

2017 Sabbatical Report: Transition to School

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Executive Summary:

The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) states that the transition from one education sector to another should be “positive and have a clear sense of continuity and direction” and children’s first schooling experience should make “make connections with early childhood learning” (MoE, 2017, p. 41). With our school’s two recent experiences of unsuccessful transitions of children with special education needs, combined with our reviewing of research on ‘transition to school’, we quickly identified an urgent need to make some changes to our practices. In particular, we wanted to develop a richer understanding of early childhood education and be more responsive to our families and their aspirations for their child at the time of transition. We knew we had to fulfil a greater duty of care and educational responsibility to avoid the potential “risk of failure” for children by leaving them “to ‘sink or swim’ on entry to school” (Peters, 2010, p.77).

Purpose:

- To investigate and research effective practices for successfully transitioning children from early childhood to school, including effective practices for transitioning children with special learning needs.
- To develop our school's early year's learning programme in alignment with Te Whāriki.

Rationale and Background:

In 2015, our school experienced two unsuccessful transitions of 5-year old children into our school. In reviewing our procedures with the parents, local early childhood centre, the Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour and classroom teachers we realised that our transition to school programme was relatively unplanned for, informal, and reactive when faced with challenges. Therefore we needed to learn more about successful transition practices so that as a school we developed a greater level of confidence and competence in both supporting families and ensuring all children have a positive and successful start to school. This has also included a focus on transitioning children with special education learning needs and the development of a play-based learning programme in the first 2 to 4 years of schooling. The intention of this sabbatical project is well supported by one of the school’s strategic goals.

Following the transition challenges we faced in 2015, I initiated the forming of a Raglan 0 to 8 Cluster to which all of the local early childhood centres, the local schools and the Ministry of Education (MoE) were invited to join. As a result, four schools and four early childhood centres are now working together to develop a more common approach to transition practices and the sharing of information to create a more effective transition process. MoE funding enabled the provision of an Educational Leadership Project facilitator to facilitate five workshops for our Raglan 0 to 8 Cluster from April to June in 2016. Workshops included:

1. Meeting each other; general overview of Te Whāriki.
2. Assessment and planning
3. Literacy and numeracy
4. Working with Māori learners
5. Successful transitions

As a group, we have agreed to keep in touch and to continue meeting, at least twice a year. We have no doubt that working together will have a positive outcome for families in our community.

Methodology:

- To visit early childhood centres and possibly some schools where theory has been put into practice
- To ask parents what their expectations are for the transitioning children to school
- To develop school resources to support a successful programme. For example, create videos for families which are concise, interesting and informative to support the transition process. This would be made accessible from the school's website.
- To work with the teachers to develop a more formalised transition to school programme for 5 year olds (for example, setting up procedures to enable teachers' visits to early childhood centres, purposeful pre-school visits, developing IEPs for children with special educational needs, the sharing of information between EC and school, parent/caregiver and teacher interviews to help gain a deeper understanding of the child and the family's educational aspirations for them).
- To integrate early childhood curriculum with NZ curriculum to provide new entrants with a play-based learning programme.
- To develop our current use of Student Learning Journals to more of a Learning Stories approach to capture and report on children's learning interests and capabilities.

Benefits: This outcome of this research project will be beneficial for both our school, and our Raglan 0 to 8 Cluster.

Te Uku School: Transition to school procedures will be developed to ensure our school is better prepared for the new child starting.

Raglan 0 to 8 Cluster: As a result of meeting and talking to early childhood teachers in our area, topics for discussion for future hui have emerged. Children and their successful transition to school are central to our reasons for meeting.

Findings:

Research on effective practices for transitioning children to school:

As a result of reading educational research, attending professional development seminars provided by the Education Leadership Project, participating in professional development sessions with our local schools and pre-school centres, making visitations to pre-school centres, interviewing parents and teachers from our school, I have developed a better understanding of the factors which impact on the success of a transition programme. I have also gained a deeper understanding of the Te Whāriki Curriculum and its vision for early childhood education.

There seem to be two main themes emerging as key influential factors for a successful transition: curriculum and relationships. In this next section, I will discuss how they can influence the transition process.

