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# Improving Well-Being in Preschool: The Role of Autonomy in Transitions

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**IMPROVING WELL-BEING IN PRESCHOOL: THE ROLE OF AUTONOMY IN  
TRANSITIONS**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
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# AUTONOMY IN PRESCHOOL TRANSITIONS

## ABSTRACT

The following proposed study aims to examine self-determination theory (SDT) in preschool transitions. Transitions are defined as the collective movement from one physical space to another. SDT states that autonomy is one of three basic psychological needs for well-being. The impacts of autonomy on well-being will be assessed on 170 preschool children aged 2-6 ( $M=4yro$ ) randomly sampled from two schools in the LA area. Research indicates that transitions are challenging due to improper teacher preparation and the common presence of behavioral challenges in preschool children. Additionally, integrating choice into education has been shown to improve well-being and academic success, but autonomy has not been specifically studied in the context of transitions. Behavioral challenges have been linked to academic and social delays and can begin as early as preschool. In this study, randomly assigned children in the “Freedom of Choice” (FoC) intervention will be provided with an opportunity to practice autonomy through having choice in how and when they transition. For example, a child may choose to stand quietly on the rug and then pretend to be a cat as they transition down the hallway. It is predicted that all children’s well-being will benefit from FoC, with strongest results seen in those with behavioral challenges. Furthermore, punishment (measured through the number of corrections given by a teacher) is expected to moderate the relationship between the intervention and well-being.

*Keywords: Self-Determination Theory, autonomy, transitions, preschool, well-being, punishment, behavioral challenges*

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Many teachers and parents of young children can probably relate to the struggle that comes with daily transitions from one activity to another. These transitions could be as simple as leaving home and getting into the car or moving from one classroom to another throughout the day. Times of transition seem to create opportunities for more chaos and disruption, sometimes causing frustration in both the parent/teacher and the child which ultimately leads to further challenges (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Corso, 2012). When a child is told it is time to move to somewhere new, the child has been given a task that comes with certain rules. The teacher may require all children to gather first on the floor and wait for everyone to be seated quietly before calling names to line up at the door. At this point, the child knows they have to be seated on the floor, still and quiet. The teacher then starts calling names of kids following the rules so they can stand in line where again, they must wait quietly and patiently. This process may sound smooth and simple until one child or even several deviate from the task. Disruption could occur at any stage of the transition – either as one activity is winding down, when it’s time to sit still and quiet among peers, as the child is lining up, waiting for everyone to be lined up and ready, and then finally walking down the hallway. At any point, if disruption occurs, the struggling child could encounter a negative interaction with the teacher, could be left behind their peers and forced to redo the transition properly, and the whole class could risk being late or arriving in an unsettled manner. It is essential for educators and psychologists moving forward to remember why rules and guidelines exist, what purpose they serve and for whom, and which skills learned in preschool will prepare all types of children for future academic and social success.

### **Transitions**

In this paper, transitions are defined as the collective movement from one physical space to another, specifically, from one classroom to another. Hemmeter and colleagues (2008) discuss

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the various elements that make transitions smooth and efficient, and why some children have more trouble transitioning well than others. They emphasized that while some children are known to have behavioral challenges, most kids will, on any given day, present challenging behavior at some point. This makes the problem of transitions relevant to the whole class. The authors argue that transitions involve structure and scheduling, and too many transitions in one day will most likely lead to higher chances of chaos and challenging behavior (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, Artman & Kinder, 2008). Children may struggle with transitions because of a lack of understanding of expectations, or if there is too much time waiting around, or if what is being asked is far from expectations at home and thus feels foreign to the child. The authors suggest that to help reduce challenging behavior, teachers could aim to schedule a day with as few transitions as possible and instead keep children engaged with meaningful and developmentally appropriate tasks. The more time that children are kept engaged, meaning not roaming around with nothing to do, the greater the chance challenging behavior will decrease. Researchers have also suggested that transitions will be more difficult for children with communication delays, struggles with social and emotional skills, and learning disabilities (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Corso, 2012).

It seems plausible that when children are asked to stand still in a straight line and stay quiet while having nothing else to do, chances are teachers will find themselves correcting children and wasting time keeping the line organized. While there is limited empirical research on preschool children's transitions from one space to another, academics in the field of early childhood education have accumulated various strategies helpful for classroom teachers. Waiting time, for example, could be modified so that while kids are waiting in line, they are playing a game, answering questions or telling stories. Teachers should plan ahead to have all materials

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ready for implementation, using auditory or visual cues telling the class it is time to transition (such as a bell or a hand sign). Additionally, turning transitions into games can reduce challenges during this process (Artman-Meeker & Kinder, 2014, as cited in Butler & Ostrosky 2018). Physical activity inside the classroom has also been argued to increase children's well-being (Sando, 2019), so if children are given more freedom to move in the classroom during waiting periods or even move more dynamically down the hallway during a transition, overall well-being could increase. Academics and teachers in the field understand the importance of keeping children engaged and happy throughout the day. However, it is clear from even the small amount of research that a variety of challenges occur during times of transition, and given how frequently transitions happen throughout the day, is it essential that psychologists and educators work to identify exactly where things go wrong, and why transitions can be dreadful to anyone leading them.

