TRANSITION FROM HOME TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SETTINGS: THE EXPERIENCE OF CHILDREN OF ETHIOPIAN IMMIGRANT PARENTS

BIZUNESH WUBIE, Ph. D.
Assistant Professor, Marshall University, Marshall University Graduate College

A paper to be presented at Comparative International Education Society: March 2004 Conference, Salt Lake City.
TRANSITION FROM HOME TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SETTINGS: THE EXPERIENCE OF CHILDREN OF ETHIOPIAN IMMIGRANT PARENTS

ABSTRACT

This paper is a part of a study conducted in Toronto, Canada. The major purpose of the study was to explore the social, emotional and educational experiences of children of new Ethiopian immigrant parents in their homes and in Canadian early childhood education settings. The experiences of six children were examined through qualitative research method by using observations and interviews. One of the results of the study showed that the children of the newly immigrated Ethiopian parents experienced intense uneasiness during their transition from home to early childhood education settings as compared to the emotional experiences of children whose language and culture were similar with that of the culture and the language of the early childhood education settings. This paper informs how and why these children experienced intense uneasiness during their transition from home to early childhood education settings and suggests some techniques of dealing with such children in early childhood education classroom settings.

For various reasons, people of different cultures and languages move from one part of the world to the other. Particularly in countries like U.S.A. and Canada, in many schools and early childhood education settings, the presence of young children with different cultural and linguistic background is obvious. In fact, the majority of the children in Toronto early childhood education settings come from immigrant families with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Biemiller, Regan & Lero, 1992). Such children are poorly understood in Toronto early childhood education classroom settings (Bernhard, Lefebvre, Chud & Lange (1995, 1997). As the result, dealing with them has not been easy. From my many years of teaching and interacting with children of diverse culture and language both in Ethiopia and in Canada, I also had the opportunity to practically observe the magnitude of the problem that such children have. This is one of the reasons that motivated me to deal with this particular issue because “any inquiry
process is within the context of a researcher’s personal experiences [and] general socio-cultural framework” (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p.33)

The major purpose of the study was to explore some aspects of the past, the present and the possible future experiences of children of new immigrant Ethiopian parents in their homes and in Toronto early childhood education settings in order to search for ideas, themes, concepts and processes that could contribute to: a) enriching curriculum and enhancing effective teaching/learning processes in early childhood education settings with children of diverse culture and languages; b) policy making with regard to early childhood education and care settings that serve linguistically, culturally and racially diverse children; c) training of early childhood education staff; and d) training of parent educators.

Qualitative research approach was applied to examine the experiences of six children, mainly, through the perspectives of their parents and teachers. In-depth interviews were conducted with twelve parents and six teachers on the children’s past and present experiences. Thorough observations were conducted in the children’s homes as well as in the early childhood education classroom settings.

The children’s experiences in their homes and in their early childhood education classroom settings were conceptualized at different points in time. One of these points was to look at their experiences during their transition from home to early childhood education settings. As a part of the larger study, this particular paper examines this point of transition from home to early childhood education classroom settings with particular emphasis on the children’s emotional experiences during their transition from home to early childhood education settings.

The major question raised to collect the data on the issue was: what/how are/were the children’s emotional experiences during their transition from home to early childhood education
settings as compared to the emotional experiences of children whose language and culture were similar with that of the culture and the language of the early childhood education settings?

Data collected from the parents and the teachers through the major question and related sub-questions were supplemented with my own experiential recollections which I gained from working with children of different cultures and languages in Ethiopia and Canada. From the analysis of the data, among other things, it was found that the children in the study experienced intense emotional uneasiness during their transition from their homes to early childhood education classroom settings.

