Strengthening Early Years to Kindergarten Transition:
Research Report 2018 – 2019

1. CONTEXT

1.1 Strengthening Early Years To Kindergarten Transitions:
Project Goal

The 'Strengthening Early Years to Kindergarten Transitions (EY2K)' initiative is intended to ensure that children and families experience a coherent transition from Early Years to Kindergarten. The initiative will develop guidelines and models that focus on:

- Increasing the use of **restorative transition policies & practices** that are strength-based, child & family-focused, holistic, and emphasize the importance of cultural identity
- Establishing a local **context for partnership, strong relationships, and collaboration** in planning and decision-making
- **Including children and families in the collaboration process** as well as a broad range of professionals that the family identifies as critical to include
- Working collaboratively to **increase the exchange of knowledge, experiences and information** about transition practices and experiences. Ongoing communities of practice – at every level.
- Identifying and address the barriers in 'both systems' and determine what would be **enabling conditions** (e.g. shared pedagogical practices, joint professional learning opportunities) (from *MOE, 2018)*

Approach

Each School District will identify a community within their School Districts that would benefit from a focused approach to:
- Place a greater emphasis on transitions that are family and child-centered
- Increase ongoing, effective and timely communication
- Increase collaboration to strengthen coherence between community and school-based Early Years services
- Improve pedagogical continuity between the Early Years Sector and Primary Education

- All sites will be required to take a collaborative inquiry approach and to document their approaches and activities within a case-study framework (from MOE)

1.2 Inquiry questions

Each district/community group developed an inquiry question to guide their work. For example:

- What opportunities can we provide for ECE/EL sector & school based educators to enhance relationships and build a culture of collaboration?

- Will inteviewing and documenting the experiences of our community partners, services providers and early years families help identify and describe the available services and people necessary tonavigate the complex transition process between early learning and school-aged programming. In addition will this process identify gaps or areas of need that are required to ensure a streamlined transition.

- How do we develop a shared understanding among the early learning sector and school-based educators regarding children's transition from early years to kindergarten?

2. DISTRICT/COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Groups in six communities participated in exploratory pilot projects designed to strengthen transitions for young children in 2018-2019. Groups chose one community or population, developed a plan, and initiated activities and partnerships. Groups met approximately once each month, recorded the actions they were taking, and the results.

2.1 Looking across projects

Local projects had a number of common factors:

- **Focus on one group** or population where they believed they could make a difference

- Incorporation of **local context** into the project design

- An **inquiry approach,** where their projects were refined and adjusted based on what they were learning

- **Community partnerships**, involving the school district, community organizations, and early learning professionals and groups

- **Revising/designing resources** for families. For example,

    - *Child Development Centre K-transition package (SD 60)*
    - *Early Years Pathways to Kindergarten (SD6)*

Projects also differed in some significant ways. For example:

- Some were designed **based on an existing project** in the district/community

   We had already been thinking about this concept, and SEYT2K was an opportunity to go to the people in our community to make it happen

- Some focused on a **particular geographic area** while others focused on a **particular service or group of children**

- Some were able to build on **existing community partnerships** while others began by **identifying community partners and building relationships**

- Some were able to provide services within a few months of starting; others spent most of the first year in gathering information and making connections

- **Parents were involved in the planning and initial inquiry in various ways** – e.g., attending orientation sessions; responding to focus groups and surveys; offering ongoing feedback about plans and activities. For example, one team began by asking families to tell about:
    - *What they want to know about K*
    - *Their hopes for their children*
    - *Their child's strengths*

3. KEY FINDINGS: Project Assets

One of the most interesting ways that projects varied was in their basic organization and their relationship to the local school district. Some of the districts entered the project with strong, committed leadership and passionate advocates for early children learning. For example, they had:

- **Well-functioning and committed teams** that worked in partnership on various existing activities. Regardless of the organizations, positions, or locations involved, these groups tended to refer to themselves as with labels that emphasized Early Chlidhood and community outreach.
    - They had existing networks and connections they could consult and draw on

    - Transitions and early learning were seen as part of the core work of the district/community

    - They had a sense of stability – for example, they were not dependent on presence or contributions of one key person so they were able to continue their work even if a key participant moved, went on leave or changed jobs. (There was some institutional "memory")

    - Although most members (sometimes all members) had other responsibilities, there was no sense that early learning/transitions was an "add-on")

        We have a strong, well-connected early learning team!

