

## **Preschool Transition in Mexico: Exploring Teachers' Perceptions and Practices**

### **Abstract**

This study explored the perceptions of preschool and first grade teachers regarding preschool to first grade transition practices in public schools in Mexico City. A survey was administered to a sample of 15 preschool and 15 primary school teachers, who rated twenty transition practices and answered five open-ended questions. Overall, results revealed that teachers used some practices moderately to promote school-home links but school-school links are not used. Teachers rarely carry out activities with families and other teachers. Teachers' concerns focused on children's academic and personal skills and adaptation to a new routine. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.

**Key Words: Preschool Transition, Teachers' Practices, Teachers' Perceptions, Mexico**

**Angel Urbina-Garcia, School of Education and Social Sciences, University of Hull**

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## Introduction

Easing the transition to primary school has been found to play a major role in children's lives, which can have important long-term effects in different areas of personal development (Curby, Rimm-Kauffman & Cameron, 2009; Perry, Dockett & Petriwskyj, 2014; Pianta, Cox, Taylor & Early, 1999). The international literature on the preschool to first grade transition strongly supports the need for teachers to support this transition given the positive impact on pupils' academic achievement and personal development (Ahtola et al., 2011; Cook & Coley, 2017; LaParo, Pianta & Cox 2000; Lo-Casale-Crouch et al., 2008; Pianta, Cox & Snow, 2007). In fact, this topic has recently been included in the agenda of international organisations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (See UNESCO, 2014) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (See OECD, 2011) as a key issue closely in line with the aim of providing a good quality of basic education to children around the world.

International research on transition has provided a wealth of empirical evidence to better understand this period of change and inform educational policies of the early years' curricula in different countries around the world (Author Citation, 2014; Fabian, 2013). However, research on preschool transition seems to be dominated by studies conducted in developed economies such as the US, Australia and more broadly in Europe, with little research in developing economies, such as Latin America (Author citation, 2014) , despite showing some of the lowest scores in academic performance based on international assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (Rivas, 2015). Our review of the literature revealed a number of variables on which researchers have focused when studying this period of change, such as teachers' practices (Hindman, Skibbe & Morrison 2013), parental practices (McIntyre et al., 2007), intervention programmes (Author, 2006; Giallo, Treyvaud, Matthews & Kienhuis, 2010), headteachers practices (Noel, 2012),

teachers' perceptions (Cook & Cooley, 2017), children's academic achievement (Schulting, Malone & Dodge, 2005), teacher-child interaction patterns (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004), and parents' perceptions (Author, 2014; Malsch, Green & Kothari, 2011) as well as parents' involvement (LaParo, Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2003). This vast body of research strongly suggests that by facilitating this transition, pupils' academic achievement and personal development can be significantly improved and thus, have an impact on reducing dropout rates in the early years of primary school (Bernard Van Leer, 2007; Bossaert et al., 2011; Curby, Rimm-Kauffman & Cameron, 2009; Rubie-Davies, 2010). Studies are needed to obtain a better understanding of how specific educational policies and the socio-cultural context and the educational system *per se*, shape teachers' practices and perceptions. It is a well-known fact that educational systems around the world differ according to the particularities of each cultural context (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014; UNESCO, 2010) and thus, the way in which this transition is experienced by children, teachers and parents, also differs among countries.

Mexico's educational system is divided into four levels. The first level is preschool, which is intended for children under six years old and is optional for parents to send their children to, whilst the second level – primary school – is for children between six and 12 years old. Children who turn six years old by summer are able to start primary school during the fall. Both educational levels are under the supervision of the Ministry of Education (Secretaria de Education Publica; SEP), which publishes the national curricula schools must follow. According to the latest educational reforms in Mexico, the National Curricula states that these educational levels must work collaboratively to ensure a smooth transition between preschool, primary school and secondary school (Cabrero, 2012). At policy level there seems to be important efforts to promote a smooth transition to primary school, but there is little

evidence as to how this has been achieved, and more importantly, what teachers are doing to aid this transition and support this continuity among educational levels.

***Theoretical background: The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition***

Based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human Development (1979), Rimm-Kauffman and Pianta (2000) proposed an Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (EDMT) as a theoretical framework which can be used to better understand the interactions and relationships occurring during this period (Stormshak, Kaminski & Goodman, 2002). Rimm-Kauffman and Pianta, highlight the relevance of this conception by arguing that "the development of this ecology itself is a key focus for understanding transition processes and outcomes" (2000, p. 500). Notably, this model has been successfully applied to the context of transitions in a number of studies (Corsaro et al., 2003; Dunlop & Fabian, 2006; Rathbun & Hausken, 2001; Regena, 2004), which confirms its usefulness in transition-related studies.