### **Self-Determination Theory**

Psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan have argued that human beings are intrinsically motivated to learn and apply their knowledge to their lives, developing a strong sense of self. They identify three basic psychological human needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – as predicting well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000, Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in its most basic form suggests that people are motivated to grow and feel fulfillment in life. The need for growth drives people's behavior such that they develop a strong sense of self. Additionally, autonomy is argued as necessary for intrinsic motivation which can lead to an individual gaining knowledge and independence. People can be motivated to do things for all sorts of external factors such as money or other rewards, but Deci and Ryan would argue that it is internal factors that drive autonomy and thus

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lead to people becoming self-determined (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The proposed study in this paper will consider how self-determination theory (specifically focusing on autonomy) can lead to more effective and efficient transitions while also increasing children's well-being in preschools by giving students greater autonomy through emphasizing freedom to choose. Furthermore, children with behavioral challenges will be analyzed separately from their peers to see whether or not their well-being is impacted the greatest with increases in freedom of choice.

### **Self-Determination Theory in Education**

In the world of education, self-determination theory involves fostering students' interests in learning, valuing education, and feeling capable and confident in their academic tasks. In line with the theory, outcomes on these concepts are driven by intrinsic motivation and internalized values and could lead to personal growth as well as engaged learning and conceptual understanding of academic topics (Deci et al, 1991). Helping children find their intrinsic motivation and understand their own agency in the classroom will, according to the theory, lead to greater independence, confidence, and autonomy. When children are given more freedom to choose, they are developing their sense of autonomy (Holt, Smedegaard, Pawlowski, Skovgaard & Christiansen, 2019). Physical education is one area in which self-determination theory has been tested, and the research shows that intrinsic motivation can predict concentration and positive affect (Standage, Duda & Ntoumanis, 2005). SDT emphasizes the role of intrinsic motivation in achieving well-being. The current education system values competition and academic performance, but it has been found that for PE class, changing the environment of physical activity such that it fosters mastery and independent learning can lead to greater positive experiences for students, especially those who may have previously lacked motivation in this area (Holt et al, 2019).

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### **Classroom Management**

Classroom management has been defined as a meta-skillset involving perceptions, self-regulation, and interpersonal relationships with faculty and students (Clodie Tal, 2010). The teacher's job is to create a healthy learning environment for all students and to have the necessary skills to complete the aims of the definition above. In her research, Tal noted that classroom management is often overlooked as a serious skill set and instead becomes something teachers throw together using tips from other teachers. While her work is with kindergarten students, she emphasizes the necessity of teacher preparation and teacher training which will dictate the classroom setting entirely.

Classroom management can be perceived quite differently from one classroom teacher to another. In some schools, part of classroom management involves the inclusion of all learning styles and behaviors. Classrooms integrating a variety of learning differences are known as inclusive classrooms. The idea of inclusive classrooms is discussed frequently in the early education world, as they can lead to positive outcomes on social and academic learning, however requiring a more well-rounded skill set from the teacher and further preparation on the part of the school. "Inclusion students" are children who show higher reports of behavioral problems (Karakaya & Tufan, 2018). Researchers Wolery, Anthony and Heckathorn (1998) conducted an observational study looking at modifying activities to include all learning styles and behaviors. Inclusive classrooms, they argued, have been shown to have positive impacts on children's social learning and academic performance if teachers are prepped and trained properly and have tools to modify activities to be more inclusive. They further discuss that transitions between classroom activities can be made more effective with proper instruction ahead of time. In their study,



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teachers' behaviors during transition times were measured along with general transition effectiveness.

To be an effective preschool teacher takes more than setting up materials and simply teaching necessary content. A classroom full of 3-5-year-old children can present many challenges, including tantrums or fights over sharing materials or failure to follow rules. Researchers Aygün, and Yildizbas (2014) were interested in different aspects of a teacher's background and how they relate to classroom management issues. They argue that classroom management involves the following key skills – rulemaking, healthy communication between the teacher and student, ability to change unwanted behavior, and time management. The results showed significant differences in effective learning outcomes based on the teacher's education level, years of experience, and the number of children in the classroom with behavioral problems.

Various approaches to working with young children based on developmental and cognitive abilities have been discussed (cf. Kohn, 2016). Kohn argued the importance of integrating a “working-with” strategy rather than a “doing-to” strategy regarding teaching young children. The “working-with” approach sees children as capable and autonomous in their thoughts and feelings and emphasizes the role of respect from the teacher to the child. Teachers should aim to be patient and understand the perspectives of young children, despite their presumed immaturity and limited self-awareness. Taking this point further, Kohn suggested that the way in which adults interact with children can influence the way in which they develop. *Working with* children can foster autonomy, social skills, perhaps even perspective taking, while *doing things to* children may instill unhealthy power dynamics and poor cooperation skills.

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Using a “working with” approach emphasizes meeting children where they are currently at, and helps them achieve aims and goals relative to themselves and their individuality (Kohn, 2016).

### **Behavioral Challenges**

Part of effective classroom management is having the skillset to handle problematic behaviors throughout the day. Since there is not a standard list of guidelines for teachers to follow, there is variation in how teachers address noncompliance during the school day (Ritz, Noltemeyer, Davis & Green, 2014). Before discussing these variations further, it is important to define what challenging behavior means. The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (2013) defines challenging behavior as: a) repeated behavioral patterns that directly interfere with academic learning or pro-social engagement with peers, b) patterns of behavior that are not improved using accepted developmentally appropriate guidelines, and c) drawn out tantrums or other forms of aggression and disruption vocally or physically including self-harm, noncompliance, or destroying property. It is important to establish clear criteria for behavioral challenges, because most preschool children exhibit a range of behaviors without necessarily being diagnosed with well-understood technical behavioral disorders. For the purposes of the proposed study, it is essential that researchers consider the role behavioral challenges can play in making a transition successful in both efficiency and producing well-being.

