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Stepping into School: Using the Step Model of Transition Capital to Critically Understand Children's Transition to School

Jennifer Green[1,2] · Cathrine Neilsen-Hewett[1,2,3] · Steven Howard[1,2,4]

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Abstract
The transition to school is a very important time in children's educational journey, as well as for their families' engagement with the community. Previous research has identified the complex interrelations of factors that influence this transition, emphasising the contextual nature of 'effective' transition. In recent years, critical theoretical approaches have been utilised to highlight systemic power imbalances within transition processes, particularly for children from priority cohorts or who are experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage. While several models and guides exist for creating and evaluating transition programs, there remains a need for an accessible model that incorporates a critical theoretical approach to understanding the diversity of experiences of transition. The current paper draws upon the newly developed Step Model of Transition Capital to better understand the transition to school process experienced by four children from refugee backgrounds within Australia. The paper outlines how the Step Model can be used as a tool for critical reflection, and to examine how children and families may experience the transition to school process differently. The Step Model can, therefore, be used to identify risks and opportunities to better support children and families through this important period.

Keywords Transition to school · Early education · Refugee · Equity · Transition programs

Introduction

A positive transition to school experience is related to children's immediate academic and social performance (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Ladd, 1987), and their longer-term educational, employment, health and wellbeing outcomes (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Vogler et al., 2008). It provides an opportunity for children to build resilience against various risk factors (Carbines et al., 2008), and to develop a strong sense of identity and status (Vogler et al., 2008). Transition to school involves more than just the individual student, and is a critical period for ensuring positive engagement between children, families, and school settings (Carbines et al., 2008). On a social level, transitions are an opportunity to disrupt cycles of social and economic disadvantage (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2009; Smart et al., 2008). This underscores the importance of ensuring that all children experience a maximally supportive and beneficial transition process (Education Transitions and Change Research Group, 2011), and has contributed to a significant body of academic literature on how educational systems can best facilitate effective transitions.

Transition to school is no longer seen as an event or series of activities, but rather, a process involving multiple individuals, touch points and intersections (Carbines et al., 2008) with transition programs typically consisting of communications and physical experiences designed to facilitate children and families becoming knowledgeable about and familiar with the new environment, while promoting broad notions of readiness (Dockett and Perry 2021a). The relational nature of effective transition has been emphasised with a focus on introducing children and families to others involved in the transition journey such as teachers, peers, other families, and school staff, and fostering relationships that are positive, respectful, and trusting (De Gioia 2017; Dockett and Perry 2021b). The expected series of transition

✉ Jennifer Green
jlg481@uowmail.edu.au

1 Early Start, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW, Australia

2 School of Education, Building 22, University of Wollongong, Dharawal Country, Wollongong, NSW, Australia

3 Goodstart Early Learning, Melbourne, Australia

4 Department of Education, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

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events and activities, however, may not occur for all children. A wide range of reasons, individual, family or social, by choice or circumstance, can mean children follow non-normative transition pathways (Dockett and Perry 2021b). Regardless of context, one mark of a successful transition is for all involved to feel a sense of belonging to the school environment (Dockett and Perry 2021c).

Most contemporary research on school transitions is founded in ecological development theories such as Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (Dockett et al., 2014). Bronfenbrenner's system model places the child at the centre of the environments they interact with, and encapsulates four defining properties: process, person, context and time. (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Dockett et al., 2014). Applicants of this model highlight the role early school transitions play in school success, emphasise the role of relationships between child characteristics, home, school, peer, family and neighbourhood contexts, and considers how these relationships change over time (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

While ecological development theories provide useful frameworks to understand transition to school on an individual level, they are less effective in identifying systemic forms of sociocultural advantage and disadvantage. Different approaches are, therefore, needed when researching transition experiences for diverse, disadvantaged or socially marginalised individuals and groups. Since 2010, a growing number of studies have used socio-cultural and critical theoretical frameworks to research transitions to school, which are better suited to this task (Boyle et al., 2018). Critical approaches often focus on identifying how power is distributed, and how forms of power are both subconsciously embodied and systematically organised. They are well placed to identify how inequalities are created and opportunities to challenge them.

In 2023–2024 we conducted a series of case studies grounded in critical theory, incorporating decolonial theories, as well as post-structuralist elements related to the work of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Biggart, 1986). We followed four children from refugee backgrounds as they transitioned to their first year of full-time school in Australia, capturing the perspectives of the children, their parents, and their teachers. In the analysis phase of this research, we developed the Step Model of Transition Capital (the Step Model), which we present in this paper as an easy-to-use model to assist critical reflection on transition programs. The Step Model is grounded in critical theory (Petriwskyj, 2014), and Pierre Bourdieu's theories of capital (Bourdieu & Biggart, 1986; Grenfell, 2008). The model can be used to identify the impact of social and cultural underpinnings of the environments where transitions occur, and risks and opportunities in facilitating transitions.

Numerous evidence-based methods of designing and evaluating transition programs exist. For example, the 2001 guidelines for evaluating effective transition programs (Dockett and Perry 2001, 2021c) pose ten features of successful transition programs, which include an emphasis on establishing strong relationships and effective communication between child, family, school, and community, being flexible to the needs of the child, family, and community, and a strength based and rights-based approach for the child. These remain relevant today, thus the intent of the Step Model is not to replace, but to add to these approaches, with a particular focus on ensuring transitions meet the needs of children and families experiencing non-normative transitions.

In this paper we will first present the Step Model, and offer an overview of its foundation and explain how it can be used to identify moments of fragility in the transition process. We will then give an overview of the case studies, which we will use throughout the paper to illustrate how the Step Model can be used to identify the forms of capital children and families are expected to have during transition to school, where moments of fragility occur within systems for children and families of refugee backgrounds, as well as opportunities for support. The paper concludes with a discussion of the potential uses, benefits and limitations of the Step Model for future research, and for supporting transition to school processes.

The Step Model of Transition Capital

It is necessary in both transition research and practice to examine the social structures that shape children's lives and transition experiences more broadly. This process is necessary to understand how power dynamics function within educational settings and influence interactions. However, there are few tools or models designed to support this analysis in either practice or research contexts. The Step Model has been designed to assist with this task and fill this gap.

Theoretical Foundation

The Step Model is underpinned by the concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and field. 'Capital' refers to resources embedded within social structures that are transmitted across generations, contributing to social reproduction (Grenfell, 2008). In addition to economic capital (material wealth), Bourdieu identifies social capital (relationships and networks) and cultural capital (beliefs, values, and behavioural patterns) (Bourdieu & Biggart, 1986). Habitus is the embodiment of cultural capital, and is the internalised cognitive structure that shapes an individual's thoughts, feelings,

and behaviours, continually working to *"recreate the environment in which it developed"* (Lizardo, 2010 p. 308). People subconsciously internalise and recreate the beliefs, ideas, customs, and behavioural norms of their surroundings (Lizardo, 2010). Within the sociocultural environment – or 'field' – certain forms of capital are privileged, often reinforcing existing power dynamics. Importantly, while fields typically sustain dominant structures, they are not fixed and therefore offer opportunities for dynamics to be contested.

Using these concepts of capital, habitus, and field, as well as a critical theoretical foundation, the Step Model is designed to help identify the forms of capital that are expected and valued within the transition to school context, and thus help identify risks and opportunities in the process. In this way deficit can be understood in terms of disconnect, and strength more as a kind of compatibility. The underlying ideology can be identified and critiqued.

Components of the Step Model

Transitions occur over time and, in the context of transition to school, track the movement of children from their established home and/or pre-school environments to the school setting. They typically begin weeks and months prior to school commencement and extend into the first year of school, sometimes earlier. With this process comes transition of physical space, identity, and status. Within the Step Model, we divide the transition process into four broad steps;

1. the base, which refers to the home and family context the child is embedded in;
2. prior to school, which includes preschool and prior to school transition programs and activities the child engages with;
3. entry to school, which includes the initial start at school and the supports that are available in that context; and.
4. the ongoing environment, where the child is fully embedded with their school environment.

The transition to the school experience occurs over time and involves the movement of the child and family up these steps. At the foundation of each of these steps are various forms of capital held by the child and family. The expected forms of capital depend on the field, or context, within which the transition is taking place. The diagram below illustrates how this plays out for children and families through transition (Fig. 1).