The EDTM model considers and analyses a set of variables involved in this transition period, for instance, pre-schoolers will have to adapt themselves to a new environment (Carida, 2011), and the interactions they used to have (e.g., group of friends, teachers) will completely change (Curby, Rimm-Kauffman & Cameron, 2009; McCubbins, 2004) once in first grade. Moreover, by the end of the preschool year, they will have already established a close socio-emotional relationship with the teacher (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006; Curby et al., 2017; Giallo et al., 2010), which will have to change once in first grade. In the new scenario, the primary school, children face new challenges. They need to adapt to a new physical environment, make new friends and establish a relationship with the new teacher and other adults (Ahtola et al., 2011; Rimm-Kauffman & Pianta, 2000). In first grade, children will no longer have the opportunity to play, but rather, they will have to show their academic skills in order to fulfil the requirements of an outcome-based curriculum (Docket & Perry,

2007; Perry, Dockett & Petriwskyj, 2014). In fact, Bassok, Latham and Rorem (2016) suggest that the contents at preschool level have changed to reflect what used to be taught in first grade. As suggested by a number of scholars (Brostrom, 2002; Dahlberg & Taguchi, 1994; Kagan, 1991), a continuity between preschool and primary school must be encouraged considering a range of essential elements, namely curricula, physical environment, social interactions and teachers' pedagogical practice – specifically to avoid turning preschool level into the “new” first grade (Bassok et al., 2016). Previous studies have highlighted the need to link both educational contexts during this transition period by promoting teacher-parent and preschool teacher-first grade teacher interactions. In the literature, this process is known as “bridging” (Malsch et al., 2011). This process is of the utmost importance during this transition since it aims at promoting a constant exchange of information among adults regarding children's personal and academic skills (Huser, Dockett & Perry, 2016; Skouteris et al., 2012). In fact, effective interventions in this period of transition – specifically in the form of teachers' training, parents' involvement and bridging both educational contexts – have been found to directly improve children's academic achievement in primary school (Perry, Dockett & Petriwskyj, 2014).

### ***Teachers' Transition Practices***

The way in which teachers perceive their role and the way in which they can support children during this transition is reflected in their teaching practices (Einarsdottir, Perry & Dockett, 2008). Teachers' practices are found to positively impact children's transitions by making links between preschool and primary school (Schulting, Malone & Dodge, 2005). In fact, teachers' practices that focused on promoting the child-teacher relationship during this transition have been associated with children showing less behavioural problems (Eisenhower, Baker, & Taylor, 2016). Teachers' practices are found to have a modest effect in the family-school involvement. LoCasale et al. (2008) found that children greatly benefit

from teachers' transition practices since these help to create "a stable, well-connected experience from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten" (p. 136), which has a positive impact on school adjustment. It is well documented that teachers' practices aimed at involving parents in their child's education, are associated with higher grades, less disruptive behaviours, better school attendance and greater enrolment in higher education (Dearing, Kreider & Weiss, 2014; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Rous, Hallam, McCormick & Cox, 2010).

The international literature has reported a number of benefits when teachers use appropriate transition practices in their schools. In a large study including 17,212 kindergarten children in the US, Schulting, Malone and Dodge (2005) found that transition practices have a significant impact on improving achievement scores even after controlling for a number of other demographic variables and family socioeconomic status. Hindman, Skibbe and Morrison (2013), found that a number of practices used by teachers in preschool, kindergarten and first grade, helped develop children's early academic skills. Specifically, the authors found that invitations for volunteers were positively associated with children's mathematics and problem-solving skills. Likewise, workshops and training facilitated by teachers, were positively associated with children's vocabulary. Similarly, Nix et al. (2013) found that practices aimed at promoting socio-emotional skills in children at kindergarten in the US, make essential and unique contributions to kindergarten outcomes in reading achievement and learning engagement. In a longitudinal study including Finnish schools, Ahtola et al. (2011) found that practices used by teachers in grade one significantly contributed to a better development of children's skills in reading, writing and math, and thus, supported the transition to first grade. But again, research analysing teachers' transition practices prevails in developed economies, but there is little research in developing economies such as Mexico.

Developed and developing economies have specific differences within the context of political, educational, economic, scientific and social systems that are worth highlighting. Developing economies face pressing challenges such as high rates of income inequality, limited highly-qualified professionals, low quality education, limited access to public services (e.g., health, education etc.) and high rates of unemployment (Beech & Brailovsky, 2015). Likewise, they show high levels of corruption and violence (Cruz, 2016; UNESCO, 2010), low salaries (Ragan & Lipsey, 2005), low public investment in education (UN, 2011), lack of demand for science, technology and innovation and limited research budgets (UNESCO, 2010). In contrast, developed economies enjoy of a stable economy with high salaries, less social inequality, good quality of public services, high rates of employment and high quality of professional qualifications and education services (Sassen, 2018). Considering specific educational and social challenges in developing economies, it is undeniable that the education sector is impacted given that teachers have limited access to professional qualifications, which could affect the quality of education in schools. Teachers' low salaries could also negatively impact their performance and their opportunities for further professional training. Limited opportunities for employment, limit teachers' opportunities to diversify their working experience, which arguably could limit their performance. Employment instability and a climate of violence also play a negative role in teachers' job satisfaction, job security, self-efficacy and psychological well-being (Collie et al., 2016; Fackler & Malmberg, 2016; Zee & Koomen, 2016), among other factors relevant to their role. As can be seen, developing economies face serious challenges which warrant attention and call for the need to conduct future research to ascertain how socio-economic and political variables, impact education systems, and more importantly, teachers' behaviour, practices and perceptions, which is the aim of the present study.