Many children struggle with behavioral challenges at some point. Some of these issues are temporary, but others can be predictors of long-term struggles in future academic success. It has been consistently shown that there are many reasons children struggle behaviorally, including genetic and environmental factors. Early interventions may help reduce challenges to promote better well-being and academic success in the future. For example, behavior problems at

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age 5 can be predicted by stressful life events, and if left untreated, academic success could be negatively impacted (Mitchell & Hauser-Cram, 2009). These researchers emphasized the importance of early intervention plans both at home and at school when problematic behaviors are first noticed, to prevent long-term negative outcomes for the child. While this paper will not focus on prevention strategies, it is helpful to understand that challenging behavior is usually not the result of one, but many aspects of a child's upbringing. For the purposes of this paper, the focus will remain on the effects of behavioral problems rather than prevention strategies, given that by the time children are in preschool, according to the previous study, they may already meet criteria for diagnoses.

Research continuing to look at impacts of behavioral problems on academic performance found that children with both emotional and behavioral problems are more prone to academic failure and are at risk for falling behind their peers. While this study focused on children ages 8-9, it is possible such findings could exist at younger ages. In preschool, academic performance does not exist in the traditional sense, such as graded assessments or teacher lectures (Mundy et al, 2017). In preschool, children have activities, such as transitions, or specific lessons throughout the day. As such, for the current study, transitions will be viewed as an activity, and in preschool, academic performance is limited to classroom activities.

Preschool teachers often report feeling underprepared to deal with the variety of behavioral challenges presented each day, and little research focuses on quantifying reciprocal interactions between teachers and students (Vujnovic et al, 2014). Children tend to experience greater well-being when teachers connect with them through a morning greeting, listening to their concerns, giving them praise or acting playful towards them (Bratterud, Sandseter &

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Seland, 2012 as cited in Koch, 2018), implying that perhaps a better approach to handling challenging behavior is to listen and connect with children rather than punish them.

### **Children's Subjective Well-Being**

It can be challenging to study subjective well-being in preschool aged children due to a lack of full cognitive abilities. However, children are aware of their emotional states even if they don't always make sense or have identifiable reasons. A couple of studies focus on subjective well-being in this age group. It was found that children consider early childhood education centers (ECEC) as fostering play and having fun with friends (friends can apply to relationships with teachers as well) (Koch, 2018). Additional research used ECEC to learn more about individual experiences. Through interviews with children, the researchers found that physical environment, available materials, and common activities are all predictors of well-being. Most importantly, they found that having agency in where to go, what to do, and whom to do it with all significantly impact a child's well-being (Sandster & Seland, 2016).

Motivation drives people to do things, but reasons for motivation depend on intrinsic or external factors. Intrinsically motivated children in school will show interest and enthusiasm in the act of learning. Furthermore, freedom, stemming from choice, tends to increase people's well-being (Schwartz, 2009). It can thus be hypothesized that allotting students more freedom could positively impact their well-being. However, at a certain point, it is possible that too much choice can have the opposite effect and decrease well-being. A study conducted with nursery school children outlines this by giving some children an external reward for completing a drawing and not giving anything to other children upon completing a drawing. The researchers found that children given external rewards were less likely to engage with drawing materials or

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used them for a shorter amount of time when presented with them later on. Children who drew simply because they wanted to, with no external rewards, were more likely to engage with drawing materials and use them for longer than their peers when offered them at a later date. (Lepper, Greene & Nisbett, 1973). Self-determination theory holds true in this study, as the “prizes” for one group of students was simply the drawing produced, and therefore was motivated through intrinsic properties.

There is a lack of solid empirical research studying autonomy and well-being in preschool children, but philosophers have been studying these concepts for years. Philosopher Johannes Giesinger (2019) argued that human beings are considered vulnerable if there is any chance of harm in a given situation. She explains that vulnerability is associated with dependence and a lack of autonomy, usually in children, but that all human beings are capable of feeling vulnerable. She believes that even if all people are susceptible, children would still fall in a category with higher vulnerability compared to the average adult. Ethicist Alexander Bagattini (2019) used empirical psychological evidence to question the relationship between vulnerability and well-being through levels of autonomy. He concluded that vulnerability is highest during childhood years due to the significant dependence children have on adults, and it is this lack of autonomy that can impact well-being. While the previous claims are more philosophical, psychological research, such as this proposed study, could help empirically analyze the questions posed by philosophers.

Tying this philosophical background to the realm of psychology, punishment as a construct acts as the possible harm for children in times of transition, thus making them vulnerable during this activity, according to Giesinger. Bagattini would suggest that this vulnerability may stem from a lack of autonomy and predict outcomes on well-being. When

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teachers punish children in vulnerable states, they may be negatively impacting their well-being. In the following study, autonomy will be given to children in times of transition to reduce their chances of getting punished, thus decreasing their vulnerability and predicting better well-being.