1) Curriculum: One key influential factor is the educational philosophy held, and therefore the teaching and assessment approaches used, by the school. As Davis stated, “children

transitioning into school are often confronted with formal teaching and learning approaches that contrast sharply with what they have experienced in contemporary early childhood education settings” (2015, p. 2). It doesn’t make sense to increase the level of anxiety that children, and their families, may already be feeling when facing a change. Instead, this important and exciting milestone of starting school should be a time for celebration and a feeling of positive anticipation to experience new opportunities. Why do we as teachers expect the most vulnerable person, the child, to make the greatest adjustment? The decision of the junior teachers at Maiherau School in Christchurch to recently change their practices to help ease transition quickly achieved positive results. They noticed that new children were settling in more readily than previous groups of children as a result of the teachers introducing a play-based learning approach (Davis, 2015). It was a courageous step for the school to take in today’s “high pressure environment of National Standards, school-entry assessment, and responses to increased pressure to get children ‘moving’ from their first day of school” (Davis, 2015, p.12). Through their changes in practice, these junior teachers have provided an example of how establishing learning relationships with children “that recognise and value their identity as learners; people who know who they are, what they bring, and how they go about things” (Wright, 2009) helps create continuity from one sector to another.

However, it is worth noting that we should not assume that all children will struggle with a more structured and formal setting of a traditional classroom. Nicki Chapman from Kidsfirst Kindergartens believes that “some children instantly thrive on it. It’s very much about assessing each child’s individual needs and challenges in adapting to the move to school” (cited in MoE, 2010). Further to this, Wright (2009) states that “curriculum continuity is about experiences that connect with children’s prior learning and capabilities. It is not about changing early childhood programmes to be school-like, nor is it about school needing to adopt early childhood programmes”. It is expected that everyone will have to make adjustments at the time of transition, the child, the family and the teachers. We should hold high expectations of children to adjust to change, avoid the temptation of over-protecting them and empower them by supporting their development of resilience and resourcefulness skills. “Learning to deal with transitions is part of life. Children need support to learn how to manage change and to build resilience. Teachers can help children develop a positive attitude to change by encouraging their sense of self-worth, confidence as a learner, independence and optimism” (ERO, 2015, p. 4).

Education at any level (pre-school, primary and secondary) should support the development of children as learners. It should acknowledge and build on the knowledge and skills the child has already learned; it should be appropriate to the child’s developmental stage and it should also stimulate children’s natural levels of curiosity. Wright (2009) stated, “the world outside education is increasingly valuing the ability to learn – knowing how to learn, how to keep learning, how to learn with others – over the ability to master specific bits of knowledge”. Quite clearly both Te Whāriki and the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) complement each other in their support of placing the child central to the learning process so that they can develop as a learner. For example, in Te Whāriki the five strands “provide the framework a holistic education” (MoE, 2017, p. 22) and support children “to develop the capabilities they need as confident and competent learners” (MoE, 2017, p. 16). In the same way, the principles of the New Zealand Curriculum place students “at the centre of teaching and learning” so that they “experience a curriculum that engages and challenges them” (Moe, 2017, p. 9). Due to the non-prescriptive nature of both curricula, teachers could together explore these links so that they can be “used and interpreted in complementary ways” (Hartley et al, 2012, p. 3), therefore creating strong continuity between the curricula of both sectors. This approach of working

collaboratively is supported by Nancy Bell, the chief executive of the New Zealand Childcare Association who says that the challenge of differing views held of school readiness can be overcome by early childhood services and schools communicating about how they can best support “good transitions” in their community (cited in Barback, 2014). Bell does acknowledge, however, that this could be more challenging for schools who draw their new entrants from a wide range of early childhood centres.

If we value and want to foster the notion of ‘learning how to learn’ and ‘student-centred learning’ then our assessment practices will need to be aligned with the same philosophy. Te Whāriki emphasises the importance of assessment being a “mana-enhancing process for children, parents and whānau, conducted in a way that uphold the empowerment / whakamana principle” (MoE, 2017, p. 64). The NZC lists the characteristics of effective assessment as: “benefits students, involves students, supports teaching and learning goals for the primary purpose of improving student’s learning and teacher’s teaching” (MoE, 2007b, pp. 39-40). This could mean primary teachers having to make a shift from the more prevalent, teacher-driven and traditional practices of only assessing learning outcomes in specific ‘subjects’ to assessing the key competencies which are the “capabilities that young people need for growing, working, and participating in their communities and societies” (MoE, 2007b, p. 38). By combining the principles of the early childhood learning stories with the learning journals approach used by some schools, there is an opportunity for primary teachers to build on the skills children have been already developing as self-regulating learners as pre-schoolers. Children engaged in the co-construction of learning criteria with their teachers as well as in a rigorous process of self-assessment will be empowered to “become experts on their own learning” (Hipkins, 2007, p. 5).