The model can be used to show how different forms of capital support the acquisition of new capital needed in a changing environment. For example, material resources (e.g., access to transport) and knowledge of available services (e.g., knowledge of enrolment processes), can support preschool attendance, which in turn supports children's development and prepares the family for a smooth(er) transition to school. Preschool attendance and a having a sense of belonging and connection to the early education context is also a form of capital that supports the transition experience. The desired outcomes of the transition process—such as the child's confidence, positive relationships with peers and teachers, and engagement with learning (Dockett and Perry 2021c)—are themselves forms of capital that will continue to grow and contribute to future success in school and life. Dunlop (2015) refers to this building of experiences as transition capital. In this model, the child and family go through the transition process together, while each bringing their own forms of capital to the process. This approach was considered the most relevant for the case studies but in other situations the child and family could be treated separately.

This model can show how particular forms of capital are expected, valued and used within a field, and how people with habitus misaligned from the field can be disadvantaged. These experiences are positioned as moments of fragility.

Moments of Fragility

When forms of capital are missing or misaligned, it creates a moment of fragility. Moments of fragility are a breakdown of connection between a person's habitus (embodied capital) and their field (social and cultural context); or a moment where the dominant ideology is incongruent with, for example, an individual's needs, characteristics, or beliefs. Moments of fragility do not exist within a person or an entity, rather they are a fracture that exists in the process and the space in between. They can exist in a breakdown of process in a place, for example transport barriers preventing a child's attendance to transition activities, or in a relationship, such as miscommunication between a parent and teacher. In a temporal sense they exist in the process and can exist in a relationship or within a system. It is important to acknowledge that these moments of fragility are not random or result from individual deficit(s). They come from prejudice within dominant ideologies within which systems are formed and are often present without the conscious awareness of the parties involved. Because of this, it is important to emphasise that moments of fragility are not a deficit of the individual, or a community, but are structural breaks or weaknesses within systems.

Moments of fragility in the Step Model result in the loss of capital that is expected within the transition process. The Step Model depicts how moments of fragility result in steeper step(s), and a more effortful or less supported transition journey. In other words, a moment of fragility within the system can make the transition journey more challenging or

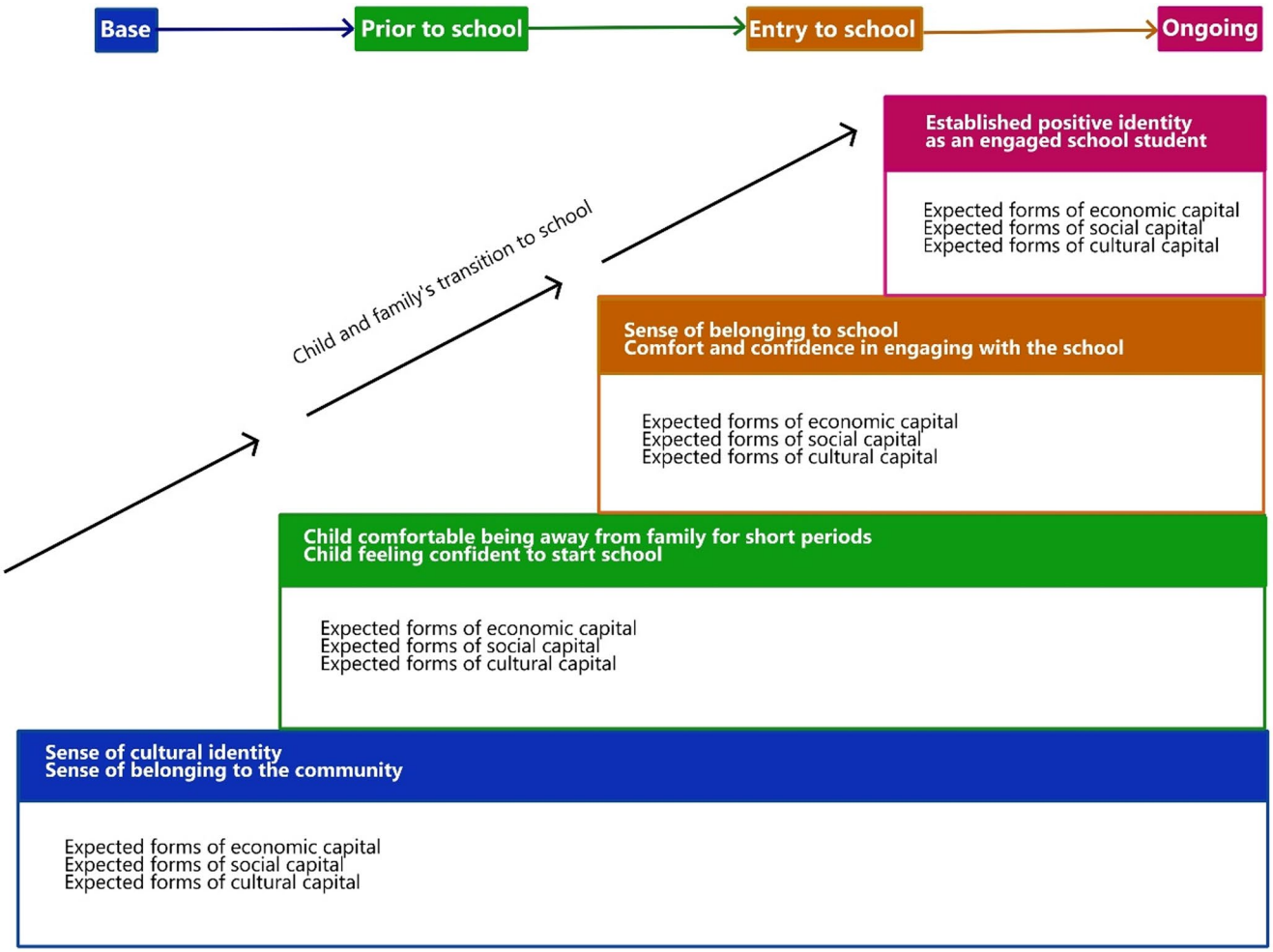

Fig. 1 The Step Model template (Figures created using Krita 5.0.2.)

'steeper' for children and families. For example, if a child is missing expected forms of cultural capital at the base, this can be compounded in the prior to school experience and entry to school resulting in a very high step to achieve ongoing positive engagement to school.

If unaddressed, moments of fragility both continue to impact the child and family's journey, and compound to create further challenges through this process. The below diagram illustrates this impact, and shows the difficulties children and families face in achieving a positive ongoing experience in the school environment, if they have not been supported in their transition journey, either prior to school or through the entry to school (Fig. 2).

Ultimately, the Step Model shows the impact moments of fragility have on the experience of children and families on the transition journey. The next section of the paper illustrates how implementing the Step Model works in practice, drawing on the case studies to identify the transfer of capital through the transition process.

Methods

Participants

The case studies were designed to capture deep insights into the experiences of children transitioning to school in Australia. Children due to commence Kindergarten[1] in 2024 were eligible for the case studies. In addition to the child themselves, their parent(s), preschool teacher, and Kindergarten school teacher were invited to participate in interviews.

To be eligible, families were required to identify as having a refugee background. Self-identification rather than legal definitions was used as a more inclusive recruitment process. The research team engaged with a local organisation to support recruitment. Case workers referred interested clients who met the selection criteria to the research team. This approach meant that participants were informed about the study from a person they had a pre-existing, trusting

[1] In the state where the case studies took place, Kindergarten refers to the first year of full time compulsory schooling.