### **Gaps in Literature**

Most previous research on transitions focusses on those made between primary school to elementary school, or middle school to high school, thus seeing transitions as bigger life events rather than parts of everyday school structure. Furthermore, prior research on preschool children lacks the examination of well-being outcomes based on classroom management styles and impacts of punishment on different personality types. Punishment is a common tool used in most schools with children of all ages, but again, little is known about what impact punishment has on preschool children, and if it leads to negative outcomes on a child's well-being, confidence, motivation and more regarding important traits necessary for success later on in school. This proposed study aims to fill the gaps in the literature by combining several research questions into one study, looking at self-determination theory to argue that opportunities fostering autonomy in times of transition will increase well-being for preschool children. In a preschool classroom, autonomy could be gained by giving children more choice in how they prepare for and execute times of transition.

This research could provide teachers with new tools aiming to mitigate chaos in times of transition that benefit both the teacher and the student, turning the transition into a purposeful and meaningful activity. Children with behavioral challenges will be studied separately from their peers so that teachers of inclusive classrooms can be better prepared for helping this subgroup transition easier and more efficiently. Additionally, this study could provide helpful

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tools for simply identifying behavioral challenges in a classroom and ways to include all learning styles in all activities (considering transitions are a type of activity).

Pooling from the explored current research, it is clear that transitions are understood to be times of chaos, especially if too many occur in one day, if children are unclear on expectations, and too much time is spent waiting with nothing to do (Hemmeter et al, 2012). SDT emphasizes the role intrinsic motivation plays in people's well-being, thus claiming autonomy as an essential psychological need (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Having freedom to choose is essential to developing autonomy (Holt et al, 2019) and further promotes well-being (Schwartz, 2009). Having agency in where to go and what to do has been shown to increase children's well-being (Sandster & Seland, 2016). However, no study has tested exactly where freedom of choice can be most beneficial, and if certain types of behaviors predict success in efficiency and well-being during times of transition. The quasi-experiment will thus incorporate a "Freedom of Choice (Foc) intervention where children will have the opportunity to explore their individual wants and needs, fostering autonomy and independence.

### **Current Proposed Study**

The following proposed mixed methods study uses an exploratory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), meaning that qualitative data collection will precede and further guide the methodology for the quantitative data collection. A mixed method approach is necessary to gather both qualitative and quantitative data on a topic with very little empirical research. Qualitative interviews informed by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) will be used to provide information on current transition strategies and processes, including teachers' responses to challenging behavior and chaos during times of transition. Quantitative data will then further

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aim to identify specific ways to increase well-being and efficiency during transitions with a control group based on findings in the interviews.

### **Grounded Theory**

A grounded theory approach will be used to identify common tactics preschool teachers currently use to help their students transition from one classroom to another. Grounded theory allows qualitative research to follow flexible guidelines rather than strict methodological rules and regulations. Through collecting and analyzing data, researchers using grounded theory will construct theories taken from, or “grounded” in the data. The method entails researchers should gathering a plethora of information about participants while paying attention to what is heard, seen, and sensed during the interviews. Grounded theory allows for a non-linear methodological approach, by emphasizing the importance of re-working and re-framing research questions as data are being collected. Substantial data collection may include going back to the field once an initial set of interviews is conducted because the researcher now has new ideas based on initial data. Charmaz (2006) compared grounded theory to a camera with many lenses, indicating the importance of taking multiple perspectives to gather rich and meaningful data.

Grounded theory in this study will help recognize what punishment looks like in preschool, since little empirical data exists. Furthermore, it will provide researchers with a general understanding of exactly what occurs during times of transition, how teachers respond to misbehavior, how teachers feel towards the activity of transitioning, and additionally if any children in particular struggle and how this struggle is handled by the teacher. The researchers will additionally focus on signs of more structured or unstructured approaches to transitions and outcomes on children’s well-being and transition efficiency. This information will be key to creating a control group in the quasi-experiment which will reflect current transition strategies.



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As such, the grounded theory phase will be used to address the research question: how do today's preschool teachers understand their role in times of transition, what is the reason for order during the process, and what common practices are used to ensure efficiency?

### **Quasi-Experiment**

The quantitative phase of this exploratory mixed methods study will take place in eight preschool classrooms across two preschools similar in demographics and daily structure. Four classrooms will undergo the "Freedom of Choice" (FoC) intervention and the remaining four will operate as the control group. Children in the FoC condition will be given more freedom to choose not only how to transition when it is time, but also where and how to wait as the group prepares to make the transition. Research shows that relationships between preschool students with behavioral problems and their teachers may be improved when the child makes decisions about what an activity looks like (Alamos, Williford & LoCasale-Crouch, 2018). The idea is that in this classroom, the teacher's role is to prepare the students for what is about to happen as they would with any other classroom activity, but without providing too many rules or details so that the children can choose what works best for them. Using the findings from Lepper et al (1973), enough guidelines will be kept in place to ensure that well-being is not decreasing due to an overwhelming number of choices. Classrooms will be observed and coded for the number of transitions made throughout the day as well as the number of corrections given as a whole and to each individual student during the transition and just before the transition. The researchers will also have information on individual students' backgrounds regarding behavioral challenges, medications and any psychological or behavioral diagnoses (for example, ADHD or anxiety).