        We had a strong core team, and that allowed js to bring in other partners to share the work load

        Working as a team benefits us with a collaborative and supportive environment where we all feel supported and heard.

- **A common sense of purpose** guiding the project. Projects varied considerably in their sense of focus and purpose. Those that appeared to be most successful, and satisfying to the project teams, tended to have a strong focus; it was relatively easy to tell which activities were "core" to their purpose, and that helped them to realize their passion for making a difference.

        We had close connections with common goals and language around family, community, and school needs.

        A common interest in social-emotional learned is helping to make this do-able.

That we keep moving in the right direction and that we are including more people in our plan.

We know what our scope is—everyone has security in knowing everything is taken care of. We break it down and take "bites" sharing our strengths

- **Informed and supportive district leadership** that assigned priority and resources to transition issues and activities and participated in community partnerships
  - In at least one district, district leaders attended not only events, but also planning meetings
  - District communications featured early learning approaches and activities
  - Through their day-to-day interactions, district leaders made clear that early learning and transitions were important
  - District leaders, themselves, sustained a network of community partners and supporters
  - The district appeared to assign some priority to staffing and assigning responsibilities for early learning and transitions, and offered public recgition of the importance of this work

  We have incredible support from upper Administration!

  Amazing collaboration when you get ECE, K teachers, and administration in the same room together – ideas were slowing and the buzz in the room was electric.

- **An emphasis on connections and relationships with individual families** that makes the project "real" and honors the time and ongoing [respect wrong word] needed to build lasting relationships and trust that help to support children throughout their time in school.

  - In one district, team members regularly visit a local friendship center just to interact and get to know the families and children. After several months, they are beginning to see more families from the Centre at other activities..
  - One district offers "Pop-up Play" sessions where they go out to community spaces to have fun with children and families (e.g., the Food Bank, City Hall, Parks)

  We've documented so many families engaging with their kids in play, but also being vulnerable in front of other parents experimenting with play.

  The support worker was a safe person who was saying that this event, these people at the event are safe. It was because of the relationship the families had with the support worker, that the families were able to trust us and engage with us. We were really intrigued by this and we really wanted to ground relationships

and connections and cultivating on trusting relationships already formed with other service providers.

We were curious on how we could connect with families who are attending early years programs. We thought why not go to them. We asked ourselves why are we always expecting families to come to us? So, we thought of offering Pop Up play

- **Strong connections to and with existing community groups and collaboratives.**

Project teams realized varying levels of success, and part of this appeared to be associated with their connections and ability to successfully involve other groups. They appeared to be both insightful and well-connected to potential in their community. For example, when their anticipated Health partner turned out to be "problematic", one team was able to form a new partnership quickly with nursing students at the local university – a partnership that worked out extremely well and now is part of the ongoing project.

By bringing people together we build relationships and learn from one another. Support for families is strengthened

One of our first questions what, "What can we join?"
This project stemmed from our community tables and has real ownership here!

We are building on our strengths and what is already working in our community

We already have a large 0-8 learning community

- **Consultation and support from families**

We took it to the community, including parents and ECEs and the project was well-received.

We learned that many families feel disconnected with the Kindergarten transition process. Many felt unprepared to prepare their children. We noticed reoccurring theme of a lack of relationships and connections.

- **Opened dialogue for ECEs and K teachers to see each other in action in classrooms and learning centers**

- **A sense of joy!**
  School should be fun and joyful!

Challenges
- **Time.**
  - *We need to ensure ideas re concrete and easily implemented otherwise there could be pushback from schools and ECE staff.*
- **Ensure that child is always at the center and that we include all voices**
  - Sometimes a tendency to make assumptions about what's needed, rather than asking and finding out.
- **Community issues and relationships**
  - *The project may be a dead end. WE thought it would work but might be something that won't go forward.*

A last word …

We have learned that transition takes much longer than arrival from point a to b and that once arrived and attending kindergarten the transition into the educational environment continues.