In many cases, when young children between eight months to three and a half years of age separate from their parents or primary care-givers and encounter a “strange situation”, that is new people and a new environment, they experience what is known as “separation anxiety” (Ainsworth, Bleher, Waters & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1970). One of the reasons for experiencing separation anxiety is their attachment to their care-givers. What is attachment? Attachment is “an emotional tie between people” (Reber, 1985, p. 63). The behavior that children display as the result of their separation from their primary care-givers is known as “attachment behavior” (Ainsworth, Bleher, Waters & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1970). These behaviors include such things as crying, being frustrated, getting scared and being distressed. To my knowledge, when Ainsworth, Bleher, Waters & Wall (1978, p. xiii) undertook their studies about children’s attachment behavior in Baltimore and Uganda, the “strange situation” was designed in such a way that it was “appropriate to the kind of experiences that an infant in that particular society encounters in real life”. In other words, even though the infants in Ainsworth, Bleher, Waters and Wall (1978) study encountered new people and a new environment, the language and culture in the new situation were not different from their home language and
culture. On the other hand, the children in this study experienced situations different from their own in terms of language and culture. How would their experience be? The analysis on the narratives of the parents and the teachers clearly showed that these children experienced very intense uneasiness as compared to children whose language and culture were similar to that of the culture of the early childhood education classroom settings. The narratives also showed that the major reason for this was that these children’s language and culture were different from the language and the culture of the early childhood education classroom settings. However, it is important to note that this study is not suggesting that the immersion of children of immigrant parents in their language and culture prior to coming to early childhood education classroom settings is disadvantageous as immersion in their home language and culture improves their future educational successes (Cummins, 1979; 1985; 1986; 1996; Feuerverger, 1994). Rather, it is to promote sensitivity on the part of parents, teachers and other educators so that they may pay a particular attention to the way they handle the transitional experiences of children whose language and culture are different from the language and the culture of the early childhood education settings and suggest some techniques of handling the problem.

Almost all the teachers interviewed for this study, indicated that children of newly immigrated parents experienced intense emotional distress. The question following that was: what techniques or means did the teachers use to reduce the intensity of the uneasiness of these children so that they could adjust to the classroom situation with ease? In analyzing the responses to this question, first, those techniques which the teachers claimed did not work for them to comfort and calm the children were identified. Second, those techniques which they claimed worked for them were identified. With regard to the techniques that did not work well, many of the teachers indicated that at the initial stage, particularly when the children were at the
highest pitch of intensity in their protest to be part of the classroom environment, trying to comfort them through picking them up, hugging, touching, playing, talking in a language that they did not understand, soothing them in a way that was not familiar to them, singing songs in melodies that they were not familiar with and giving them toys to play with, did not work. In fact, these teachers recalled that when they tried to talk to them, the children turned their faces away, when they tried to give them toys they refused to take them or if they took them they would throw them away and when they tried to hug them they struggled to get out of their arms. The teachers emphasized that talking to the children in a language that they did not understand intensified the children’s protest against staying in the early childhood education settings and in turn made their transition from home to early childhood education settings worse.

Among the techniques that the teachers claimed worked for them included: encouraging parents to stay in the classroom for some time, using a lot of pictures and visualization, saying a few simple words in the mother tongue of the children and asking parents if there were any English words that were familiar to the children and using those words when necessary, where possible looking for teachers who spoke the language of the child. For example, one of the teachers said that the administration of the daycare where she was working always looked for casual teachers who had the cultural and linguistic background of children of newly immigrated parents. This suggests that the involvement of the administration in ameliorating the problems of such children’s transition from home to early childhood education settings is very important.

Normally, when young children come to an early childhood education classroom settings for the first time, it is important to ask the parents to stay in the classroom for two or three days until the child feels comfortable. But staying around for two or three days in early childhood education classroom settings does not appear to be adequate when it comes to dealing with
children of newly immigrated parents. As the teachers in this study emphasized, for such children it takes a longer time, sometimes from three weeks to one month, to settle down which, in turn, demands the presence of the parents in the classroom for a longer period.

Infants and young children tend to explore an unfamiliar environment in the presence of their mothers, primary care-givers, but slow down or cease exploration in their absence" (Ainsworth, Bleher, Waters & Wall, 1978, p. x). This means that the presence of primary care-givers in the classroom helps to ease the transition of children of first generation immigrant parents from home early childhood education settings. But as some of the teachers pointed out, some parents resist staying in the classroom thinking that they are wasting their time. Therefore, early childhood educators, need to encourage and orient parents on how to be “partners”(Wilson, 1997) of teachers in comforting and helping settle down their children in early childhood education setting is one means of promoting the smooth transition of such children from home to early childhood education settings. Both parents and teachers should be aware of the fact that a positive partnership between them is a key towards better understanding, learning and adaptation of their children (Bernhard, Lefebvre, Kilbride, & Chud, 1998; Brown, 1979; Mock, 1986; Pugh, 1985; Wilson, 1997). Positive and a warm attitude between the two partners can be an avenue toward comforting children during their transition. Particularly, for teachers and other early childhood education professionals, a closer relationship with parents offer opportunities for overcoming some of the many discontinuities between home and pre-school services (Pugh, 1985, p. 223) as they could exchange ideas helpful for the children’s well-being both at home and at early childhood education settings.