It is hypothesized that the greater number of corrections given in a time of transition will decrease the efficiency of the transition. Additionally, children in the FoC condition will receive

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fewer corrections from teachers than children in the control group. The more corrections individual children receive will decrease their well-being. Additionally, children in the FoC condition will have higher well-being directly after transitions than children in the control group. Furthermore, children with behavioral issues in the FoC condition will have greater influences on well-being than those in the control group. Finally, the number of corrections a child receives will act as a mediator between the FoC intervention and well-being.

### **Proposed Method**

#### **Qualitative Phase**

##### **Method**

**Participants.** Participants will come from a sample of 30 mostly White and Hispanic preschool teachers with at least three years of teaching experience and will be sampled from the LA area. Teachers will be recruited through flyers and announcements on various listservs directed at preschools in the LA area. Participants will be given an \$30 Amazon gift card and offered free trainings in the proposed intervention in Study 2 (once it is completed) to implement into their own classrooms if they wish.

##### **Materials.**

**Interview.** A semi-structured in-person or Skype interview will be used to collect qualitative data. This type of interview involves all participants being asked the same questions with the opportunity to also ask follow-up questions to each individual participant on what is shared. Each participant will be asked the following set of questions:

1. How many years have you been a preschool teacher?
2. How many students are typically in your class?

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3. Thinking about one full day start to finish, are there parts of the schedule that stand out as being particularly difficult to manage or times of the day you may even dread as a teacher?
4. From start to finish, what does a normal transition from one space to another usually look like?
5. Are there certain children who frequently get in trouble during times of transition?
  - a. If so, what behavioral characteristics do these children have that seem to make transitions difficult?
  - b. What does punishment look like when it is used during times of transition?
6. Are times of transitions generally smooth and efficient?
  - a. If not, where does chaos occur and what does it look like?
  - b. What do you do to mitigate this chaos and return structure to the transition?
7. When you arrive at the next destination, how often do you find yourself in the hallway with a non-cooperating child who may need more time to collect themselves due to issues with the transition?
  - a. What behavioral characteristics are associated with these children?
  - b. What usually works to help get this child back on track and settled in the next activity?

**Procedure.** Participants will provide written consent before the interview begins. A researcher will then conduct the semi-structured interview in the lab or via Skype asking each participant the same basic set of questions with room to clarify or ask follow-up questions when necessary and on track with the interview. Participants will be debriefed in person, and it will be explained that these responses will be used in the second part of this study to help determine

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what the control group should look like. Upon completing the interview, each participant will be compensated with a \$30 Amazon gift card and told that free information sessions on the proposed intervention in Study 2 will be made accessible to them within the year.

**Researcher Reflexivity.** It is necessary to consider my own biases when conducting qualitative research. While psychological studies aim to rely on objective data analysis, personal biases can still arise through analyzing more open-ended data such as responses in an interview. I have been more substantially trained in quantitative data analysis but have more recently focused on mixed methods designs in the hopes of bringing a more holistic approach to my research. I have years of experience working with preschool children in various parts of the United States, and thus have witnessed first-hand the numerous challenges associated with transitions. My experiences may or may not line up with what is learned in the interviews, and I will have to be aware of my bias in this way. I have an understanding of what I think tends to happen, but my experience will be far less than those I am interviewing, and it is critical that I remember this when conducting data analysis.

**Data Analysis.** Each researcher will code interviews individually, highlighting any reflections on chaos, challenging behavior and step-by-step transitional processes. Researchers will then compare their analyses and look for trends indicating problems with transitions and similarities of strategies used to try and understand the common practices among preschool teachers. Researchers will further focus on general attitudes preschool teachers have towards times of transitions by identifying any comments/words reflecting negative or positive feelings.

### **Quantitative Phase**

Following grounded theory, a quasi-experiment will complete the exploratory design by testing an intervention plan aiming to increase children's well-being by improving the efficiency

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of transitions and decreasing chances of punishment through giving children more freedom of choice.

### **Method**

**Participants.** A power analysis was run using a medium effect size for a variety of statistical tests to determine a sample size of 170 preschool children aged 2-6 in the LA area. Children will be about 65% Hispanic/Latinx, 7% Black, 7% Asian, and about 14% White. Gender breakdowns are irrelevant to this study, so this demographic information will not be collected. Twenty-one preschool children will be in each classroom, and there will be a total of eight classrooms across two randomly selected preschools of similar nature (four classrooms experience the intervention, two at one school and two at the other while four classrooms experience the control, two at one school and two at the other).

### **Materials.**

**Well-Being.** Well-being will be assessed using the Leuven Well-Being Scale (Laevers, 2005). Scores are based on the researcher's observations of children's expressed moods. A score of 1 indicates low well-being, shown through sadness, anger, screaming and/or whining, and a score of 5 indicates high well-being, shown through expressive happiness, relaxation, and/or liveliness. A score of 3 indicates a neutral emotional state, a 2 indicates signs of inconsistent discomfort and a 3 indicates signs of inconsistent happiness. Inter-reliability was tested and found to be moderate (kappa value of 0.42, 89% reliable) (McHugh, 2012 as cited in Sando, 2019). Since scores are based on observations, researchers will undergo professional training from clinical psychologists to learn how to identify different moods and facial expressions of preschool children. Training will include watching videos and pilot testing.

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***Autonomy.*** Children's autonomy will be assessed through teachers identifying to what extent each child has shown growth in this area in the year following the study. Children will be asked more regularly and closer to times of transition about their understanding of their sense of freedom. Specifically, children will be asked, "do you feel like when we make transitions you can choose what you want to do?"

