immigration, religious affiliation, or social class. Here we focus on the latter, drawing on Mel Kohn's (1977, 1995) view that parents' prior educational and current occupational experiences have a profound impact on their child-rearing values. Kohn's argument is that although parents want to raise their children to succeed, working-class and middle-class parents tend to have different approaches, based on their educational and occupational conditions of life. Those who need to be self-directing and think for themselves at work are much more likely to value self-direction and autonomy in their children; by contrast, those who succeed at work primarily by carefully following the rules that others have decided are more likely to value children who also carefully do what they are told. In Kohn's view, therefore, authoritarian and authoritative child-rearing styles are not primarily personal characteristics (Baumrind, 1989) but are related to socioeconomic conditions of life; a more inductive, authoritative approach is likely to fit better with values favouring the development of children's self-direction, whereas a more controlling, authoritarian approach makes more sense given a goal of raising children to follow others' rules.

Obviously there are parents from both social classes who, temperamentally, are more inclined to lay down the law whereas others favour drawing children into the decision-making process. Similarly some children from both social classes seem to be more temperamentally suited than others to try to achieve self-direction despite what their parents might wish. Clearly it would be a mistake to view social classes (or any other cultural group) as homogeneous. Nonetheless, systems of values and beliefs that are widespread throughout a cultural group also have a profound impact on the ways in which parents in that group try to raise their children.

But the situation is yet more complex, because children clearly are influenced by other people than their parents, and many, as we know, have had child-care experiences with teachers and other children alike. As described earlier, there are relations between the quality of the child care and the ease of the child's transition to school. But the quality of child care is not so easily ascertained, once we accept the notion that different groups within any given society have different goals for raising their children. And it is just as easy to see clear variations in the types of child-care experiences provided to working-class and middle-class children as it is to see variations in their home lives. Again we will draw on the US situation, although precisely the same arguments have been made with regard to societies as diverse as China, Japan and Brazil (Freitas and Shelton, 2005; Freitas *et al.*, 2008; Tobin *et al.*, 1989).

During the nineteenth century, coinciding with the rise of industrialization in the United States, day-care services were made available for some (but far from all) of the children of indigent and/or poor, but working, families. These services were designed essentially to take care of children whose parents were viewed as unwilling or unable to do so or, as in the case of the kindergarten, to socialize the children of immigrants into the American way of life (Freitas *et al.*, 2008; Scarr and Weinberg, 1986; Tobin *et al.*, 1989; Weber, 1969). The very name ('day care') denotes the fact that children were there to be taken care of during the day in order to allow parents to work. The aim was clearly to serve economic, and not educational, ends. However, during the same historical period, a different type of setting was being established for the children of middle-class and wealthy families – kindergartens whose

purpose was to provide educational and social experiences for the children who attended for just part of the day.

The impact of these roots is still felt today. Admittedly, day-care facilities have gone beyond the simple provision of care to serve educational goals; this is seen most clearly in the various programmes designed to help the children of the poorest families, such as the federal Head Start programme, established in 1965, Early Head Start (started 30 years later, for 3-year-olds) and the rapidly growing number of state-wide pre-kindergarten programmes (Gilliam and Zigler, 2004; Love *et al.*, 2005).

However, as Scarr and Weinberg pointed out: 'In contrast to the nursery schools of the 1950s, most Head Start programs emphasized education more than development – or more precisely, learning to learn' (1986, p. 1143). The focus in many of these programs is on the 'basics' of education – learning the 'skills' of early literacy and early numeracy and, equally important in the eyes of the teachers, learning to pay attention, follow instructions and obey the school norms. This approach to school readiness is clearly quite different from middle-class approaches to early education that are based more on ideas of the 'whole child' who learns through play and whose interests are supported and extended (Heath, 1983; Lubeck, 1985; Lubeck *et al.*, 2001).