### ***The present study***

The present study sought to explore the perceptions of preschool and first grade teachers regarding preschool to first grade transition practices (i.e., type, prevalence and frequency in use) in a developing economy like Mexico. Additionally, this study analysed potential associations between transition practices and teachers' characteristics (i.e., years of experience, attendance at specialised training courses etc.). In previous studies focused specifically on exploring teachers' practices, there seems to be a trend in studying such practices either from a quantitative (i.e., using scales; see Curby et al., 2018) or a qualitative perspective (i.e., using interviews or questionnaires with open-ended questions; see Buehl & Beck, 2015; Costales & Anderson, 2018), but not from a mixed perspective. This study went beyond and sought to triangulate information from a mixed-method perspective by using a concurrent triangulation design (Creswell et al., 2003). This decision was made considering that a mixed-methods approach would help us obtain more evidence and thus reach a deeper understanding of the type of practices teachers use and how these can be influenced by what they think are the main concerns and barriers, and overall, their beliefs about this transition. In the present study, researchers sought to enhance, elaborate and illustrate results from the quantitative data (e.g., teachers' practices), teachers' perceptions and their demographic characteristics. This is one of the first attempts to gather and analyse empirical evidence from the perspectives of teachers in developing economies, which expands the current knowledge and understanding we have regarding this transition period in developed economies.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

This study followed a concurrent mixed-methods design (Creswell et al., 2003) specifically making use of concurrent triangulation which helped to converge the quantitative



and qualitative data in the analysis-stage, allowing for a more accurate examination of the use of transition practices, participants' perceptions and demographic data.

### *Participants and Schools*

Probability sampling was a challenge due to current health and safety policies in place by the Ministry of Education – whereby the access to schools is extremely restricted due to the current climate of gang violence. However, the researcher's professional network from the Ministry of Education (MoE), facilitated a non-probabilistic purposive sample for this study. While we recognise that this sampling process may not represent all Mexican teachers, this sampling process helped us recruit participants with specific criteria to address the main aim of this study and lay the groundwork for future studies in developed economies (Maxwell, 2012; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003; Teddlie & Yu, 2007).

The MoE (2017) reports that in Mexico City there are 1,457 public and 1,168 private preschools, while there are 2,033 public and 1,168 privately owned primary schools. Public schools are run by the MoE and private schools are privately owned, however schools from the 32 states in Mexico must follow the national curriculum produced by the MoE. Public schools offer free service to children from low-income families while middle and upper-middle class children attend to private schools. Specifically, participants were recruited from fifteen and five public preschools and primary schools respectively, in the south of Mexico City. These schools were located in the suburbs of the city which enjoyed all public services (e.g., adequate sanitation, drinking water, health services, etc.) found in an urban area – although the quality is questioned by some scholars (see Nygren, 2018). On average, each preschool centre recruited and hosted around 60 pre-schoolers while each primary school hosted 150-200 first-graders, which serve mostly low-income families with monthly earnings ranging from \$79 to \$422 (Levet, 2019).

*Teachers.* Thirty teachers (15 preschool and 15 primary school) from 20 different schools were recruited. The total sample of preschool teachers (PR) were female whilst the group of first grade teachers (FG) comprised six males (40%) and nine females (60%). The average age for PR was 39.3 years old and 42.4 for FG teacher. Notably, the average number of children in classroom reported by PR teachers was more than double ( $M=31.9$ ) that of FG teachers ( $M=13.4$ ). The majority of FG teachers reported to hold an undergraduate diploma (84.61%) whilst less than half of PR teachers (46.15%) reported to hold the same academic degree, nevertheless PR teachers reported a greater number of specialised training courses attended (84.6%) than the FG teachers (40.6%).

### ***Measures***

*Questionnaires.* Two different surveys (i.e., one for preschool and one for primary school teachers; see Appendix A and B, respectively) were developed based on an extensive literature review of a number of studies carried out on the subject of transition (Ahtola et al., 2011; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Kane, 2008 ; Gill, Winters & Friedman, 2006; LaParo, Pianta & Cox, 2000; Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2008). Our review of previous surveys used in this field have shown their efficacy when used in a number of similar transition studies (Rathbun & Hausken, 2001, Nathanson, Rimm-Kauffman & Brock, 2009; Ponitz et al., 2009). This survey included sections aimed at gathering demographic information (e.g., participants' age, gender, years of experience), rating the prevalence and type of 20 transition practices and obtaining participants' perceptions based on five open-ended questions. The transition practices were rated by teachers on a 5 point-Likert type scale ranging from "1=Never" to "5=Always" (e.g., "Explain to parents what children are expected to do in first grade"). Transition practices were worded differently for preschool and primary teachers. We sought interrater-reliability by sending the final list of items to a panel of three experts in preschool and primary school education. After obtaining experts'

feedback, a few amendments were implemented, mainly regarding the wording and order of the items. The open-ended questions were also reviewed by the same panel of experts including a range of questions to gather teachers' perceptions related to children's transitions (e.g., "*What concerns do you have regarding the transition process for preschoolers to first grade?*").

*Ethical considerations.* The present study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the author's affiliation. Although ethical approval was not required by the Mexican Ministry of Education, general information sheets and individual consent forms were signed prior to any data collection. The principal researcher's contact details were shared with all participants.