***Punishment.*** Punishment will be measured through coding for the number of corrections given by the teacher to individual children during a time of transition. This construct will be tested as a moderating variable between the intervention and outcomes on well-being. In both conditions, teachers will be asked to correct children as they normally would when dealing with misbehavior in times of transition. When children are corrected, it means they have diverted from the task, and thus acts as punishment because the child's autonomy is temporarily taken away through reinforcement of guidelines.

***Efficiency of Transition.*** The transition will be considered efficient if the class arrives as scheduled to the next destination. This will be recorded by noting the time of arrival.

***Behavioral Problems.*** Professionally conducted functional behavioral analyses will assess which children have behavioral problems and which children do not based on criteria from the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (2013). As stated in the introduction, the criteria are as follows:

1. Repeated behavioral patterns that directly interfere with academic learning or pro-social engagement with peers.
2. Patterns of behavior that are not improved using accepted developmentally appropriate guidelines.

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3. Drawn out tantrums or other forms of aggression and disruption vocally or physically including self-harm, noncompliance, or destructing property.

***“Freedom of Choice” Intervention.*** Children in the “Freedom of Choice” (FoC) condition will be given greater choice in both preparation and execution of a transition. When it is time to transition, teachers will ring a bell to get children’s attention and say to the class, “It is now time to get ready for \_\_\_ (whatever the next activity is). Please put all materials away and when you are finished, you may choose to either stand or sit anywhere on the rug in the middle of the room.” Once the children have chosen where and how to wait for further instructions, the teacher will continue by saying, “When you notice that you are not speaking to anyone else and your body is calm and still, you may walk down the hallway where \_\_\_\_ (name of teacher leading the next activity) is waiting. You may choose how to walk down the hallway. For example, you can crawl, skip, hop, or pretend to be your favorite animal as long as you stay calm, do not run and do not speak to any of your classmates.” Before transition one on day one of the study, the teacher will additionally say, “Would someone like to volunteer and show everyone how you might pretend to be a dog without making any noise or wild movements?”

***Control.*** Teachers in-charge of the control classrooms will also ring a bell signaling to children it is time to clean up materials and gather on the floor before transitioning to another room. The teacher will say, “When you have cleaned up all materials, you may find a seat on the rug and sit crisscross applesauce. When I see that you are quiet and your hands are still in your lap, I will call you to line up at the door. When you line up at the door, you may wait silently until everyone is ready to go. Please do not touch any of your classmates.” The teacher will proceed to wait and call on individual children when they show they are ready. Once all children have been called to line up, the teacher will stand at the front of the line and say to the class, “We

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are now going to walk down the hallway. Please stay behind the person in front of you and stay silent until we arrive.” The teacher will be the line leader for the duration of the transition and only leave once everyone is quiet and still. Should complications arise, the teacher will be asked to handle them as they normally would.

**Procedure.** The study will begin in the first month of the school year and last for a total of two months during which researchers will spend three days a week observing transitions. Once written consent has been provided from parents, teachers and school administrators and assent has been asked of each individual child, researchers will randomly assign four preschool classrooms to the “FoC” condition and four to the control condition. Information on the presence of behavioral problems for each child will be provided prior to the start of the study, and these children will have a star placed by their name (only for researchers to see).

For the first implementation of the “FoC” intervention, after reading the assigned script, the teacher will ask volunteers to demonstrate the various choices for transitioning, such as how to pretend to be a cat while still following the rules of being quiet and keeping to oneself. This is to ensure the children understand the guidelines and will not disturb the rest of the school when transition. For each transition following, teachers will simply follow the script any time of day a transition occurs until the class no longer needs formal instruction beyond ringing the bell and clean-up time (meaning that after a few times of hearing instructions, children may not need to be reminded of specific details). Teachers in the control classrooms will use the script assigned as is from day one. For all classrooms, it will be required that the teacher waiting for the class’ arrival will be standing in the hallway by the entrance to the classroom so that children in the FoC condition are not left unattended.



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Researchers in both conditions will code for the number of corrections made by the teacher as well as the total time of transition from the bell ring to the last child to enter the next class. Children with behavioral problems will have a star next to their name so researchers can keep track of outcomes specific to this subpopulation. Researchers will follow the class to the next location (after each child has arrived) and score children's well-being in the minutes directly following the transition. The researchers observing FoC conditions will ask children individually to state whether or not they felt they had freedom of choice when transitioning. In the year following the study, teachers from both conditions will report on to what extent each child has shown growth in their autonomy and overall well-being (this is to test for state, or long-term, well-being, since the study itself focuses on trait, or short-term, well-being). All participants will be debriefed at the end of the two-month period.

### **Ethics**

The proposed study does not exceed minimal risk, meaning anything the children will be asked to do will not be far from what is asked during a normal school day. Children will either be asked to sit on a rug and line up at the door quietly or given freedom in how they choose to transition from one classroom to another. However, since the questions of interest are specific to preschool children, the study will be working with a vulnerable population. To help protect the participants, individual verbal assent will be asked of each child both verbal and written consent will be provided from parents, teachers, school administrators, and the school district. Additionally, teachers will be asked to inform their students of what will be occurring in their classrooms and explain who the observer is and what they will be doing.