Two things are noteworthy. The first is that historical time is important; children's experiences are not simply influenced by their geographic and social context but also by their historical context. Not only does it matter *when* children are born (to be cared for during the day, in the nineteenth century, and to be given a 'head start' in the basics to give them, supposedly, a better chance at competing with their middle-class peers, at the start of the twenty-first century), but also historical origins continue to be influential.

The second noteworthy aspect is that parents' child-rearing values and beliefs seem to be mirrored in the types of child-care settings that their children frequent. This is perhaps not surprising; parents who value their children growing up to be relatively self-directing will be unlikely to choose (assuming they have a choice, both financially and in terms of availability) a child-care facility in which the children are encouraged simply to learn to obey and follow directions. Parents who think it important for their children to learn respect and discipline will be far happier choosing this type of setting. In other words, the very notion of what is to count as quality varies – what is viewed as high quality by one group (even within a single society) may not be so viewed by members of another group.

We should stress that this contextualist position is not one of simple relativism, in which any set of values and beliefs is as good as any other, but what Lourenço (1992) termed 'cultural relativism'. Within any given society, such as the United States, in terms of contemporary markers of cognitive and social development and of school success, the research evidence seems fairly clear (see, for example, Dickinson and Tabors, 2001; Hart and Risley, 1995, 1999). But one cannot simply assume that all cultural groups, even within one society, therefore subscribe to the same set; there are historically formed reasons for the variations, and each set has both strengths and weaknesses for children's development.

Just by looking at social class variations in a single country, we can thus see deep-seated differences in the values, beliefs and experiences of children arriving in school. The issue becomes more complex when we consider the other sources of variation, such as ethnicity, religion, skin colour and so on, and the intersections among them. What then are the implications for the vertical continuity that helps children's transition to school? Continuity is least likely to be found when the teacher's background (by virtue of social class, ethnicity, race, religion, etc.) is different from that of the child (Crozier, 1998; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lareau, 1989, 2002).

In societies in which there is a good deal of de facto segregation (whether by race, ethnicity, social class, or religion) perhaps there is less of a problem; working-class children, for example, will simply go to working-class schools. But there is a problem if that society, at the current time, accepts an ideology of schools providing an equal education, or of no child being 'left behind' as in contemporary discourse in the United States. Teachers, moreover, by virtue of their own education and their current occupation, are more likely to have middle-class values and beliefs. Cooney (1995) reported, for example, that even in an area of the United States with a wide range of different ethnic and social class groups, the schools there clearly reinforced the values, interests and expectations of just one group – white and middle class. This is hardly surprising, given that success (at least as measured by income and status) is more clearly attained by this group than by any others. But we should be extremely cautious about accepting one set of values and beliefs as a societal ideal, with alternative sets viewed as a deficit (Doucet, 2008; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

Shortcomings, dilemmas and tensions

To this point we have laid out what we mean by contextualism and our view of a contextualist approach to the transition to school, relying primarily on Vygotsky's and Bronfenbrenner's contextualist theories. Both theories have their shortcomings, however. Vygotsky never defined what he meant by culture and paid minimal attention to the processes whereby differences among cultural groups are transformed into variations in children's developmental experiences. He also did not focus on what the individual brings to the process of development.

Bronfenbrenner, building on Vygotskian and Lewinian foundations, was far more explicit about the impact of children themselves on their own development, and laid out a clearer differentiation of layers of context than did Vygotsky. However, despite his treatment of the macrosystem as a culture or sub-culture, he failed to take seriously the implication of different cultural groups having different values and beliefs, and therefore of encouraging different types of activities and interactions ('proximal processes' in his terminology). Instead he implicitly accepted mainstream white middle-class practices as the ideal to be attained. (For a more detailed assessment and critique of the theories, and the discussion of a more inclusive contextualist theory, see Tudge, 2008.)