### ***Procedure***

Data collection was carried out by the first author in Mexico City as he visited each of the schools selected. Headteachers allowed one specific room, where there were no children, to administer the questionnaire to teachers, and on average, the administration of the survey took between 15-20 minutes.

### ***Data analysis***

Quantitative data obtained from the surveys were computed with the statistical package SPSS version 20. Descriptive statistics were obtained and teachers' transition practices were reported by means of percentages and frequencies. As suggested by Coolican (2013), a one-way ANOVA was computed to look for the significant variations in both groups of teachers. Prior to conducting analyses, data were examined to ensure that statistical assumptions were not violated (e.g., normality, equality of variances etc.) and that outliers did not influence results. A series of correlations using the Pearson-product moment coefficient were computed to examine the associations between transition practices used by teachers and

teachers' characteristics. Following the advantages of the concurrent triangulation design (Creswell et al., 2003), we carefully triangulated the data from the Likert-type scale demographic information and open-ended question data.

## Results

### *Teachers' Transition Practices.*

*Preschool Teachers.* Aiming to determine the frequency of use of transition practices, three frequency-based categories were created and evenly distributed to obtain a clear idea of the teachers' positions on a continuum scale, considering that the maximum points that a teacher could obtain was 100: "*Infrequent*", "*Moderate*" and "*Frequent*". Results revealed a similar frequency in the use of transition practices in both groups of teachers (60% and 67% for PR and FG, respectively).

Central tendency measures were obtained to explore the prevalence and frequency regarding teachers' transition practices (Table 1). For PR teachers, the most frequently reported practices were: "*Provide a final report to parents in regards to the child's academic and/or developmental skills*" ( $M=4.47$ ,  $SD=1.24$ ) and "*Involve parents in classroom activities during last three months of preschool*" ( $M=3.27$ ,  $SD=1.28$ ), whilst for FG teachers the most frequently used transition practice was "*Explain to family and child the expectations for first grade of primary*" ( $M=4.53$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ). Interestingly, however, there were three transition practices which obtained similarly high rates: "*Involve families in activities during the first weeks of the first grade year*" ( $M=3.80$ ,  $SD=1.08$ ), "*Have a talk with families before school starts*" ( $M=3.67$ ,  $SD=1.71$ ) and "*Organise and provide orientation sessions to families*" ( $M=3.60$ ,  $SD=1.29$ ).

The less common practices for PR teachers were "*First grade teacher visits preschool class*" ( $M=1.00$ ,  $SD=.00$ ) and "*Have informal contacts with first grade teacher about children*" ( $M=1.07$ ,  $SD=.25$ ), whilst for FG teachers they were "*Have informal talk with*

*preschool teacher*" ( $M=1.00$ ,  $SD=.00$ ) and "*Preschool children carry out an activity in primary school classroom*" ( $M=1.00$ ,  $SD=.00$ ).

Table 1

*Means of Most and Less used Transition Practices as Reported by Preschool and Primary School Teachers*

Transition Practices	
Most Frequent Transition Practices Reported by Preschool Teachers	Most Frequent Transition Practices Reported by Primary School Teachers
<i>"Provide a final report to parents in regard to child's academic and/or developmental skills"</i> ( $M= 4.47$ , $SD=1.246$ )	<i>"Explain to parents what children are expected to do in first grade."</i> ( $M=4.53$ , $SD= 1.060$ ),
<i>"Involve parents in classroom activities during last three months of preschool"</i> ( $M= 3.27$ , $SD= 1.280$ ).	<i>"Involve families in activities during early weeks of first grade year"</i> ( $M=3.80$ , $SD=1.082$ )
<i>"An open house for parents and children before primary school starts."</i> ( $M= 3.14$ , $SD= 1.351$ ).	<i>"Have a talk with child's parents before school starts."</i> ( $M=3.67$ , $SD=1.718$ )
	<i>"Give parents orientation session about first grade."</i> ( $M=3.60$ , $SD=1.298$ ).
Less Frequent Transition Practices Reported by Preschool Teachers	Less Frequent Transition Practices Reported by Primary School Teachers
<i>"First grade teacher visits preschool class"</i> ( $M=1.00$ , $SD= .000$ )	<i>"Have informal contacts with preschool teacher about children."</i> ( $M=1.00$ , $SD=.000$ )
<i>"Have informal contacts with first grade teacher about children"</i> ( $M= 1.07$ , $SD= .258$ ).	<i>"Have preschoolers perform a planned activity in first grade classroom"</i> ( $M=1.00$ , $SD=.000$ ).

For both groups of teachers, a cross tabulation was obtained in order to analyse the frequency with which teachers reported the use of transition practices. Overall, in 65% of the practices (13 items), more than half of PR teachers reported to either never or rarely use these

in their school. Interestingly, all of the participants reported not having first grade teachers visiting preschool class at all, whilst 93% of participants reported not having informal contacts with the first grade teacher. Almost 90% of participants did not hold meetings with first grade teachers to discuss children's social and academic skills. Only 10% of the transition practices assessed (2 items) were frequently and always used by more than half of the teachers. FG teachers' data indicated that in 70% of the practices (14 items), more than half of the participants reported to either never or rarely use these transition practices in their school. Nearly all participants (93%) did not use the three main transition practices related to promoting community interactions "*First grade teacher visits preschool class*", "*Have first grade children visit preschool class to talk about first grade experience*" and "*Have parents whose children are in first grade have a talk with preschool parents*". In only 20% of the practices, more than half of teachers reported to use them on a frequent basis. The most frequently used practice reported by teachers (73%) was related to explaining to parents what children are expected to do in first grade.