As two of the teachers in this study emphasized, since such children do not understand spoken words or sentences, it is helpful to communicate with them through pictures and gestures.
This method is a common method used to teach young children in any early childhood education setting. But as emphasized by the teachers, it has particular importance to the children whose home language is different from the language of the early childhood education settings as it enables them to see the pictures of things that they do not know their names in English. Therefore, to use pictures, particularly pictures that are culture specific, helps the child to understand what the teacher is talking about.

Another technique which was frequently mentioned by the teachers was asking the parents to tell them the English words or songs that the children already knew. This helps the teachers to say a few words or to sing songs that the children are familiar with because, as Montessori (1973) points out, if one wants to communicate or to teach a child in an understandable way, it is important to start from what the child already knows. Although most of the Ethiopian first generation immigrant parents did not speak in English with their children prior to their attendance in early childhood settings, there probably are a few English words that the children would have picked from children’s television programs, from other children in the neighborhood play grounds or from family friends. Saying words or singing songs that the children already knew helps to stop them from crying. Also as many of the teachers in this study emphasized, preparing a list of simple words from the language of children of newly immigrated parents and using them during the transition period has been found very useful.

During our discussion on the issue of transitional experiences, some of the teachers in this study were interested to know more techniques on how to deal with such children. In fact, two of them insisted that they would like to know more about the issue of dealing with such children and asked me if I could tell them any techniques that I believed worked in comforting
such children in early childhood settings. I was happy to share with them the techniques that I found effective in my experiences of working with children of similar backgrounds.

During the first few months of my experience, just as the teachers in this study did, I thought that hugging, soothing in my own way, talking to them and giving them toys to play with would help to comfort the children; however, just as these techniques did not work for the teachers in this study, they did not also work for me. But in my endeavor to comfort the children, what worked for me best was using toys and educational materials in slow motion in areas where the crying and distressed children could watch. These activities included such things as rolling small balls on the floor; building blocks very gently and in an orderly fashion; hugging dolls with love and care; doing puzzles; pouring water from one jug to another with care and precision; drawing pictures on large pieces of paper on the floor; dancing in slow motion. What I observed was that when the crying and distressed children saw these activities they would pause to watch, they stopped crying and sometimes smile and burst into laughter. This is consistent with Montessori’s (1973) theory which says that children love to see small and moving things and also enjoy activities that are performed in a gentle and slow manner.

In summary, the techniques that teachers and parents may use to ease the transition from home to early childhood education include: encouraging parents to stay in the early childhood education settings until children feel comfortable, using a lot of visualization, saying a few English words that the children already know, singing songs that they know, saying a few words from the home language of the children and engaging in nonverbal activities in a gentle and slow manner. Moreover, pre-transitional techniques such as familiarizing the children with a few basic English words and songs, participating in parenting centers and arranging visits to early childhood education settings where children of newly immigrated parents will join can contribute
to ease the transitional experiences from home to early childhood education settings. What is also important to note is that the traditional techniques of easing the experience of transition from home to early childhood education settings are not effective in dealing with the transition of children of newly immigrated parents. In fact, as this study suggests, it may make the situation worse. It is also important to note that all children of newly immigrated parents are not homogenous. They can be “heterogenous” (Bernhard, 1995) since factors like class, gender and race may influence their experiences during their transition or adjustment. Due to this, a technique that works for one child may not work for another child. So it is always important to consult parents to know the background and the home experiences of the child in detail.

In conclusion, as early childhood educators, we need to recognize the intense uneasiness of children whose languages and cultures are different from the languages and the cultures of the early childhood education settings during their transition from home to early childhood education classroom settings. This implies that the training programs in the field of early childhood education and parenting need to pay a special attention to the issue of transition from home to early childhood education settings particularly for children of newly immigrated parents so that teachers and parents could be well prepared to effectively deal with the problem.
REFERENCES