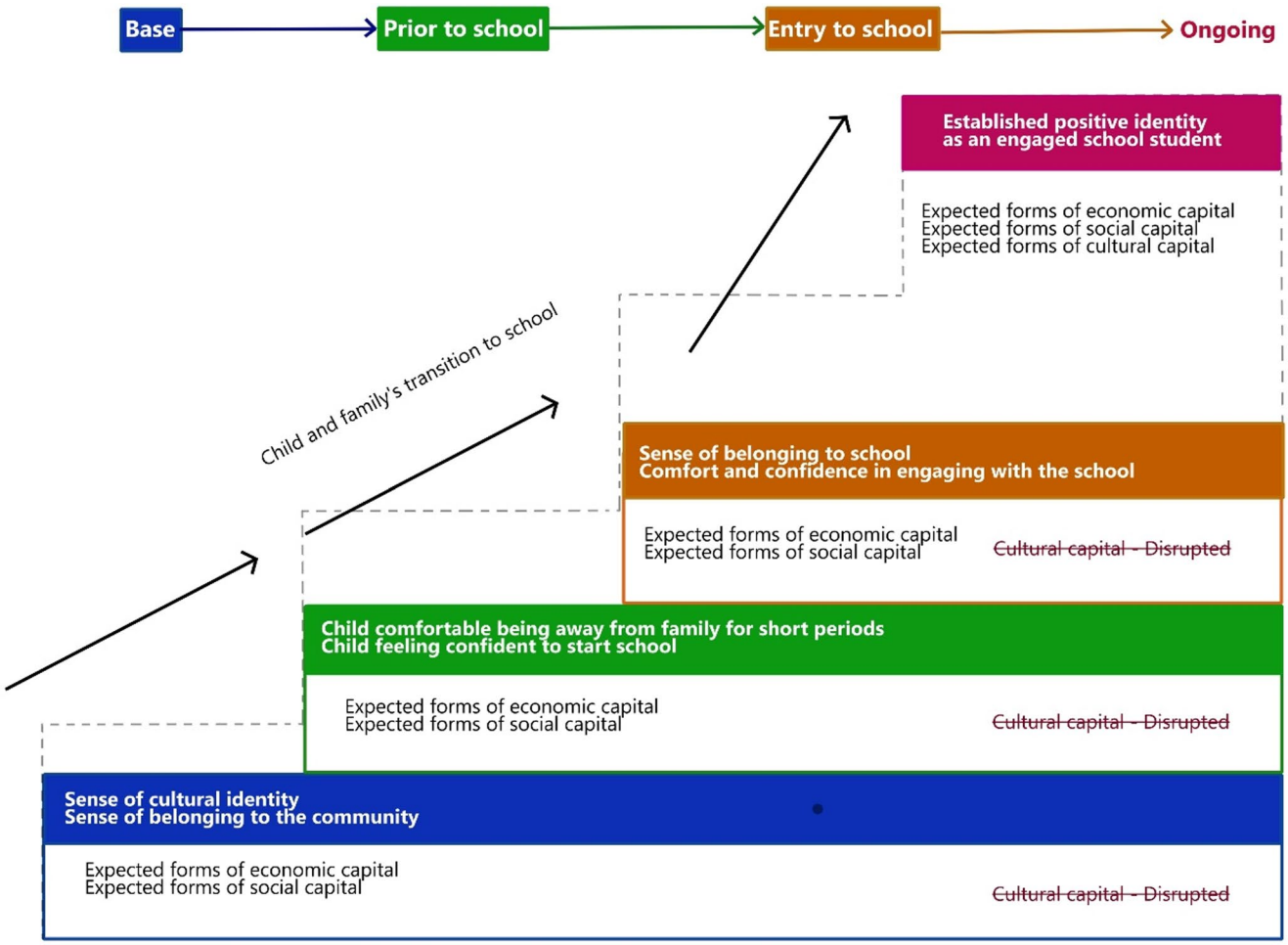

Fig. 2 Step Model showing the ongoing impact of a moment of fragility. The dotted line illustrates the uninterrupted path

Table 1 Participant demographics

Case study	Child	Parent(s)	Older sibling	Preschool teacher	School teacher
1	Rowan	Sarah	Sam	Louise	Pietra
2	Myia	Pemala	N/A	Helena	Christie
3	James	Hayma;	N/A	N/A	Sophie
4	Noah	Aly and Paul	Lucy	Mandy	Sandra

relationship with. Due to low numbers of participants being identified through this process, an additional three community organisations were asked to support recruitment.

Four participants were included in the final sample (see Table 1). Four additional participants commenced the research but withdrew as they did not meet the research criteria (i.e., they identified as a migrant rather than refugee, or the child's start at school was delayed until 2025).

All the children were four or five years of age during the first interviews. Rowan and Myia were born in Australia; their families had lived there for nine and seven years, respectively. James and Noah were born overseas, with their families arriving in Australia two and three years before the interviews. In two case studies, older siblings attended the play-based activities because the parents had caregiving responsibilities. Sam and Lucy, two of the older siblings, showed interest and participated in the activities. Rowan, Sarah, and Sam were originally from Iran. James, Hayma, Myia, and Pemala are Kareni, while Noah, Aly, Paul, and Lucy are Chin. An additional interview was conducted with Fereshteh, a community worker known to some of the participants.

Research Activities

Care was taken in the research design to mitigate power imbalances between researcher and participants as much as possible < redacted reference>. The case studies included

in-depth interviews with parents. The interviews were semi-structured to allow the participant to raise issues, ideas and concerns at their own volition, and were conversational in nature.

An over the phone translation service was used during interviews with Pemala, Hayma, Aly, and Paul; all other interviews were conducted in English. For translated interviews, consent was gathered verbally and audio recorded. Parental permission was sought for activities with children, as well as the children's assent, gathered before the activities (Huser et al., 2022). Ethics clearance was granted by university and school-based Human Research Ethics Committee(s).

Activities with children involved a drawing activity about school. The interviewer used prompts such as '*I can see there are people in your drawing, can you tell me who they are?*' and *'What do you think the best thing about school will be?'* to elicit a discussion about the drawing and school more broadly. This visual and active approach was used to empower the child to direct the course of discussion and show what matters to them (Clark, 2010). Using open ended questions provided children with the opportunity to express their opinions and perspectives.

The parent and child interviews were in practice blended. Parents were able to choose the time and location of interviews, with a small private outdoor play area located at an Australian university in a metropolitan area of NSW being made available as an option. This location was chosen for most interviews. Open ended questions were also used for parent interviews, with questions ranging from general prompts about the family such as '*would you like to tell me a bit about yourself?"*', and questions related more to transition expectations such as *'What do you think the best thing about school will be for [STUDY CHILD]?'*.

With parental consent, preschool and schoolteachers were invited to participate in an in-depth and semi-structured interview. These interviews took place at the preschool or school site at times that suited the participants. Questions to teachers were open ended, designed to capture broad information about the teacher's experience and perspectives about teaching such as *'What are your favourite things about being a teacher?'* and *'Can you tell me a bit about your thoughts on transition to school?'*. Questions were also asked about the child participants, with the starting question being *'Can you tell me a bit about [STUDY CHILD]?'* and follow up questions based on the initial response.

The case study was comprised of three rounds of interviews and research activities. The first took place between August- November 2023, prior to the participants engaging in transition programs. The second took place in November 2023 – January 2024, prior to the children starting school. The final round took place in April – May 2024, once the children had completed a full term of school (approximately 10 weeks), with one teacher interview delayed until October 2024.

Analysis

A reflexive thematic approach to analysis was adopted (Braun & Clarke, 2024). The first author conducted and transcribed all interviews, and initial themes were identified through this process. All scripts were then read. Data were coded semantically in NVivo 12 using both induction and deduction. In alignment with the theoretical foundation, data were coded deductively (i.e. relationships, economic capital, effective transitions). The content within these organising frameworks were coded based on an inductive approach, for example, data codes were derived from semantic interpretations of the data, such as self-described experiences of parent participants' changes in identity. To enhance the trustworthiness of the data and findings, peer debrief was conducted throughout the data analysis phase, checking and re-checking to ensure reliability and validity of the data themes and codes. Ongoing writing and analysis supported this process and led to the final reporting that has guided the development of this paper.

Results

Expected Forms of Capital within the Transition Process

In this section we draw on both academic literature on what is required to support a 'good' transition, and the perspectives of preschool and schoolteachers from the case studies to identify the forms of cultural, social and economic capital that are expected (or transferred through transition programs) within the specific context. The success or effectiveness of a transition to school program is based in context, what works well in one context may not in another (Dockett and Perry 2021c; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000).

Transition activities available to families in the case studies included school visits andintroductions to the teacher and classroom environment, as well as information sessions and resources for families. At the base, participation in these activities requires various forms of capital—such as stable housing, access to technology to receive information, social and community connections through which information is shared, and the confidence and capability to seek out this information. It often also requires English language proficiency.