*Teachers' characteristics and use of transition practices.* A Pearson product-moment coefficient was computed to explore the associations between transition practices and teachers' characteristics. Preschool teachers carrying out activities involving families within the last three months of the academic year was correlated with the number of years teachers have been working in the current school ( $r = .54, p = 0.05$ ). Sharing the child's final report with families was negatively associated with having preschool-related teacher training courses ( $r = -.76, p = 0.05$ ). Interestingly, sharing a child's portfolio with the first grade teacher was associated with the number of training courses attended by the teachers ( $r = .72, p = 0.05$ ). The design and facilitation of workshops addressed to families was positively associated with the number of years of: teaching experience ( $r = .69, p = 0.01$ ), working at preschool level ( $r = .71, p = 0.01$ ) and working at the same educational centre ( $r = .56, p =$

0.05). For First Grade teachers, we found that the maximum academic degree reported by teachers was positively correlated with explaining expectations to the child and the parents ( $r=.60, p= 0.05$ ), but negatively associated with the organisation of meetings where preschool parents could talk to primary school parents ( $r= -.67, p= 0.05$ ). The number of children in the classroom was positively associated with involving families in activities during the first weeks of primary first grade ( $r=.69, p= 0.01$ ), and negatively related to preschoolers visiting first grade primary classrooms ( $r= -.67, p= 0.01$ ). Finally, the number of training courses attended by teachers was negatively correlated with involving families in activities in primary school during the first weeks of the academic year ( $r= -.76, p= 0.05$ ).

### ***Statistical Comparison between Means Scores for Both Groups of Teachers***

A statistical comparison by using one-way ANOVA was computed to examine whether the mean scores of teachers were statistically significant between groups. Despite the fact that statistical differences were found in this analysis, the results should be interpreted with caution because of the sample size used in the study. Nonetheless, these differences could aid the development of future studies that explore the differences found in greater depth.

The one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences between means scores regarding the use of transition practices (see Table 2). Within this group of items, FG teachers obtained higher mean scores in only two items (*Explain to parents what children are expected to do in first grade* and *Give parents orientation session*), whilst preschool teachers obtained higher scores in the remaining four items. That is to say, FG teachers seem to focus more on exchanging transition-related information with parents, whilst preschool teachers tend to share information with parents and carry out visits to primary school. These results also suggest that PR teachers use these specific transition practices in a more frequent way compared to FG teachers. Considering these differences, it could be argued that FG teachers

favour the importance of promoting school-home connections which may suggest that teachers are aware of the relevance of parental involvement to aid this transition. However, this could also be influenced by school policies, whereby teachers are expected to have parents involved in their child's school matters. Alternatively, it might be that contact time with parents is facilitated when parents pick their children up from school. On the other hand, results suggest that PR teachers seem to be aware of the relevance of promoting both, school-home and school-school links. The promotion of these links could be influenced by previous teacher training and/or possibly by school policies.

Table 2

*One-way ANOVA Results Showing Statistically Significant Differences in Transition Practices between Groups based on Means Scores*

Transition Practices	Preschool teachers <i>M</i>	First grade teachers <i>M</i>	F	Sig.
1. Review/provide preschoolers' final report to/with Parents.	4.47	1.93	30.173	.000 **
2. Preschool children visit 1 <sup>st</sup> grade class.	3.13	1.27	12.062	.002 *
3. Have parents whose children are in first grade, have a talk with preschool parents.	2.47	1.27	7.821	.009 *
4. Explain to parents what children are expected to do in first grade.	2.36	4.53	23.753	.000 **



5. Give parents orientation session about primary first grade.	2.33	3.60	6.365	.018 *
6. Have preschoolers perform a planned activity in first grade classroom.	1.80	1.00	6.588	.016 *

\*\**. Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*

\**. Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)*

### ***Preschool and Primary School Teachers' Open-ended Question Responses.***

*Teachers' responses analysis.* Responses to the five open-ended questions were analysed with Nvivo software following a thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The main codes obtained for each question for both groups were used to identify the main and key phrases (Sandelowski, 1995) that led to three central themes which reflected the essence of teachers' narratives. Once again, we sent the codes and final themes to a panel of three experts with a view to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis.

#### *Theme one: The need for children to develop personal and academic skills.*

Participants' narratives reflected their concern about children acquiring/developing personal and academic skills for this transition. Whilst a number of teachers mentioned the need for children to have developed/acquired a number of personal skills such as independence, socialisation, autonomy, self-efficiency, emotional self-regulation, self-care and self-esteem, other teachers reported the need for children to have academic skills such as pre-reading and pre-writing.

