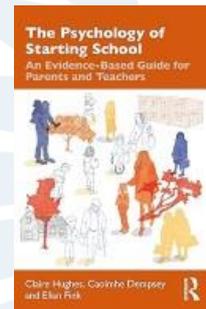


# The Psychology of Starting School: An Evidence-Based Guide for Parents and Teachers



Reviewer: Zhenlin Wang 

A review of *The Psychology of starting school: An evidence-based guide for parents and teachers*, by Claire Hughes, Caoimhe Dempsey, and Elia Fink (2024), Routledge, 160 Pages 26 B/W Illustrations, ISBN 9781032211497, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003266990>, NZD \$34.39.

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Informed by cutting-edge developmental science, this book is intended for parents and educators of early years and primary schools to understand school transition. Written by world-leading authorities in child development based on their intimate understanding of developmental science and some of their own research, the book stands out as a groundbreaking perspective of school transition from a whole child approach. Challenging the traditional conceptualisation of children’s “school readiness” that focuses on the individual children and their literacy and numeracy abilities, this book proposes a theory-informed and evidence-based account highlighting the shared responsibility of school transition for child flourishing. The writing style is refreshingly approachable for parents and teachers alike. It is packed with examples, practical tips and strategies, resources such as video clips, tools, online information, and even a research-informed original picture book. The original artwork, photographs, and illustrations add to the book’s appeal and help drive the messages home.

The book starts with an overarching chapter contextualising school transition in Glen H. Elder Jr.’s (1998) life course theory, which highlights five key principles of development: life-span development, linked lives, time and space, agency, and timing. It goes on to introduce each chapter’s focus and explain how these chapters tie in with the principles of life course theory. “Education is a journey, not a race” (p. 6). The life-span perspective highlights the cumulative effects of early experiences and the “whole child” approach that fosters lifelong well-being and flourishing. A large portion of the book discusses linked lives, including peers, siblings, parents and teachers. The authors

organically incorporate years of developmental research into a coherent narrative that redefines school readiness as a “shared responsibility” among children, families, schools, and the community. Time and space encompass the impact of personal history such as having a sibling and shared history such as the COVID pandemic around the time of school transition, as well as how school transition is experienced as a shared community event worldwide yet with cultural-specific variations from place to place. Highlighting the child’s agency, the chapters on thinking skills and mindreading (i.e., having a sense of what others think and feel) discuss how parents and teachers can help children develop these meta-skills essential for both social functioning and academic development. Last but not least, the timing of starting school is discussed in the context of children’s maturity and their experiences such as observing an older sibling’s school routine. In addition to the opening chapter that contextualises the book, a final wrap-up chapter further highlights partnerships within and between families, schools, and the broader communities during school transition. Overall, the book provides rich evidence and a convincing argument centring around the key take-home message that “[i]t takes a village to raise a child” (p. 4). More importantly, it serves as a guiding map helping parents and teachers navigate school transition while their little ones embark on the journey of formal schooling. The book is organised with the readers in mind. Each chapter is a standalone topic with quick summaries at the end encapsulating the essence of that topic, as well as practical tips for parents and teachers. The authors even identify the specific chapters that are more applicable to parents and those that are more applicable to teachers, making them more reader-friendly.

Although the majority of the examples in the book are situated in a British context, readers from Aotearoa New Zealand could still resonate with the arguments. One of the chapters discusses inclusiveness and educational equity across ethnicity, family background, and neurodiversity, both a justice issue and a developmental issue. From an individual perspective, children need diversity in their friendships to understand different viewpoints and develop sophisticated social understanding. From a system perspective, differences in cultural heritage, family background, and neurodevelopment enrich children’s experience when starting school. Being a multicultural society, Aotearoa New Zealand is witnessing similar, if not more intense, discussions on inclusivity and diversity issues.

Following the No Child Left Behind policy in the US, the education reform initiated by the current New Zealand government proposes a state-prescribed curriculum focusing on structured literacy and mathematics and an assessment schedule to regularly test students’ academic knowledge and skills from the first year of primary school. The

reform is met with concerns over teacher's autonomy and well-being, restricted curriculum, and teaching to assessment. This timely book reminds us that academic preparedness is by no means the only measure for school transition, if anything, numeracy and literacy are the "downstream" of core aspects such as self-regulation, social cognition, and supportive social relationships. After all, "children can only learn properly when they're happy" (p. 5).

An Aotearoa New Zealand education initiative, recently the subject of debate, aims to reduce school truancy by fining parents whose children do not meet attendance requirements. Although this policy has been in place for a while, it has rarely been enforced. This initiative puts teachers and parents in conflict, defying the principle of bridging schools and families. A refreshing idea presented in the book is that school readiness is not just about children. Parents, teachers, and the whole community need to get ready when children start school. In the process, parents' and teachers' well-being and family-school communication and collaboration matter. It is only when families and schools work together, but not opposite of each other, could children be best supported in their school transition.

Overall, this book is a must-read for parents, teachers, and professionals working with children to understand what works, why, and how to support children's school transition. While it does touch upon how educational policy affects schools and families in a British context, a discussion on best practices in educational policy-making would appeal to a broader readership and lend the book greater impact.

## Author notes

Zhenlin Wang has a research relationship with some of the authors of the book being reviewed. Zhenlin Wang was not involved in the writing of the book.

For more information about this book review, contact the first author at [Z.Wang5@massey.ac.nz](mailto:Z.Wang5@massey.ac.nz)

## References

Elder Jr, G. H. (1998). The life course as developmental theory. *Child Development*, 69(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1998.tb06128.x>

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