Consistent with previous research, the three preschool teachers described a range of activities used to prepare

children for school. Louise included school visits as part of her program, while Mandy and Helena considered these ideal but did not offer them, as their children were transitioning to a wider variety of schools. All three spoke about connecting with children's future Kindergarten teachers and preparing transition statements to support them. They emphasised the importance of discussing school with the children and setting expectations. Helena highlighted the value of *'actual visits and experiences*, *rather than just talking about it'.* Mandy and Helena also described setting up a play-based 'school readiness' area to simulate a school environment, and facilitating games and activities to introduce school routines. Both referred to a government-funded regional transition program that includes school visits and information for children and families. Helena also mentioned hosting parent information nights and inviting local Kindergarten teachers. These activities aim to give children and families insight into school expectations and help build relationships with teachers, peers, and other families. Notably, they are only available to children attending preschool.

All schoolteachers noted that their schools conducted multiple orientation sessions in the year prior to starting school. These sessions included activities with children such as drawing, reading and a snack break, while parents separately attended information sessions (conducted in English). The number of sessions varied from two (Sandra) to five (Pietra), with Sandra also mentioning a variety of playgroup sessions to complement the official orientation, and the option of additional visits for children who needed them. Pietra emphasised the importance of these early sessions to help teachers get to know the children. Alongside formal orientation sessions, Christie and Sophie discussed running separate more informal activities such as morning teas and picnics. The vast majority of transition activities occurred prior to school starting. However, Pietra spoke about conducting individual interviews with children as part of the Best Start program in the first week of school. Similar to the preschool activities, these sessions were designed to help children and families obtain the social and cultural capital expected at the start of school.

From these examples we can consider the forms of material, social and cultural capital that were: firstly, expected of case study children and parents before engaging in the transition activities; secondly, intended to be cultivated for the children and families prior to transition; and thirdly, achieved through settling into the new school environment. These are represented in the 'base', 'prior to school' and 'entry to school' steps in the Step Model. Forms of capital include both explicit expectations, often offered through transition programs or activities, and implicit or unspoken expectations. Based on these findings, we can establish the Step Model below as the general transition path intended for the case study children (Fig. 3).

This is not an exhaustive or definitive list. The forms of capital identified here are relevant to the case studies in question, and likely transferrable to similar transition environments. Users of the Step Model are encouraged to critically reflect on the forms of capital expected within their own environments.

Identifying Moments of Fragility

By understanding the expected forms of capital, the Step Model can be used to identify moments of fragility in the transition process. Case study families experienced a few moments of fragility. The most prominent form of capital expected of families, but which was missing for some, was English language proficiency. The parents of three case study children (Myia's mother Pemala, Noah's parents Paul and Ali, and James' mother Hayma) could not speak fluent English. While all the parents took every opportunity to engage in transition activities, their ability to actively participate was limited.

> **Christie**: I don't know for orientation, what it looks like. We speak, we say so much. Like there's an hour where someone's at the front talking, how does that get communicated to the non-English speaking parents?

About these experiences parents said:

> **Hayma**: I went to all the orientation. But it was a bit quick for me. I could not catch everything. But within an hour, you know, they said many different things.

> **Pemala**: Because the teacher told me many things but I don't quite understand all the process or preparation, only 50/50.

Sometimes translation services could be used to help with this, but they were not always available.

> **Sandra**: we tried to get a translator to translate for them, but no one had their dialect. Yeah, we couldn't get one to help them. So there was no point.

> **Christie**: We don't have any interpreters that whole time. And I don't know how to do that well… it's really tricky…Sometimes there's just no one available.

Here, the absence of one form of expected capital, English proficiency, was unable to be transferred into the parents' knowledge of the school environment and expectations at

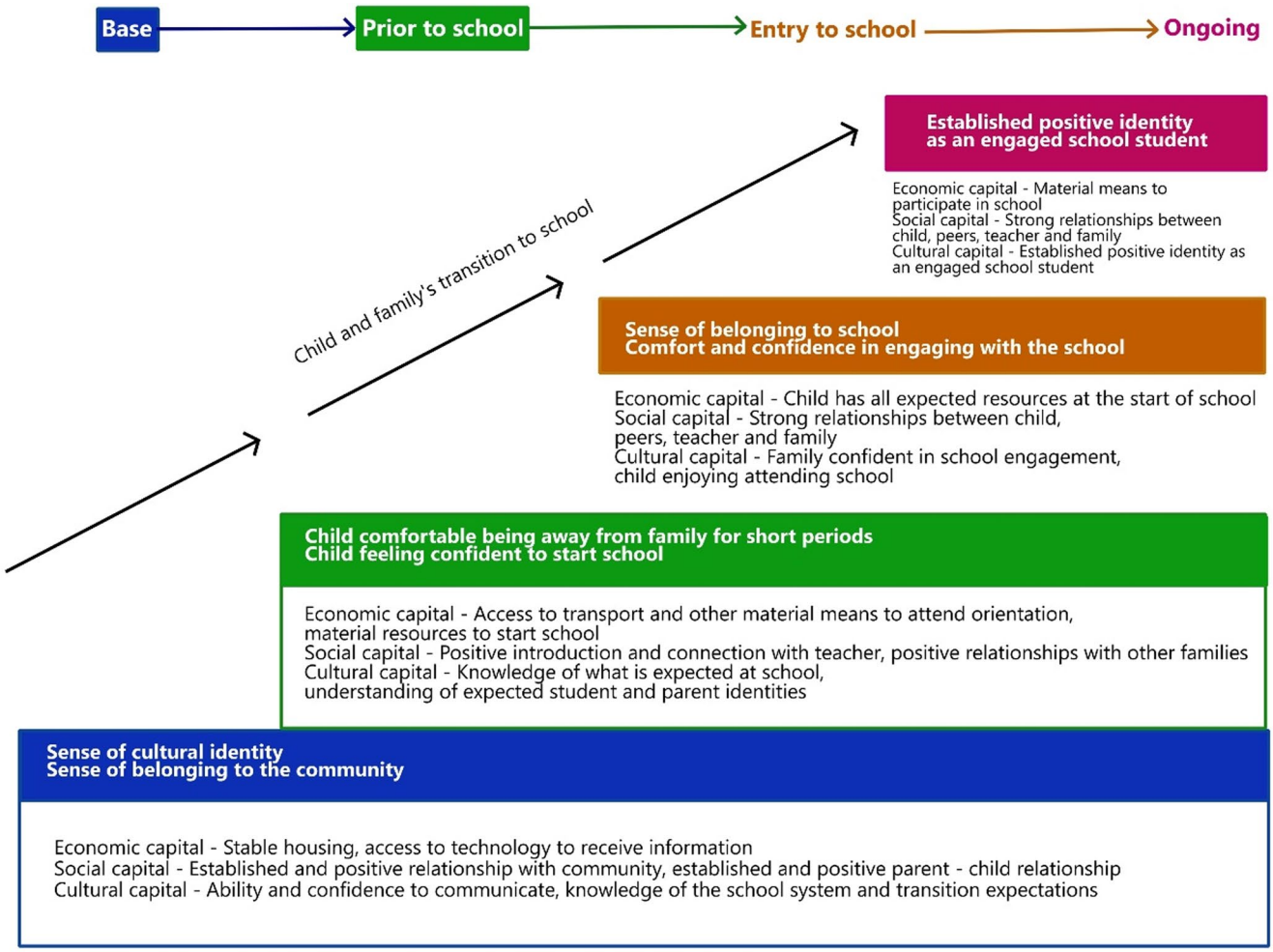

Fig. 3 Step Model with identified expected capital in each step

school. It had the additional impact of limiting the development of a strong positive relationship between parents and the preschool teacher. Relationships and knowledge in this context are forms of capital that assist children and families in the transition journey. The breakdown of this transfer of capital represents a moment of fragility within the process, the influence of which impacts the acquisition of further capital. The moment of fragility, therefore, has an ongoing, cumulative impact on the child and family if not addressed. In the case studies, without some sort of language support or translation, access to latter forms of capital (i.e., social connections) are less likely to be obtained. This moment of fragility within the system causes a disruption in the child and family's journey that does not prevent progress, but makes it harder – more "effortful". This is shown in the diagram below as the gap between steps becomes higher (Fig. 4).