“What worries me the most, is that children may feel insecure, not being autonomous, without adequate knowledge and not having the parental support”

*(Preschool teacher)*

“...my children do not come with any knowledge about maths and reading and this is sad because we are going to be doing this in my classroom. They must develop such skills in preschool” (*Primary school teacher*)

*Theme two: Adapting to the new routine.* Participants' responses focused on the different conditions/elements that may make this change difficult for children adapting to a new daily routine. Teachers highlighted that the new place where pre-schoolers will go – primary school – greatly differs from the environment found at preschool level. Teachers highlighted this adaptation process to the new environment (including new peers and teachers) as one of the main concerns and problems in this change. The acquisition and adaptation to a new set of rules and directions was also pointed out. Meal-time was mentioned alongside the length of time children spend seated as part of the daily routine. Finally, teachers pointed out the different dynamics that children have in the first grade classroom in terms of group-based activities.

When I receive the new children in September, they struggle with the adaptation to work, schedule, working in groups and focusing on the activities. They were used to play all day long, but now, they will have to remain seated for most of the day (*Primary school teacher*)

My children will suffer once they leave the preschool because they will enter to a bigger school with loads of children who are older than they are. They will have to obey the new teacher, learn new rules as well as a new routine (*Preschool teacher*)

*Theme Three: The establishment of community links (preschool-primary school).* This theme reflects teachers' views regarding the lack of links between communities, preschool and primary school. Firstly, teachers' responses focused on the need to promote teacher-teacher interaction, enhance communication between teachers and parents and improve communication between teachers and children. Secondly, teachers highlighted barriers to the abovementioned elements, such as the lack of support from the authorities of the institution and the double standards shown by the Ministry of Education. This is to say, there is a difference between what is said and what it is carried out by the Ministry of Education. Likewise, teachers commented that the workload in terms of paper-work is one of the main obstacles during this transition.

“It would be important to invite [primary] teachers to chat about their experiences regarding their teaching practice and [invite] children so they can share the experience of their daily routine” (*Preschool Teacher*)

Allow preschool centres near primary schools to visit each other and carry out one activity alongside preschool teachers. Provide information to parents [...], parents need to be aware of handing in all the documents when requested. Preschool teachers need to give us information about preschool syllabus and the skills that children have not yet developed (*Primary Teacher*)

## **Discussion**

This study sought to explore teachers' practices and perceptions regarding this transition in a developing economy such as Mexico. This discussion was grounded on the concurrent triangulation of evidence gathered from the survey, demographic information and open-ended questions.

### *Teachers' Perceptions of Transition Practices*

Results indicated that both groups of teachers seem to use more practices focused on establishing home-school links with parents by providing important information about this period and involving them in different activities such as “open doors” and informative sessions. Conversely, there is evidence to suggest that school-school links are not a common practice in this context - which is further supported by the results obtained with the open-ended questions. Based on these questions, teachers highlighted the need to create more spaces where parents are involved in school activities. This finding may suggest the need to further analyse the relation between the less frequently used practices (e.g., school visits) and the educational policies in schools. It could be argued that both groups of teachers make use of these practices to help children and parents. However, further research is needed to determine the rationale behind the use of these practices. It is also necessary to further analyse the extent to which these practices help children develop the personal and academic skills necessary for first grade, which was also a salient topic derived from the open-ended questions. The ecological perspective of transitions suggests that the interconnections among ecologies should rely on a constant exchange of relevant information about contexts and the child's skills to develop the most effective strategies to promote a smooth transition (Berlin, Dunning & Dodge, 2011; Rosenkoetter et al., 2009), however our findings revealed that such interconnections are not common in the sampled schools. The lack of a constant exchange of information among contexts could arguably be influenced by a range of elements from the Macro context of developing economies such as the climate of social inequality, high levels of gang violence, on-street drug-related problems, corruption, high levels of crime and poverty (Cruz, 2016; World Bank, 2019). These social factors seem to have influenced current health and safety policies in place by the Ministry of Education, which in turn do not allow children to be taken out of their preschool/primary school, which can endanger their

physical and mental integrity. Based on this, it seems undeniable that the socio-cultural context of developing economies has a definite influence on how stakeholders can aid this transition.

Nevertheless, it may be necessary to consider other variables involved in carrying out transition practices in these educational settings, such as teachers' motivation, school policy, the population's socio-economic status or the geographical location of schools within the Mexican context. The reported lack of connections among these contexts, was also found to be a practice less used in other studies (Laparo, Pianta & Cox, 2000; LoCasale, et al., 2008; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011), however, others have found it to be a common one in teachers' repertoires (O'Kane & Hayes, 2006). The present study's results are also different from Regena's (2004) findings where she found that sending written information to parents was one of the most common practices used in US schools. The "open door" activities found in this study are consistent with previous research as a common practice used by teachers (LaParo, Pianta & Cox, 2000; Pianta, Cox, Taylor & Early, 1999). Further research is needed to ascertain why teachers use some practices whilst others are not used.

Based on our findings, we could speculate that teachers find it easier and safer to involve parents in transition-related activities, than visiting primary school or preschool centres respectively, which would put children at risk. Alternatively, it may be that school policies do not indeed encourage the promotion of school-school links to aid this transition. Further research is needed to determine the extent to which school policies encourage making links among contexts.