The primary dilemma of a contextualist approach to the transition to school is, surely, the difficulty of applying it in practice, at least in contemporary society, as we will now attempt to illustrate. Returning to our example of a boy entering school, what sort of activities and interactions are going to be most helpful to his doing well? His teacher's first goal needs to be to understand his past experiences and his current attitudes and abilities. Although some understanding can be gained from meeting his parents, knowing whether he attended child care (and its nature), and assessing his cognitive and social skills, what is really needed is better and different communication between teacher and child.

Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development is particularly relevant. Unfortunately, too many scholars continue to translate the crucial Russian word *obuchenie* as 'instruction' rather than the more accurate 'teaching/learning' when describing interactions within the zone (Tudge and Scrimsher, 2003). Instead we should think of a bi- (or multi-) directional interchange between child and teacher, in which a zone of proximal development is created in the course of interactions in which both can teach and learn. Our boy can certainly teach his teacher about his past experiences, if he is given the chance, and his teacher can certainly teach him better after having learned from him. The types of activities and interactions in which he then engages can then be related to both his strengths and

his weaknesses. As we have argued elsewhere, ‘children, while teaching their teachers about themselves and their ways of thinking, are likely to become more drawn into the process of learning’ (Doucet and Tudge, 2007, p. 312) and it is often the case that teachers learn best when teaching (Tudge and Scrimsher, 2003). Our view is thus very similar to that of Paulo Freire, who defined ‘liberating education’ as education in which ‘the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialog with the students, who in their turn while being taught also teach’ (1998, p. 53).

For this to happen, of course, it would help for both teacher and child to be interested in this type of teaching and learning process, and some are more temperamentally suited to it than are others. But we also need to look outside the classroom. To what extent are teachers prepared to teach in a way that not only is highly individualized and time-consuming but also requires a degree of humility about how much needs to be learned from one’s pupils as one teaches them? This depends in part on the type of education that students have while becoming teachers; it would obviously be helpful if teaching/learning experiences of the type described above were a regular feature of their interactions with their own lecturers and professors. But it also depends on what contemporary society thinks is important: What are its values? How great is the concern that all children are helped to make a successful transition to school? What resources will be given to the education system to ensure that children and teachers can create zones of proximal development in the ways we have suggested? To what extent will head teachers support teachers who try a different approach to interactions with children and the provision of varied types of activities?

At present we are doubtful that these questions can be answered in a way that we think would be valuable. However, cultures and societies are forever undergoing change, and change, in part, comes from the activities of individual members of those cultures and societies. From a contextualist perspective, it is never enough to expect the context to determine the nature of activities and interactions, but for individual actors to play their role in changing their context.

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Reflective questions

- 1 If you're a teacher of young children, your goal is probably to start providing your help from where the child is – cognitively, socially, and emotionally. But, to know that, you have to understand more than what the child seems more or less capable of within the classroom. What would you need to do to understand the child's background in more detail, including the parents' values and goals for their child and the child's strengths and weaknesses outside the classroom? How would schools need to change to give you the time to get to know these things?
- 2 We pointed out that the Russian word *obuchenie* has incorrectly been translated either as 'instruction' or 'learning' rather than as 'teaching/learning'. How would teacher–child interactions need to change if we wanted to create zones of proximal development in the course of teaching/learning rather than simply by providing information and assistance just in advance of the child's current ability level?

Further reading

For literature on the transition to school

Pianta, R.C., Cox, M.J. and Snow, K. (2007) *School Readiness and the Transition to Kindergarten in the Era of Accountability*, Baltimore, MD, Brookes.

For contextualist theories

Tudge, J.R.H. (2008) *The Everyday Lives of Young Children: Culture, Class, and Child Rearing in Diverse Societies*, New York, Cambridge University Press.

For early schooling from a Vygotskian perspective

Scrimsher, S. and Tudge, J.R.H. (2003) 'The teaching/learning relationship in the first years of school: some revolutionary implications of Vygotsky's theory', *Early Education and Development*, 14(3), pp. 293–312.