There is a risk that this fragility will ripple through to subsequent steps. For example, a parent's missing knowledge about the school environment could continue through later steps to negatively impact the family's relationship with the school (i.e., through lack of connection or understanding). This missing capital and moments of fragility could impact the child's sense of comfort and confidence in the school environment, and subsequently, their positive identity as an engaged school student.

Another moment of fragility concerned Sarah, Rowan's mother. During interviews, Sarah discussed an extremely negative experience of mistreatment and racial prejudice she experienced when accessing health services in Australia two years prior. This experience left Sarah with a distrust in government services and impacted her confidence in being heard and taken seriously by service providers. This confidence and connection to community is a form of social capital in the base step, now disrupted for Sarah. The following year, Sarah's eldest son (who was seven years old at the time) was experiencing bullying at school. This included verbal and physical alterations. Sarah was hesitant to approach the school due to her experience of racism. Sarah said, *'because I think oh, like the hospital, you know? We are rubbish for Australian people, you know?'* While this example relates

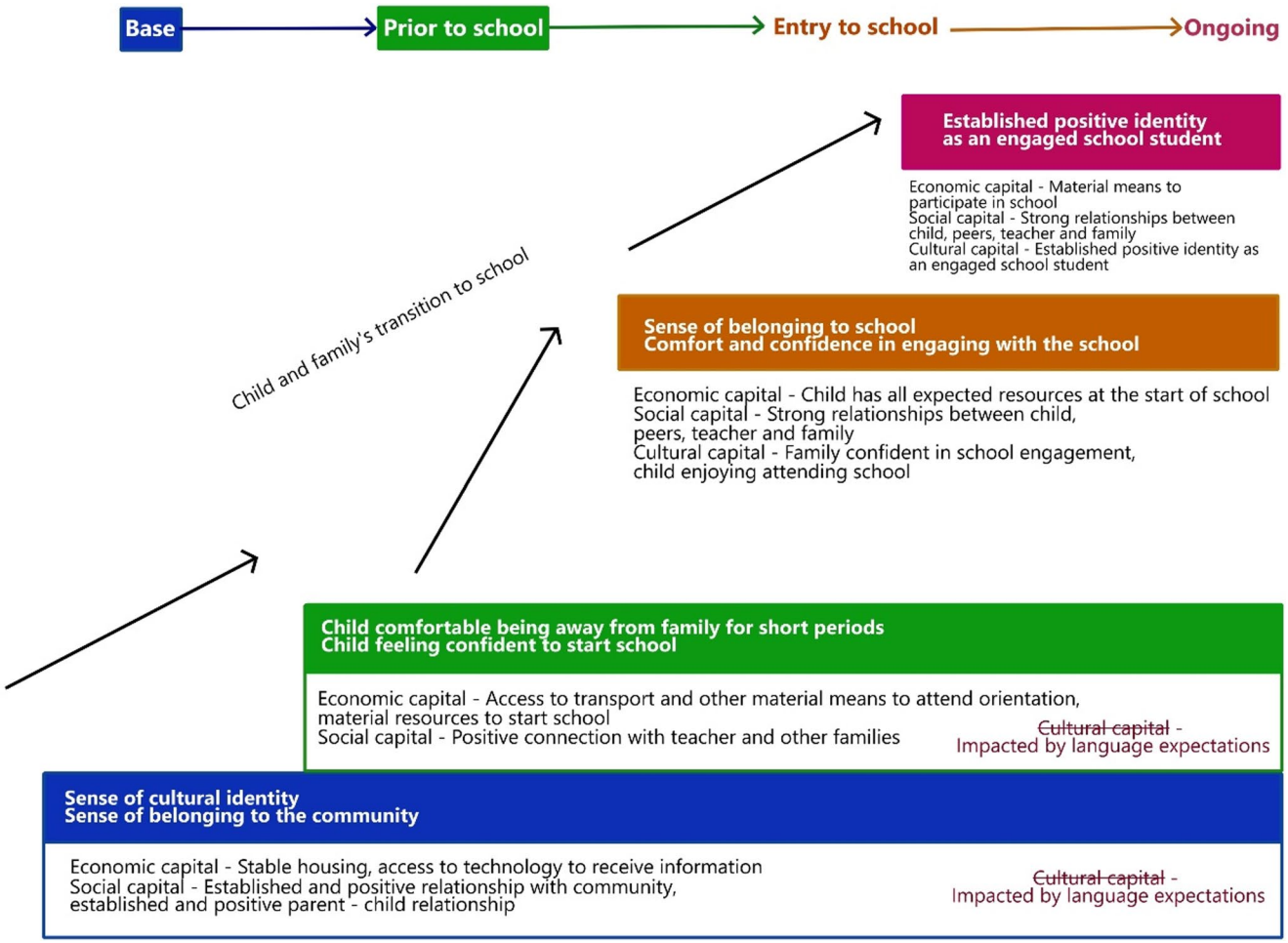

Fig. 4 Step Model demonstrating the impact of language barriers prior to entry to school

to the family's engagement with the school more broadly, it impacted their engagement and Rowan's transition. The below diagram illustrates how the experience of racial prejudice had flow on impacts in the school environment, as the height of the steps increases where forms of capital are missing (Fig. 5).

These examples demonstrate how the Step Model can be used to identify moments of fragility within systems and their impact. The lack of trust for Sarah has the potential to persist through the transition journey if not addressed or alleviated. For Hayma and Pemala, not having the level of English proficiency expected in the transition programs limited the amount of capital they could obtain in subsequent steps (knowledge of the school system, effective communication leading to stronger relationship with the teacher). This disruption creates fragility within a step and can compound to increase future challenges (and indeed fragility within the system) as children progress throughout school.

Opportunities for Change

Where expected forms of capital are missing, there are two ways the Step Model can be used to identify ways of supporting families. The first is in identifying additional or alternate supports that can be used to create additional steps that increases the elevation lost from the missing capital. The second is in identifying and valuing the forms of capital families bring that are not initially valued within the school environment. In other words, broadening the types of capital valued within the field. Examples of both methods were identified within the case studies. Economic, social and cultural capital can take many forms and be both relational and structural.

Returning to Sarah's experience of racism and the impact this had on her family's engagement with school, Sarah attended the Community Space at the school where community worker Fereshteh runs a wide range of programs and activities for mothers of young children in the community, with a particular emphasis on connecting with women from migrant or refugee backgrounds. Fereshteh formed a