### ***Association with Demographic Variables***

Results revealed a number of interesting positive associations between teachers' demographics and the use of some practices. Generally speaking, findings seem to indicate

that more experienced preschool teachers with more specialised training courses seem to promote more home-school activities. Furthermore, whilst being more trained as a preschool teacher seemed to trigger more conversations with first grade teachers throughout the academic year about children's skills, it seems that they would not share a final report at the end of the year. On the other hand, primary teachers' academic background seemed to play an important role, given that qualified teachers seem to involve and have a chat with parents on a more frequent basis (i.e., to explain expectations). However, the evidence seems to suggest that these qualified teachers would not involve parents in pedagogical activities at the beginning of the first grade of primary school. These findings seem to be consistent with other studies which suggest that the experience obtained through the years provides teachers with an awareness of the important elements involved in the early years of education (Liu, Jones & Sadera, 2010). Furthermore, the higher academic background makes teachers more knowledgeable about effective practices, which they can use in their everyday practice (Pugh & Duffy, 2013). It could be argued that an awareness of the importance of family involvement in the school's activities is one of the main aspects teachers may have acquired in college (Harris & Sass, 2011) and which was, to some extent, observed in this study.

Although limited by the sample size, differences between groups of teachers were found to be statistically significant in only six of the 20 practices included in this study, whereby preschool teachers use four practices whilst primary teachers used only two of them more frequently. Results also seem to indicate that primary school teachers use more practices related to sharing transition-related information with parents, whilst preschool teachers focused their practices on explaining to families what it is expected at primary school and providing orientation sessions, which is consistent with Rathburn and Hausken's (2001) findings. The need to clarify expectations to families regarding the new routine in primary school was also a salient topic in the open-ended questions which seems to reinforce the

importance of talking to parents on a more frequent basis. Preschool teachers seem to use more practices related to exchanging information about children's skills with parents and promoting school-school links which is an essential practice highlighted in the literature considering the EDMT model proposed by Rimm-Kauffman and Pianta (2000). Interestingly, preschool teachers seem to get preschool and primary school parents together to exchange information regarding this change, but caution must be taken when interpreting these results, given the low score reported specifically for this practice. Further exploration of this issue is strongly recommended. To sum up, these findings contribute to the existing international literature in developed economies by revealing that teachers do, to some extent, carry out a number of transition practices. However, other relevant practices are not used at all.

### ***Conclusions and Implications for Policy and Practice***

Findings from this study open a window for further research focused on socio-cultural factors and current policies on preschool and primary education in developing economies. Although limited, these findings point to the need to promote educational policies aimed at promoting school-school links and encouraging the use of transition practices to promote a smooth transition. Teacher training should consider the inclusion of evidence-based transition practices that teachers could implement to support children and parents during this change. It seems necessary to support teachers to become aware of the implications of this change and provide them with specialised training to aid this transition. The sample size used in this study does not allow for generalisations, and as such, it is imperative that future studies consider larger samples to further analyse what other practices teachers from developing economies use, and how these relate to socio-cultural factors. This will allow us to create scales to gather empirical data which could inform educational policies during this transition.

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**Appendix A****TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ON TRANSITION SURVEY****(Preschool)**

Dear Teacher:

Thank you for helping us with this survey regarding the transition process which has been widely investigated by worldwide researchers highlighting the importance of this process not only for children, but also for parents and teachers. Based on a range of studies, this process is a period through which preschool children experience a significant change from one environment into another. Through this process, children must have skills, knowledge, abilities and significant relationships that help them have a successful transition to their new environment.

We are mainly interested in learning about how the transition process from preschool to primary first grade occurs in your community. This knowledge, will allow us to identify the most effective ways to support not only preschool children, but also teachers and parents during this transition period.

\_\_\_\_\_ Date Completed\_\_\_\_\_

**Instructions**

- This survey seeks information on your knowledge and practices that are related to children's transition from preschool into first grade of primary school.
- We ask you to be very honest with your answers.
- The information you provide will be kept confidential and will only be used for research purposes.
- It is important to notice that there are not "right" or "wrong" answers. The information you provide will be very useful for future educational practice.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• No. of Years of Teaching Experience: _____</li><li>• No. of Years in Preschool Level: _____</li><li>• No. of Years in this School: _____</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Highest Grade Completed (Vocational Training, Bachelor, Master, PhD): _____</li><li>• Have you been in a preschool training course: _____; If yes, how many?: _____</li><li>• Date of last training course: _____</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Age: _____</li><li>• Gender: _____</li><li>• No. of Children in your group: _____</li></ul>
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1. Overall, how concerned are you about preschool children's transition to primary first grade?

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2. What specific concerns do you have regarding the transition process for preschoolers to first grade?

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3. Describe the child who is well-prepared for 1<sup>st</sup> grade of primary school.

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4. Can you identify the most common issues and problems children might face during their transition to primary first grade?

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5. What are some barriers that you feel may prevent you from engaging in transition practices.

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Below are listed a number of transition practices that **might** occur to facilitate children’s transition to first grade primary school. For each of the practices below, circle the number on the right side that best describes what happens in your community.