Participants will not engage with any sensitive issues or topics that may cause them harm or discomfort. However, the researchers will be given access to individual children's school

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records and will speak with classroom teachers to indicate which children have behavioral issues, diagnosed or undiagnosed, if they are on any medications, and how they respond to being corrected or punished by an authority figure (like when a teacher scolds a child or punishes them in front of their peers). This information is necessary since the research questions include interest in how behavioral challenges impact a child's ability to transition effectively and outcomes on their well-being but will be kept confidential in the hands of the researchers. The only measures children will fill out directly involve their well-being and classroom engagement, both of which will be modified to be age appropriate. At no point in time will participants or classroom teachers be deceived, and anyone will be free to drop out of the study at any time. All relevant data from those who dropout will be destroyed and omitted from analysis.

The researchers will keep all data confidential. Participation will not be completely anonymous since the researchers will have access to enough information to draw data back to individual participants. Data will be kept private in the hands of the researchers and none of the information could ever impact individual children's future academic success or hinder participant's relationships or reputations with their teachers. The benefits of this study outweigh the potential risks, since no interventions exceed minimal risk. Other than having a stranger in their classroom, children will not be doing anything differently from normal preschool life.

This study could provide preschool teachers with helpful tools to improve the efficiency of transitions, and thus reduce frequent daily chaos. It is a common understanding among preschool teachers that transitions can be challenging for a variety of students and often lead to chaos. When a child cannot stand still in line, for example, the teacher punishes the child and time is wasted waiting for the child to cooperate probably resulting in an untimely transition. In

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improving the efficiency of transitions, this study could help reduce behavioral challenges during transitions and increase well-being and classroom engagement for all preschool children.

### **Predicted Results**

#### **Grounded Theory**

Interviews will be coded by individual researchers and then collectively to establish relevant trends and common strategies. Grounded theory suggests that strong analyses are made when researchers consider all of the gathered information, including nuanced aspects of interviews. The analyses are predicted to indicate that when it is time for transitions, most preschool teachers will signal to the class it is time to end an activity either by ringing a bell, clapping their hands, singing a song, or simply making an announcement. Once the children have cleaned up materials, they are typically asked to sit in a communal space, usually asked to cross their legs remain silent. Teachers may then explain that when a child demonstrates to them that they are ready by following the previous rules, the child will be invited to line up at the door. It is predicted that most teachers will allude to some kind of chaos during times of transition, usually revolving around children who struggle behaviorally to follow strict guidelines. It is likely the case that most preschool teachers respond to chaos through types of punishment, either by holding some children back, waiting in the hallway with individual children, or asking children to sit back down and start over, all of which decrease the efficiency of the transition. It is further predicted that some teachers even dread times of transition because of the impending chaos.

#### **Quasi-Experiment**

A chi-square test of independence will determine whether the greater amount of corrections given in a time of transition will decrease the efficiency of the transition. Each time a

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correction is made, time is taken away from the transition, so it is postulated that transitions will take longer than anticipated if teachers are stopping to correct behavior or wait for children to cooperate. A two-independent samples t-test will be run to test whether children in the FoC condition will receive fewer corrections from teachers than children in the control group. With fewer guidelines and restrictions, there will be little room for punishment to occur, and thus fewer corrections will be given. A simple Pearson's correlation test will determine if more corrections lead to diminished well-being for individual children. Previous research indicates that positive connections between teachers and students indicate well-being (Bratterud et al, 2012 as cited in Koch, 2018), so perhaps punishment would indicate poor well-being. Additionally, Giesinger (2019) would argue that because corrections are a form of punishment, children getting corrected are in a vulnerable state, which Bagattini (2019) would suggest indicates a lack of autonomy in this moment, thus explaining decreased well-being for corrected individuals.

An additional t-test will examine whether children in the FoC condition will have higher well-being directly after transitions than those in the control group. Self-determination theory suggests that well-being is predicted by levels of autonomy, and with more freedom of choice, children are given more autonomy during transitions. To test an interaction, a factorial ANOVA will be run to examine if children with behavioral challenges in the FoC condition will have greater influences on well-being than those in the control group. While it is predicted that all children's well-being will be increased in the FoC condition, children with behavioral problems may benefit even more from a less restrictive environment. It was furthermore hypothesized that children in the freedom of choice condition receive fewer corrections and thus have higher well-being than those in the control group. A multiple regression analysis will be conducted, and it is

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predicted that the number of corrections will indeed act as a moderator between the intervention condition and outcomes on well-being.

### **Discussion**

The current education system promotes competition and efficiency, leaving little room for self-exploration and individual well-being. On a systemic level, education works to serve neurotypically developed children, limiting successful outcomes for a range of other personality and learning types. However, preschool could be thought of as a sanctuary where children are beginning to be categorized by their differences but are not yet subjected to one path or direction. In other words, preschool may be the ideal place to provide the building blocks necessary for success and well-being throughout a child's education. Transitions are perhaps the perfect time to encourage children to practice autonomy. When children are transitioning, they are uprooted from structure and purpose at least momentarily, so helping them build independent thinking skills and self-awareness may help them slow down and process exactly what is about to take place, what is expected of them, and how they can best prepare themselves individually.