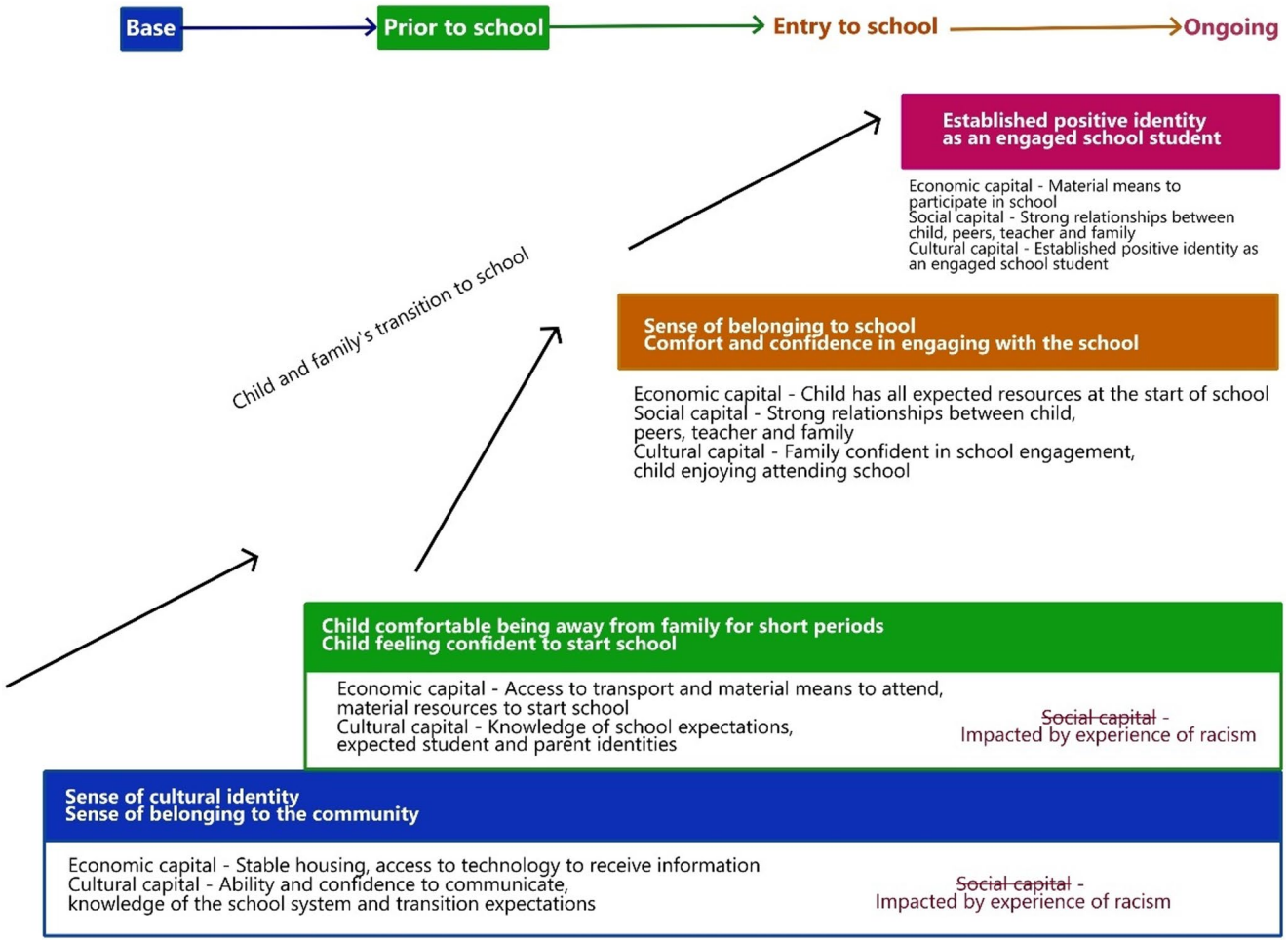

Fig. 5 Step Model demonstrating the impact of racism for Rowan and Sarah prior to entry to school

trusting relationship with Sarah, and when Sarah disclosed the bullying, Fereshteh encouraged her to raise the issue with the school. Fereshteh attended the meeting with Sarah and the matter was addressed by the school.

Within the Step Model, the intervention and additional support provided by Fereshteh and the Community Space can be visualised as an additional step as a booster, illustrating how this new form of capital fills the gap. this results in a smoother transition process, thus mitigating the risks associated with the moment of fragility (Fig. 6).

The relationship with the Community Space helped rebuild this relationship with the school and ensured that Sarah had the confidence to engage with her younger son Rowan's transition. In the final interview, Sarah expressed how happy she was with her children's engagement with the school. *'I'm so happy. Because this year was awesome. [Both children] have good teachers. And I'm so happy.'* Sarah now has regular contact with Rowan's teacher, Pietra, who said, *'Rowan's mum always comes up and talks to me every day'.* In this case study, the presence of relational and structural support greatly improved Rowan's transition journey. The diagram above demonstrates how Fereshteh's actions supported Sarah and Rowan's transition.

Acknowledging and valuing the forms of capital families from refugee backgrounds have but are not expected in the environment aligns with a strength based approach recommended in engagement with children from refugee backgrounds. In a discussion with her class about migration, Sandra highlighted the strength of Noah's journey to Australia.

> **Sandra**: I said, 'You were only little but you know, you've had to come to a brand new country'. And he actually knows what it's like to be like that. And I said to everyone else 'you can learn lots off Noah because, you know, he's had to do that and learn a new language'. And they were like 'oh wow!'

In the playgroups she runs with families prior to children starting school, Fereshteh said;

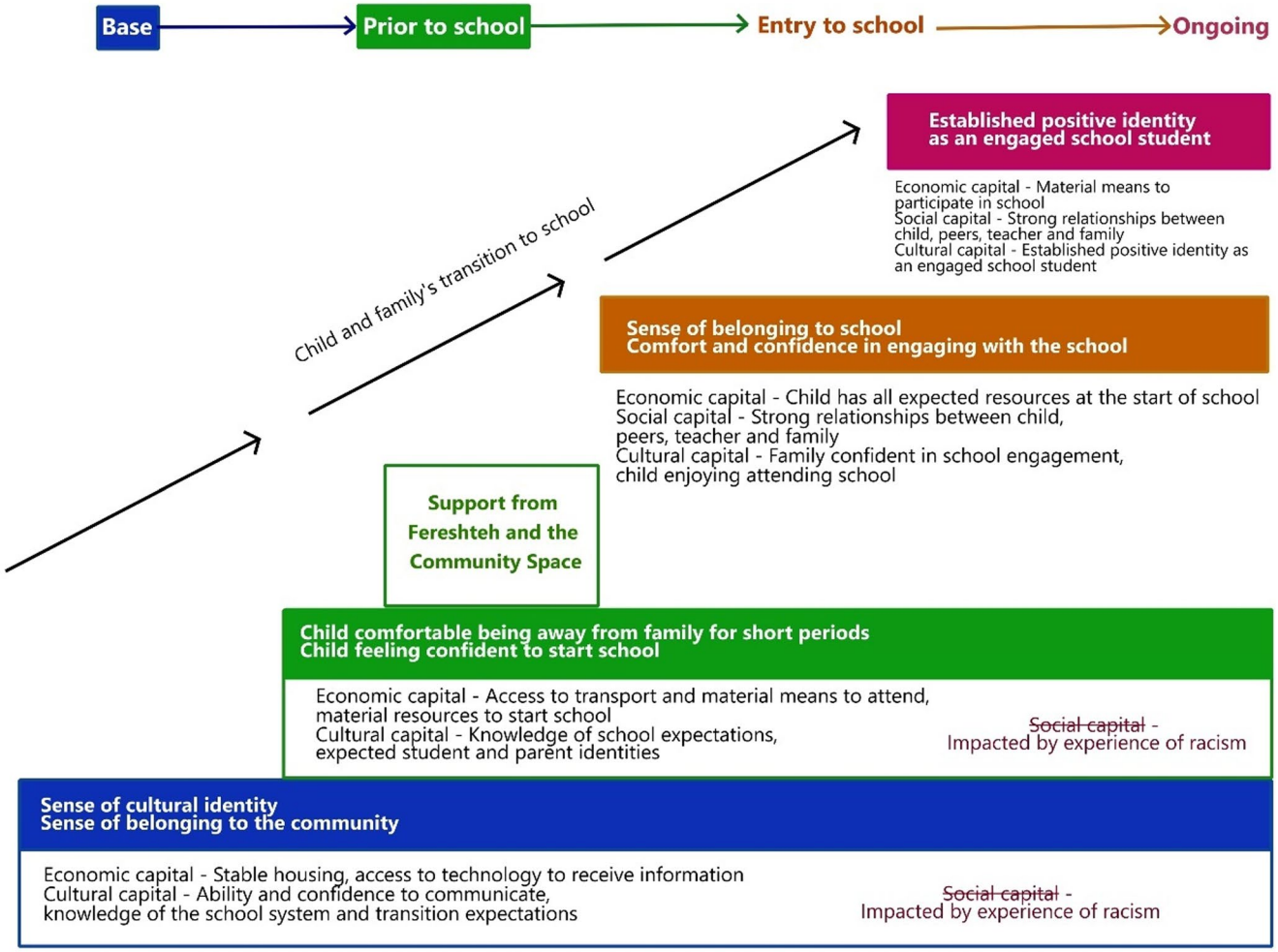

Fig. 6 Step Model demonstrating how additional supports ease the transition process where a moment of fragility exists

> **Fereshteh**: we let each child if they know a song from their own backgrounds, like a kids song and they can sing it in their own language. Because we… we're teaching mums to not lose their mother language. So it's really good to keep it, so mum will be practicing with her child, because he's going to sing a song next week in his own language.

