From Preschool to Kindergarten: Pathways that Preserve and Strengthen Inclusive Practice

PRESENTED BY MICHELLE M. SANDS

1

Hello!

Who is here today? Poll

2

Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, participants will:

- Understand key research-based principles of inclusive kindergarten transitions
- Identify high-impact (especially high-intensity) transition practices
- Apply strategies that support continuity of inclusive supports and relationships
- Develop at least 1-2 actionable next steps for their own programs

3

Agenda

1. WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS
2. WHY TRANSITIONS MATTER FOR INCLUSION
3. WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US WORKS
4. BUSTING BARRIERS TO INCLUSIVE TRANSITIONS
5. STRENGTHENING INCLUSIVE PATHWAYS
6. CLOSING AND TAKEAWAYS

4

Think of:

A child who had a challenging time transitioning to kindergarten...

A child who had a successful transition to kindergarten...

What made these children's experiences unique?

5

Why Transitions Matter for Inclusion

Access, participation, and supports depend on alignment, relationships, collaboration, and individualization.

6

Transition to Kindergarten

Transition is a process (before, during, after), not a single event.

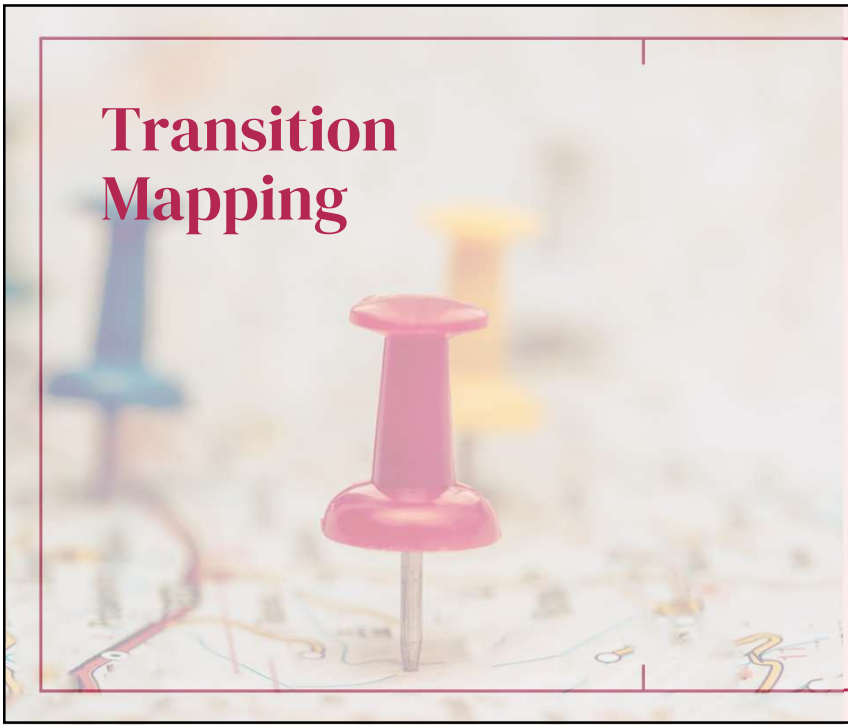
Contextual or environmental differences: Class sizes, structure, supports

Particularly challenging for children with disabilities due to: Changes in environment, supports, expectations

Can predict and lay a foundation for future inclusion success

7

Transition Mapping



Work with 2-3 people around you to create a quick "transition experience map" using the materials provided.

What does transition look like:

-Before

-During

-After

Identify:

-Supports that are present

-Gaps in inclusive practice

8

What Research Tells Us Works

9

High-Intensity vs. Low-Intensity Transition Practices

Evidence: High-intensity practices are most effective—but underused

- High-intensity (individualized):
  Home visits, planning meetings, classroom visits
- Low-intensity:
  Orientation nights, handouts

10

Ongoing Collaboration & Communication

Throughout the transition process, it is important to have formal and informal opportunities for collaboration and communication between families, teachers, and other professionals.

- Strong predictor of successful adjustment and inclusion
- Must include:

  -Families/caregivers

  -Preschool and kindergarten teachers

  -Related service providers

11

The Five Critical Conversations

1	2	3	4	5
What can children and families expect in kindergarten?				

12

The Five Critical Conversations

1	2	3	4	5
What can children and families expect in kindergarten?	What would you like us to know about your child and your family's story?			

13

The Five Critical Conversations

1	2	3	4	5
What can children and families expect in kindergarten?	What would you like us to know about your child and your family's story?	How does your child do with friendships and big feelings, and how can we support them best?		

14

The Five Critical Conversations

1	2	3	4	5
What can children and families expect in kindergarten?	What would you like us to know about your child and your family's story?	How does your child do with friendships and big feelings, and how can we support them best?	What really helps your child learn, and how can we build on their strengths?	