2). Relationships: Another key factor that attributes to a successful transition is “the nature of the relationships” formed between the child and their family, with the school (Peters, 2010, p.1). “Transition to school is more complex than just helping children become familiar with the school’s environment, staff and curriculum. Good relationships among children, teachers, parents and whānau are all essential to support children settling in to school” (ERO, 2015, p. 1). On the surface, it may appear to the adults involved, parents/caregivers and teachers, that the transition is going smoothly. This could be a result of the child’s ability to cope well in the face of change. However, a successful transition should be based on more than the child being seen to cope or not; the child and their family should be feeling valued. It will be through the actions of the school and its teachers that this level of success can be realised. Traditionally, parents and caregivers may have felt that they were on the receiving end of the school’s procedures with little or no effort being made by the teachers to get to know them or acknowledge the knowledge and skills they arrive with. “Children, whose teachers take time to get to know them, affirm their culture, recognise and build on their prior learning, and see promise rather than deficits, reflect many of the features of a successful transition that will support their learning” (Peters, 2010, p.1). It is through the use of learning stories that Greerton Early Childhood Centre has found an opportunity to strengthen the relationship with their families. Parents are encouraged to contribute their perspective in the child’s portfolio about their learning that takes place outside the centre’s hours. In this way, the teachers and family work together “in search of the learning opportunities that have real meaning for the child” (Hatherly et al, 2002, p.4) and learn about the people other than teachers who “may provide valuable expertise and learning support” (MoE, 2017b). It is important for teachers to acknowledge that learning does not just happen at an early childhood centre or school. “Contexts outside school may afford rich opportunities for students to demonstrate their developing competencies” (MoE, 2017b).

The relationships established between the teachers from early childhood and primary school are also key to supporting successful transitions. Taking the time to get to know each other and developing a deeper understanding of each sector's curriculum will surely benefit children. By understanding that there is a strong correlation between the five strands of Te Whāriki and the key competencies of the NZC, the sharing of information at transition time could be strengthened. For example, in Te Whāriki's "Strand 1 wellbeing / mana atua" (MoE, 2017, p. 26), the learning outcomes refer to children becoming increasingly capable of using self-help skills which will inevitably help them in different settings such as school. In NZC, the key competency "managing self" builds on this with its focus on "self-motivation" and "a can-do attitude" (MoE, 2007b, p. 12). By working together, teachers can actively support the aspirations evident in both curricula by affording children the opportunity to apply and further develop their dispositions of being resilient and resourceful in the actual context of transition. The Education Review Office evaluation report concluded that an early childhood centre could compromise a successful transition if it did not have "a strong focus on developing dispositions and social competence" (MoE, 2015, p. 2). Likewise, schools would be failing if not building on the skills and strengths children have already been developing in their first 5 years.

The development of a play-based learning approach in the first 2 to 4 years of schooling is not only another opportunity for strengthening the relationship between early childhood and primary teachers, it can also ease the transition for children. With our wealth of experience, teachers from both sectors can teach each other about the intent and implementation of their respective curriculum. In our school, we are now questioning the relevance of an industrial model of education in which learning is measured in discrete subjects. With our school's vision to 'expand hearts and minds' we want to develop a more student-centred learning approach in which children learn to become better problem-solvers, and learn to be innovative along with developing their social capability. We have felt inspired by the work of our early childhood colleagues from our Raglan 0 to 8 Cluster when they have shared details of their teaching philosophies. By integrating Te Whāriki into the NZC, we have introduced a tinkering time based on our school's emerging beliefs about play-based learning and the educational theory to support it. Now that our junior children are learning in an open and flexible space with their four teachers, planning meetings have been "reconceptualised" so that their discussion is focused on the learning. Meaningful discussion about "What learning is happening here?" engages the teachers in thinking about "ways to connect and deepen the learning" (Brierley, 2013, p3). A big next, and exciting, step for our school in 2018 will be reviewing and revising our school's curriculum in consultation with the students, staff and community to embrace our changes in practice and to ensure it is strongly both learner and future-focused.