Fereshteh's active engagement with mothers from migrant and refugee background was also undertaken in a manner that encouraged engagement with the school community in a way that encouraged them to put their strengths first. The impact this strength-based approach, and acknowledging the significant skills and knowledge families bring to the transition experience is shown in the model below (Fig. 7 and 8).

Acknowledging the strengths that individual children and families bring—without resorting to tokenism or stereotypes—is an effective way to support transition experiences. The Step Model can be used to identify strengths, and show how they translate to improved transition experiences.

Discussion

Effective transitions are related to both immediate and long-term positive outcomes for children across a wide range of measures (Carbines et al., 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Ladd, 1987; Vogler et al., 2008). Through communications and physical experiences, transition programs' primary goals are to ensure positive engagement between children, families, and school settings, ensuring children and families gain knowledge and familiarity within the new environment (Carbines et al. 2008; De Gioia 2017; Dockett and Perry 2021c). When children and families experience moments of fragility through the transition process, they risk missing out on the key resources and support expected during transition. This highlights the need to provide early support, remove

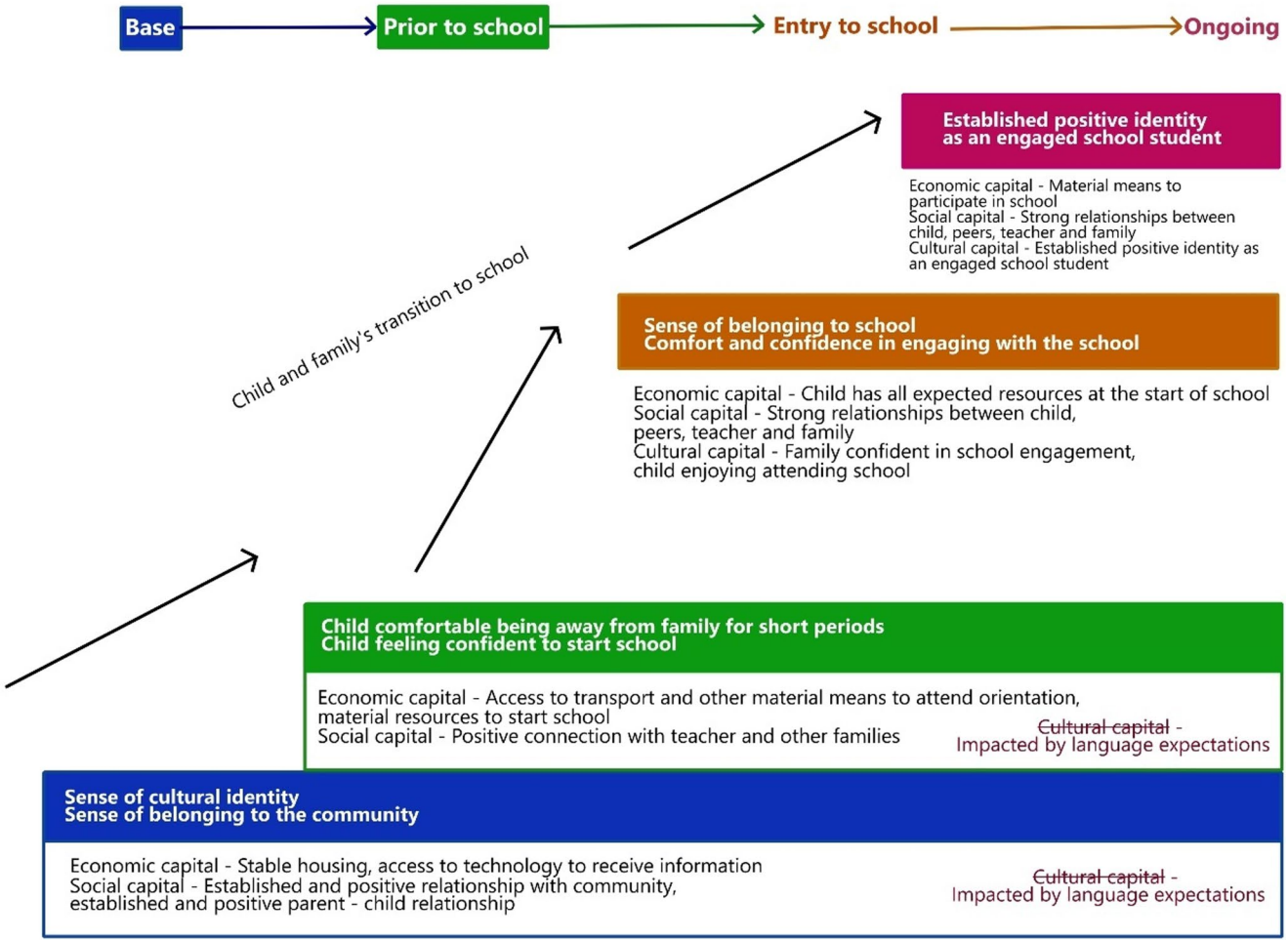

Fig. 7 Step Model demonstrating the impact of a moment of fragility on the transition process, before diverse forms of capital are recognised

barriers, and recognise the different types of capital children and families bring to schools and transition programs.

While the focus of this paper has been on presenting the Step Model, findings from the case studies discussed here show a clear need for greater support for children from refugee backgrounds transitioning to school and their families. This includes increased funding for translation services to improve the accessibility of transition activities, as well as greater funding and resources for programs such as the Community Space, which enable strong relationships to be established between families and schools and support the transfer of cultural capital in the form of knowledge. For the families in the case studies, the presence of these services and programs would help address the systemic challenges faced throughout the transition process and help to mitigate moments of fragility experienced by families.

Given the significance of transitions, there is a need for tools in both research and practice that facilitate the examination of social structures that shape children's transition experiences and lives more broadly, and consider how power dynamics function within educational settings and influence interactions. There are currently few tools available to support this examination, and given its importance, the Step Model fills a significant gap.

It is worth noting that in the case studies, all families participated in the orientation activities available to them. Attendance in these activities is a key point of connection. In Australia, approximately 90% of children are enrolled in a preschool program in the year before full time school (Australian Government, 2025). However, while it is difficult to gain an exact percentage, the proportion of children from a refugee background attending preschool is likely to be significantly lower as most studies find underrepresentation of refugees in early childhood education and care and preschool (Krieg et al., 2015; Lamb, 2020).This is more likely for families who are in the process of being assessed for refugee status as Government provisions are not always available, limiting families' options. All four children attended preschools and engaged in the transition activities run by preschool teachers. As noted earlier, participating preschool teachers place a strong emphasis on supporting children's transition to school. While some children who do