Self-determination theory argues that autonomy is a key psychological need for well-being in all people. The purpose of this proposed study is to provide children with greater autonomy in times of transitions, reducing the likelihood of punishment taking place, and promoting well-being. Why is autonomy so important, though? Shouldn't it be the case that young children are provided strict guidelines, so they stay on task and cause little trouble? The proposed argument is that if children are given time and tools to identify for themselves when they are physically and mentally prepared to transition, then they will transition efficiently and feel more positive emotions. Autonomy is about making choices that align with our values and

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views of the world. A preschool child probably does not have a sense of their own values the same way an adult does, but in order to become self-determined, they must be given opportunities to practice autonomy, especially when they find themselves in vulnerable positions.

It was predicted that children with behavioral problems will benefit most from the FoC intervention. Inclusive classrooms are becoming quite common in the United States (classrooms with children with a variety of learning needs) and thus it is necessary that teachers in these classrooms be mindful of a variety of strategies for serving all individual students. Most children with identified behavioral challenges will have a Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP) and if the hypotheses are predicted to be true, interventionists (those who design behavior plans) should consider a child's freedom to choose, understanding that autonomy promotes positive behavior outcomes and positive well-being. This predicted study should push all educators to consider the role autonomy can play compared to strict control. The intervention proposed is predicted to benefit all children, but teachers may decide to implement various aspects of it targeted towards individual personality types and behaviors if there is a need to do so. The FoC intervention aims to serve all children but is flexible enough to be molded to the needs of individual classrooms or even children.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations worth considering. Many logistical issues can arise when working with children, especially of such young ages. Children often get sick and miss days of school which means data may be missing for these individuals. Furthermore, children may be wary of a stranger in their classrooms and their behavior may reflect this discomfort, making it difficult to discern exactly why certain behaviors may occur in observations. Some

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children may respond negatively to the FoC condition if they are overwhelmed by the reduced structure. Teachers implementing FoC into their classrooms should be aware of children who benefit from guidelines and allow them the choice to behave as they normally would, perhaps reminding them they can still sit on the carpet and they do not have to be an animal if they do not wish. It is also the case that well-being is defined and expressed quite differently among varied cultures. Some children may grow up in households that value individual well-being more than others. Some parents may encourage free choice at home, while others stick to a stricter parenting style. While the sample is fairly representative of the LA population, western standards are not always applicable cross-culturally. The results thus may not be generalizable to non-western ideologies.

As discussed earlier, researcher bias is essential to note for this study. Observers will be required to undergo extensive training learning how to identify emotions in young children as accurately as possible. Regardless, it is always the case with observational research that the observer's bias will be integrated into the data even with proper protocols increasing objectivity. An additional challenge of this study is getting consent. Because children are a vulnerable population, researchers must get consent from a variety of people, including school administrators, parents, teachers and further verbal assent from participating children. With slightly more hoops to jump through, it is always possible that one of the necessary parties will not give consent, or perhaps parents will not want data collected on their children. Sensitive information will be collected regarding behavioral diagnoses which could further limit who agrees to participate in the study.

It is possible that the reason children have increased well-being in the "FoC" condition is because they get to pretend to be an animal, and thus get a few extra moments of free play in

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their day. This is clouding the chance that it is purely autonomy driving well-being. However, as discussed earlier on, children view their subjective preschool experiences as ones that should foster play and positive connections. Perhaps children playing as they transition is equal to children being autonomous, since they are still acting with agency and behaving in line with how they perceive the purpose of preschool. Future researchers may wish to continue this work by studying the relationship between play and autonomy to justify incorporating more opportunities to play in all activities of the day, beyond just times of transition.

Given a lack of empirical research on preschool transitions (as defined in this paper) there are a variety of directions future researchers could go in. A longitudinal study could look at what happens to people's development and well-being in adulthood when autonomy is practiced or established at as young as preschool. Is it the case that autonomy is further developed at younger ages? What further outcomes does autonomy in the classroom have on children's academic success? Researchers could also consider how self-determination theory correlates to self-awareness, and run a study focusing on autonomy's relation to a child becoming more self-aware and the benefits of doing so. Additionally, this study focuses on transitions specifically involving the whole class moving from one room to another, so future research could consider other types of transitions that occur throughout the day and the role autonomy can play in efficiency and well-being. For example, Montessori classrooms integrate independence into nearly every activity, including children going to the bathroom by themselves, preparing snacks with little help, or choosing "work" (materials to engage with) on their own terms. A researcher might look at how autonomy in Montessori benefits children, and extend this ideology to be integrated into multiple aspects of a day.



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Future researchers may also want to consider the other aspects of self-determination theory (competence and relatedness) in preschool settings. Studying these factors in addition to autonomy regarding transitions may give a more well-rounded analysis of well-being in preschool children; specifically emphasizing changes teachers can make to satisfy all of a child's needs for well-being and academic success.

Transitions occur throughout our entire lives. Some people look for frequent change, and others find comfort in their stable, unchanging schedules. Regardless, when we transition, either from one grade to another, one job to the next, or even from one room to a different room, we are making ourselves vulnerable. We are existing in an in-between moment. Sometimes, clear guidelines help make these transitions smoother and less anxiety-producing, but other times, when we are subjected to strict rules, we diminish our sense of self and forget we are independent beings who can and should make autonomous choices to generate growth and self-determination. The skills we learn during early childhood, our most crucial developmental years, impact the development of our future selves. If we can provide young children with the necessary building blocks to becoming self-determined and developing a unique sense of self, we can prepare them for future success both in and out of education settings. Encouraging autonomy as early as preschool could significantly alter the way a child develops in today's traditionally Western education system.

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