Transition Practices	What Happens in <u>MY COMMUNITY</u> ...				
	1	2	3	4	5
	never	rarely	sometimes	usually	always
1. Give parents orientation session about primary first grade.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Provide written (letter, brochure, flyer) communication regarding transition to your children’s family.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Have a talk with child’s parents before primary school starts.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Have a meeting with child and family before primary school starts.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Have parents and child visit primary school prior to the start of the school year.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Provide a final report to parents in regard to child’s academic and /or developmental skills.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Explain parents what children are expected to do in first grade.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Have regular meetings with first grade teacher to discuss continuity in the curriculum between preschool and first grade.	1	2	3	4	5
9. You consider into your teaching action activities/content according to first grade curriculum.	1	2	3	4	5
10. The preschool and first grade teacher talks about social and academic skills needed to prepare children for primary school.	1	2	3	4	5
11. The preschool children’s “portfolio” is shared with first grade teacher.	1	2	3	4	5

12. Have informal contacts with first grade teacher about children.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Involve parents in classroom activities during last 3 months of preschool.	1	2	3	4	5
14. Organise an open house for parents and children before primary school starts.	1	2	3	4	5
15. Preschool children visit 1 <sup>st</sup> grade class.	1	2	3	4	5
16. First grade teacher visits preschool class.	1	2	3	4	5
17. Have first grader children visit preschool class to talk about first grade experience.	1	2	3	4	5
18. Have preschoolers perform a planned activity in first grade classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
19. Have school workshops with children and parents to prepare them to primary school.	1	2	3	4	5
20. Have parents whose children are in first grade, have a "talk" with preschool parents.	1	2	3	4	5

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP!**

**Appendix B****TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ON TRANSITION SURVEY****(First Grade)**

Dear Teacher:

Thank you for helping us with this survey regarding the transition process which has been widely investigated by worldwide researchers highlighting the importance of this process not only for children, but also for parents and teachers. Based on a range of studies, this process is a period through which preschool children experience a significant change from one environment into another. Through this process, children must have skills, knowledge, abilities and significant relationships that help them have a successful transition to their new environment.

We are mainly interested in learning about how the transition process from preschool to primary first grade occurs in your community. This knowledge, will allow us to identify the most effective ways to support not only preschool children, but also teachers and parents during this transition period.

\_\_\_\_\_ Date Completed\_\_\_\_\_

**Instructions**

- This survey seeks information on your knowledge and practices that are related to children´s transition from preschool into first grade of primary school.
- We ask you to be very honest with your answers.
- The information you provide will be kept confidential and will only be used for research purposes.
- It is important to notice that there are not “right” or “wrong” answers. The information you provide will be very useful for future educational practice.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No. of Years of Teaching Experience: _____</li> <li>• No. of Years in Preschool Level: _____</li> <li>• No. of Years in this School: _____</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highest Grade Completed (Vocational Training, Bachelor, Master, PhD): _____</li> <li>• Have you been in a preschool training course: _____; If yes, how many?: _____</li> <li>• Date of last training course: _____</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age: _____</li> <li>• Gender: _____</li> <li>• No. of Children in your group: _____</li> </ul>
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1. Overall, how concerned are you about preschool children's transition to primary first grade?

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2. What specific concerns do you have regarding the transition process for preschoolers to first grade?

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3. Describe the child who is well-prepared for 1<sup>st</sup> grade of primary school.

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4. Can you identify the most common issues and problems children might face during their transition to primary first grade?

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5. What are some barriers that you feel may prevent you from engaging in transition practices.

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Below are listed a number of transition practices that **might** occur to facilitate children’s transition to first grade primary school. For each of the practices below, circle the number on the right side that best describes what happens in your community.

Transition Practices	What Happens in <u>MY COMMUNITY</u> ...				
	1	2	3	4	5
	never	rarely	sometimes	often	always
1. Give parents orientation session about first grade.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Provide written (letter, brochure, flyer) communication regarding transition to student’s family.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Have a <u>talk</u> with child’s parents before school starts.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Have a <u>meeting</u> with child and parents before school starts.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Have parents and child visit primary school prior to the start of the school year.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Review the pre-schooler’s final report with parents regarding the child’s academic and /or developmental skills.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Explain parents what children are expected to do in first grade.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Have regular meetings with preschool teacher to discuss continuity in the curriculum between preschool and first grade.	1	2	3	4	5
9. You consider into your teaching action content according to preschool curriculum.	1	2	3	4	5
10. The preschool and first grade teacher talks about social and academic skills needed to prepare children for primary school.					
11. Have the preschool children’s “portfolio” reviewed.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Have informal contacts with preschool teacher about children.	1	2	3	4	5

13. Involve parents in classroom activities during early weeks of primary first grade.	1	2	3	4	5
14. Organise an open house for parents and children before school starts.	1	2	3	4	5
15. Preschool children visit 1 <sup>st</sup> grade class.	1	2	3	4	5
16. First grade teacher visits preschool class.	1	2	3	4	5
17. Have first grade children visit preschool class to talk about first grade experience.	1	2	3	4	5
18. Have preschoolers perform a planned activity in first grade classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
19. Have school workshops with children and parents to prepare them to primary school.	1	2	3	4	5
20. Have parents whose children are in first grade, have a "talk" with preschool parents.	1	2	3	4	5

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP!**