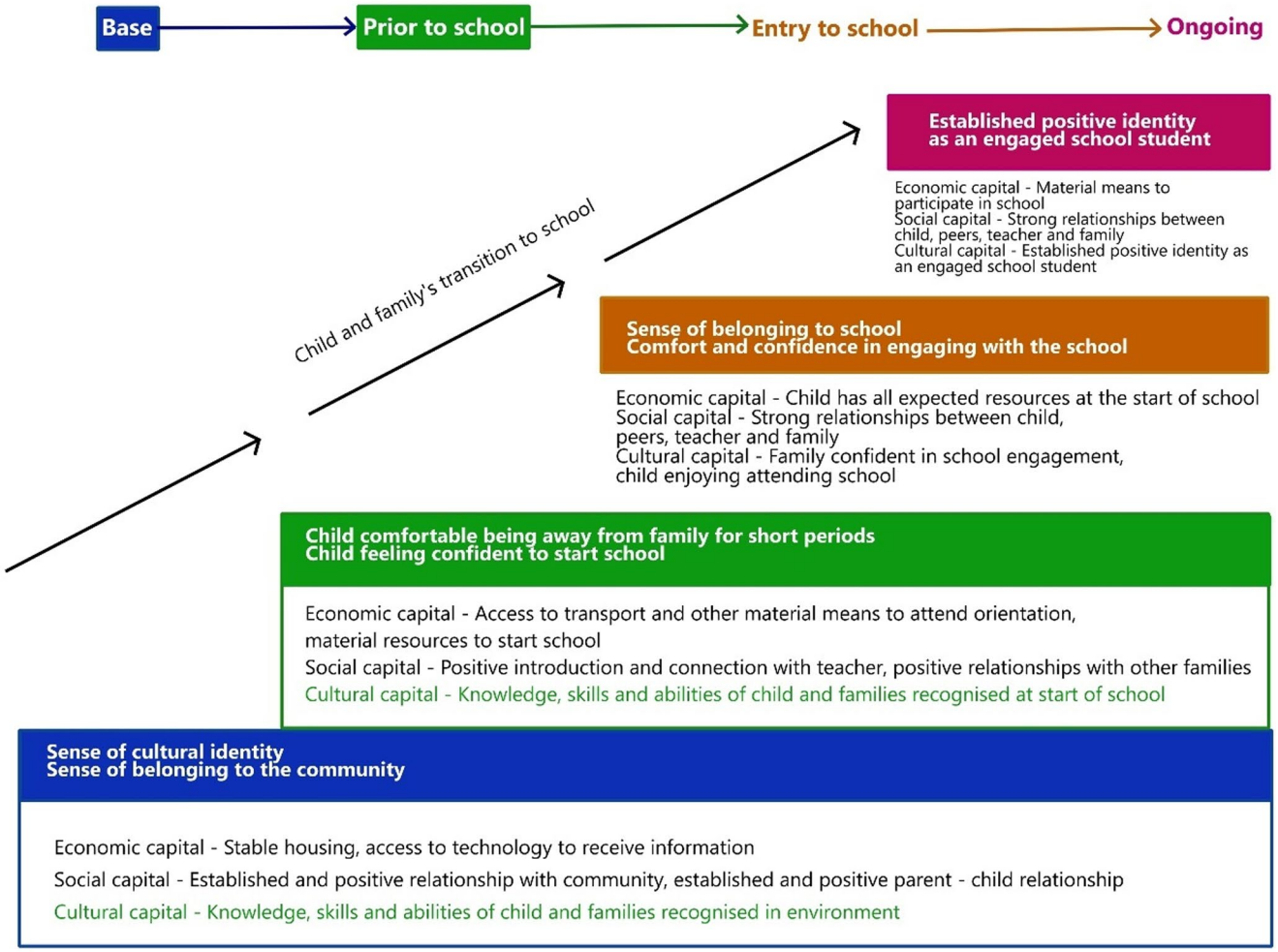

Fig. 8 Step Model demonstrating the impact of recognising diverse forms of capital on the transition process where a moment of fragility exists

not attend preschool are supported in these types of transition activities by their families, for others, such support may not be available or possible. This would represent a significant moment of fragility for these children, as they would be far less familiar with the school setting and its expectations upon starting school, reinforcing the value of preschool attendance as core to effective transitions. The Step Model is, therefore, an effective tool to consider the presence or absence of opportunities, and to identify moments of fragility and their impact.

Application of the Model

The Step Model has been designed as a tool for both research and practice. It provides a framework for examining and deconstructing the social structures that influence children's lives and their experience of transition, and to audit transitions and planning effective transition activities. While the model was developed as part of a study on transition to school, its theoretical foundation in Critical Theory and Bourdieu's theories of capital (Bourdieu & Biggart, 1986), is not confined to this context and the Step Model could be modified to apply to different populations and/or diverse contexts. In other words, the model is not specific to school transitions but can be used as a research tool for examining the social structures that shape children's lives and transition experiences more broadly. It can also be applied to audit and plan for more effective transitions, offering a framework to understand how power dynamics function within educational settings and influence interactions. By gaining insight into these dynamics, it becomes possible to identify opportunities to address risks, bridge gaps, and challenge disadvantage—both at the individual level and within the broader system.

At its core, the Step Model enables the identification of both explicit and implicit expectations within transition systems, and potential risks for individuals or groups who follow non-normative transition pathways.

While the application of the Step Model will vary depending on context, the utility of the model lies in its ability to support both researchers and practitioners to:

1. Identify the broad steps associated with the transition context, including the intended outcome for the child (or other agent) on the transition journey.
2. Critically reflect on what forms of capital underpin progress up these steps.
3. Identify what approaches the school (or other institution) have in place to support the acquisition of these forms of capital.
4. Through critical reflection and consultation identify potential barriers that could cause moments of fragility within this system.
5. Consider approaches that could be used to alleviate these moments of fragility. This could be through;

a. Identifying forms of capital children and families possess that are currently not considered or valued in the transition context (e.g., If there are skills or knowledge held by children or families disengaged from the school setting, provide time and space to share and celebrate these within the transition program); and/or.
b. Identify changes or additions to the current system (e.g. if low-income families are not attending transition activities in an area due to transport limitations, consider more flexible modes of delivery, alternate times, or providing transport support).

Considering Dockett and Perry's (2001) guidelines for evaluating transition programs, the Step Model can be used to consider transition programs' success against evidence based features of effective approaches. For example, these guidelines identify flexibility and responsiveness as desirable features of transition programs, and advocate for taking into account contextual aspects of community and of individual families and children within that community (Dockett & Perry, 2001). Through the application of the Step Model, the effectiveness of these elements can be assessed within a specific context and for a specific population.

The case studies and the transition contexts examined in this paper are drawn from a single Australian jurisdiction. Transition contexts—including available programs and activities—vary across Australian jurisdictions, with even greater differences evident internationally. These differences include, but are not limited to, the age at which children commence school, the availability of early childhood education prior to school, expectations of family engagement, and school curriculum. Despite this variation, we propose the Step Model as an effective tool that can be applied across diverse contexts. When applying the model, as outlined above, a central element is critical reflection on the transition context, including the identification of both explicit and implicit expectations embedded within transition experiences.

Central to the effective use of the Step Model, regardless of context, is the active engagement and communication with the children and families involved. At the core of Bourdieu's theories of capital is a recognition of the agency of individuals and groups within systems marked by power differentials (Grenfell, 2008). In recognition of this agency, children have a say in matters that affect them. In addition, when considering populations experiencing disadvantage (such as refugees) it is essential to ensure the perspectives of these peoples is at the core of decision making in order to avoid applying harmful stereotypes.

Limitations

While the focus of this paper has been on presenting the Step Model, we wish to note several limitations of the case studies which need to be taken into consideration when viewing the results. An over the phone translation service was used in interviews with parents in three of the four case studies. Translation inevitably influences how participants' statements are communicated, and there is a possibility of misinterpretation (Wagner & Naidoo, 2023). Participants may also have been influenced by the presence of translators in what they were willing to share during the interviews (Due et al., 2014). In addition, although the translators engaged were from a professional service, at times the quality of the translation was uncertain. This was evidenced by long conversations occurring between participants and translators, followed by disproportionately short statements from the translator in English to the interviewer. Poor call quality at times also impacted the quality of translation, including two instances where translators unexpectedly left mid-interview, with the call unable to be reconnected < redacted reference>. Despite these limitations, the presence of translators enabled participants with low English proficiency to participate, which is a strength of the study. However, we highlight the need for future research with families from refugee backgrounds to further bridge language barriers and ideally be led by researchers with shared language and cultural background with participants. The limitations in the present study have been taken into consideration in the analysis.

The language barrier between researcher and interviewer, < redacted>, was one factor influencing the research. The positionality of researchers always impacts their research. < Redacted>is affiliated with university education and is a white English-speaking adult. The dynamic between participants and researcher during interviews was influenced by these factors. When designing and undertaking the case

studies the research team took this into consideration. However, participants' engagement was undoubtedly affected by < redacted>'s positionality. We have taken a reflexive approach throughout the analysis to acknowledge the impact of the power differential during data collection and the process of analysis itself.

Conclusion

We propose the Step Model as a useful tool for critically reflecting on transition programs and practices. Teachers and education policy makers can use the model to consider what underlying ideology is shaping the transition design, leading to both spoken and unspoken expectations of children and families engaging in transition. From here, users can identify how children and families who may be experiencing non normative transitions may experience moments of fragility within the transition process. Ultimately, this model can then be used to identify areas where change or additional supports can improve the transition to school experience.

We recommend that the Step Model is used in conjunction with other evaluation tools for transition programs to ensure a holistic understanding of transition experiences are included for consideration.

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Declarations

Conflicts of interest No conflicts of interests noted.

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