Special Educational Needs

"For children with special education needs, early planning for their move to school and a longer transition period are particularly important. Ideally this planning involves teachers (early childhood and school), parents and whānau, and support providers" (ERO, 2015, p.6). In 2015, the Ministry of Education Special Education and some schools in Auckland worked together in a project to review and develop their practices for providing a more seamless and inclusive approach to transitioning children with special educational needs into school. One of the key principles underlying this initiative was focusing on the school getting ready for the child, rather than focusing on getting the child ready for school. The key stakeholders, family, early childhood and primary teachers, caseworkers such as RTLB and MoE fieldworkers worked together to develop a "tailored plan" (MoE, 2016) in support of the child. Two case studies described in this project attributed their success to everyone involved having a voice, being

listened to and an action plan being formed by using everyone's contributions (MoE, 2016). Joleen Millward, from the Ministry of Education stated that "an important element to the project is that the transitioning student is placed at the centre of the professional collaboration" (MoE, 2016).

Since forming our Raglan 0 to 8 Cluster, we have all agreed that a more planned approach to sharing information at transition time will ensure a greater level of continuity in learning for each child, and particularly so for children who have already been involved with an external learning support agency. We are committed to working together when needing to develop an Individual Education Plan for a child about to start school.

Implications: Peters (2010, p.2) said that transition programmes should be "developed and evaluated in local contexts, as there are no simple recipes". Therefore the development of our school's transition procedures need to be practical and relevant to our context. At Te Uku School, children who enrol as 5 or 6 year olds have usually attended one of the five early childhood centres. Each centre has its own beliefs about learning and the type of learning environment they provide. We think that it is important to embrace all of the local centres and 'how they do things' and provide a transition to school programme that builds on the strengths, skills and knowledge that each child brings to our school. We hold a high level respect for our early childhood colleagues as professionals and educators. Therefore, supporting successful transition is "not about changing early childhood programmes to be school-like, nor is it about school needing to adopt early childhood programmes" (Wright, 2009). As long as we all understand the demands, challenges and opportunities of each sector's respective curriculum, then we will be able to work together in the best interests of the children in our community.

Conclusions:

Te Uku School plans for improving children's 'transition to school' are already underway. Some of our plans are work in progress; they are being developed in consultation with our Raglan 0 to 8 colleagues.

The practices we plan to implement / build on in support of transition include:

- Contact each EC centre every term to schedule pre-school visits, as required
- Invite pre- schoolers visiting to take photos at school, eg, playground, cloakbays, drinking fountains, toilets, classroom, for EC teacher to print out and have access to at EC
- NE teacher to create a 'learning story' of the pre-school centres visit to display at the EC
- New entrant teacher to visit EC prior to child visiting school (if possible, take a school-child with her)
- Contact / meet with the EC teacher to discuss the child's progress and development at EC, and next learning steps
- NE teacher to arrange pre-school visits with child's parents/caregivers
- NE teacher to set up a photo-board display of children due to start school
- NE/junior teachers to introduce themselves on a display including photos and some personal information they are willing to share with families
- After child has started school, NE teacher and parents/caregivers to provide brief weekly reports (email or phone call) of how well they think the child is settling into school
- Encourage child to bring "Learning Stories" portfolio to school (place in a specific place/container for on-going access by child and teacher)