15

The Five Critical Conversations

1	2	3	4	5
What can children and families expect in kindergarten?	What would you like us to know about your child and your family's story?	How does your child do with friendships and big feelings, and how can we support them best?	What really helps your child learn, and how can we build on their strengths?	What can we all do—together—to make their move to kindergarten go smoothly?

16

Individualized Transition Plans

Should Include:

- Child strengths and needs
- Family priorities
- Specific supports (visual schedules, peer supports, etc.)

17

Transition Practices – What Do You or Don't You Do?

Which of these do you already use? Which of these do you not yet?

What do you do that is not on the list below?

Individual transition meetings with P, K and Parent/Caregivers (H)	Teacher, Child/Family visits to Preschool/Kindergarten Class (H)
Host informational night (L)	Meet the teacher event (L)
1:1 Classroom Visit (H)	Emails/phone calls with current/next teacher (H)
Send files to next teacher (L)	Provide individual schedule, visuals to next teacher (H)
Teaching team meetings (H/L)	Administrator Conversations (H/L)
Collaborative Program Planning for Transition (L)	Cross-Program Alignment Meetings/Trainings (L)
Individual Transition Plans for Each Child (H)	Information sent home to families about K (L)

Consider: Do you use more low-intensity or high-intensity practices?

18

BUSTING BARRIERS TO INCLUSIVETRANSITIONS

19

Key Challenges from Research:

- Interviews and surveys with kindergarten teachers, family members/caregivers, administrators

- **Limited Communication and Collaboration Between Preschool & Kindergarten**
  Throughout the process (pre/during/post)
- **Late Kindergarten Teacher Assignment**
  Sometimes not done until 1-2 days prior
- **Work is Needed to Ensure Alignment**
  Environments and expectations
- **Family Voices Underutilized**
  Partnership vs. involvement

20

Barrier Busting

Limited Communication and Collaboration Between Preschool & Kindergarten

Why Does this Exist?

One Immediate Solution:

One Systems-Level Solution:

Late Kindergarten Teacher Assignment

Why Does this Exist?

One Immediate Solution:

One Systems-Level Solution:

Work is Needed to Ensure Alignment

Why Does this Exist?

One Immediate Solution:

One Systems-Level Solution:

Family Voices Underutilized

Why Does this Exist?

One Immediate Solution:

One Systems-Level Solution:

21

Strengthening Inclusive Pathways

22

Core Principles for Inclusive Transitions

1. Start early and sustain the support needed
2. Center family voice and history throughout the process
3. Ensure continuity of supports and use of inclusive practice
4. Increase teacher collaboration throughout the process
5. Use shared planning tools and communication plans

23

Let's Pretend

Leo is a 5-year-old child with autism who attended an inclusive preschool classroom. During preschool, Leo thrived with several individualized supports, including a visual schedule, a peer buddy system, and daily communication between his teacher and family using a home–school notebook. His preschool teacher worked closely with his speech-language pathologist and family to support his communication and transitions throughout the day.

In the spring, a transition planning meeting was held. Leo's family, preschool teacher, and early childhood special education team attended, along with a kindergarten "representative" from the elementary school. During the meeting, Leo's strengths, needs, and successful strategies—such as the use of visual supports and structured transitions—were discussed. His parents expressed how important consistency and predictability were for Leo's success.

However, once the school year began, several challenges emerged.

Leo was assigned to a different kindergarten teacher than the one who attended the meeting. That teacher had not been given detailed information about Leo's previous supports and had not contacted the preschool team. The kindergarten classroom did not initially include visual schedules or structured transition supports, and there was no system in place for ongoing communication with Leo's family.

Within the first two weeks, Leo began having difficulty transitioning between activities, often becoming overwhelmed and refusing to move to new areas of the classroom. During unstructured times, he struggled to engage with peers and frequently withdrew or displayed frustration.

Leo's parents became concerned, noting that the strategies that helped him succeed in preschool were not being used. When they reached out to the school, the kindergarten teacher shared that she was unaware of many of these supports and had not had the opportunity to collaborate with the preschool team.

In a small group – discuss:

What went wrong here?

Which research-based practices were missing?

What would you implement to best support this child and family?

24

Action Planning & Reflection

CELEBRATION:

WHAT IS ONE THING WE DO WELL?

ACTION ITEM:

WHAT IS ONE STRATEGY WE PLAN TO IMPLEMENT?

STEP(S) TO TAKE FORWARD:

WHAT IS ONE COLLABORATION STEP WE WILL STRENGTHEN?

25

Thank you!

MSANDS@NIU.EDU

26