- NE teacher and child to visit EC centre after they have been at school for 5 to 6 weeks
- NE teacher to meet with family to discuss their aspirations/goals for their child, after the child has been at school for 5 to 6 weeks
- NE teacher take steps to learn more about the child's culture, life experiences, strengths, and setbacks/challenges in their first 5 years
- Investigate the adoption of a 'buddy programme' in which older students (eg Year 5s) become a mentor/coach for a child about to start school
- Develop a formal and specific transition to school plan for children identified with special needs, involving the parents/caregivers, teachers and any external agencies already engaged for the child
- Be open to, and welcoming of, children starting school after they turn 5
- Principal to contact the family after 6-months at school to get feedback about what went well and what could be improved in the future
- Provide a 'one-pager' pamphlet/flyer to all of the early childhood centres to describe how we support children transitioning to school.
- Create a video about the early years at school learning programme for prospective families (eg, the philosophy behind the Years 1 and 2 play-based learning programme, who the teachers are). This could be co-created by children and teachers.
- Develop pamphlets for specific school-related information, for example: First Days at School; waste-free lunch boxes; tinkering time; communication – learning journals, reporting on progress (see Hartley et al, 2012, p.42); how to help with reading at home.
- Continue to develop our early years' curriculum (Years 1 to 4) to a play-based approach, with a focus on strengthening continuity between Te Whāriki and the NZC.
- Develop the use of our school's Learning Journals to include the philosophy and practices underpinning learning stories. For example (taken from Hartley et al, 2012).
 - Use the Learning Journal to record how the child responded on their first day at school, and invite the family to tell the teachers what their child said to them about the first day.
 - Store in a box at children's height, with named coloured dividers (or photographs) for easy retrieval by the children.
 - Protocols to be established with the children about who can 'read' the Learning Journal.
 - Encourage families to add their stories to the Learning Journal about special events outside of school.
 - Teachers to also construct Learning Journals about their professional and personal lives, accessible to the children and their family, to help build a relationship with families.
- Continue to co-ordinate the Raglan 0 to 8 Cluster so that the local schools and early child centres can continue to meet together and network.
- Arrange for 'teacher' swaps between interested ECs and our school – 1 ½ hours duration to observe and participate in the curriculum in action as a means for developing understanding of both curricula, and to encourage educational dialogue between teachers.

Suggestions for ECs and schools in our Raglan 0 to 8 Cluster:

- To provide information for families about the process involved for transitioning their children to school. Together we could develop a generic "frequently asked questions" as a one-pager to enable parents/caregivers to plan the approach that will suit them. For example:

- How do I choose which school to enrol my child in? *Visit each school and arrange with the principal to be shown around and to answer your questions. Check the schools' websites; access the schools' ERO reports (Education Review Office – www.ero.govt.nz)*
- What will I need to do to enrol my child?
- How will the EC centre and school support my child with the transition?
- How can I support my child with the transition?
- To continue developing our knowledge and understanding of Te Whāriki and NZC, and their common elements.

In conclusion, having the time provided through my sabbatical to complete this research has had a positive outcome for our school. Not only have I had a chance to strengthen our relationship with the early childhood centres in our area, I have had time to read educational literature to reflect deeply on, and make changes to our practices.

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A Learning Story format to use with the NZC

Child's name		Written by	Date
Lifelong learners Actively involved Connected Confident	Thinking Uses creative, critical and metacognitive processes to makes sense of information, experiences, and ideas Shows intellectual curiosity Seeks, uses and creates knowledge Reflects on own learning Draws on personal knowledge and intuition Asks questions Challenges basis of assumptions and perceptions		
	Using languages, symbols and texts Representing and communicating information, experiences, and ideas Uses languages and symbols to produce texts of all kinds Interprets and uses number, images, movement, metaphor and technologies in a range of contexts Recognises how choice of language, symbol, or text affect people's understanding and responses Confidently uses ICT to access and provide information and to communicate with others		
	Managing self Self-motivated Has a 'can-do' attitude Sees self as capable learner Self assesses Enterprising, resourceful, reliable, resilient Establishes personal goals Makes plans, manages projects, sets high standards Uses strategies for meeting challenges Knows when to lead, when to follow, when and how to act independently		
	Relating to others Interacts effectively with a diverse range of people in a variety of contexts Listens actively Recognises different points of view Negotiates Shares ideas Able to take on different roles in different situations Is aware of how their words and action affect others Knows when it is appropriate to compete and when it is appropriate to co-operate Works effectively together Can come up with new approaches, ideas, and ways of thinking		
	Participating and contributing Actively involved communities Contributes appropriately as a group member Makes connections with others Creates opportunities for others in the group Has a sense of belonging Confidence to participate within new contexts Understands importance of balancing rights, roles, responsibilities Contributes to the quality and sustainability of social, cultural, physical, and economic environments		
Analysis		What next?	

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