

Principal Sabbatical Report

TRANSITION FROM E.C.E. TO PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Acknowledgements

- Thank you to Teach NZ and the Ministry of Education for making this sabbatical possible. The opportunity to study, travel and return refreshed and rejuvenated to my current position, has been much appreciated.
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- Thank you to Jean Cowie of the Pelorus Community Preschool, for your interest in and contributions to my report.
- Thank you to the Principals and staff of the Pelorus Cluster of Schools for your input and feedback.
- Thank you to the Principal and staff members, of Arentorp Skola in the Lidkoping District of Sweden, for hosting me and answering my many questions.

Purpose

Through this sabbatical, my intention was to extend my understanding of and investigate best practice, for students and their families, when transitioning from an early childhood centre to a primary school i.e. from the Pelorus Community Preschool to the various local Pelorus Cluster Primary Schools. I wanted to identify how our current transition programme could be improved to enhance the learning of new entrant students starting at our school. I also had an in-depth look at a Preschool-Primary School in Sweden and was able to make comparisons with our system of transition.

Background

When I first took up my position as Principal at Canvastown School in 2002, there was no local Play Group, Preschool or Kindergarten organisation for the under 5 year olds. What we did have was a Mobile Kindergarten van which travelled to our township twice a week. Developmental play/learning type activities were the major focus of the day and parents brought the students to the local hall for these.

As a Cluster group of Principals we had some concerns re the quality of learning/readiness for primary school, of our incoming 5 year olds, and began to investigate other possibilities for improving the educational and social development opportunities and resources, for students and their parents, transitioning to Primary School. Thus began the 'Sounds Great

Cluster Project (2003)' which led on to the eventual establishment of the Pelorus Community Preschool in 2008.

We sought funding from the Ministry of Education to employ a part-time person with skills to strengthen school/preschool links across the region. Our application was successful and thus began the **Sounds Great Cluster Project**. The key objectives were to –

- a) increase levels of parent involvement in early learning activities,
- b) liaise with various preschool providers,
- c) maximise the effectiveness of current resources,
- d) develop new resources and
- e) investigate and implement a range of new strategies that will further enhance student achievement opportunities at Yr 0/1 level.

The coordinator spent much of the first year liaising with parents, schools, preschool organisations, educationalists etc. and came up with the following recommendations i.e.

- The Pelorus Cluster Schools adopt a consistent set of core evaluative tools to assess all 5 year olds who enrol;
- Through mutual sharing and the exploration of outside models, the Pelorus Cluster seek to develop a comprehensive transition programme for children from pre-school education;
- A Memorandum of Understanding document is written which gives definition to the elements of successful transition and identifies a set of targets that all stakeholders in the region can work towards;
- The Sounds Great coordinator explores ways to support the development of parents in the region to improve their understanding of how they can help their child's learning.

We had established the foundations for moving forward and with funding from the Ministry confirmed for 2004, the coordinator was able to -

- develop a Memo of Understanding which focused on the 'five bridges (learning dispositions, Te Whariki) to be developed and nurtured in children.' These included **Being Perseverant, Being a Communicator, Being a Learner, Taking Responsibility and Being Well**;
- ensure all 4 year olds have a profile/scrapbook to take to their new Primary School;
- ensure Preschool organisations complete the transition rubric for each child transferring;
- conduct PiPS testing within a week of arrival at school;
- ensure reception teachers complete the rubric after one month at school;
- conduct PiPS testing again on the child's sixth birthday;

- develop a pre-school pack of useful learning materials/information to be given to parents of students who are 4 years of age. (REAP Marlborough played an important role in funding and developing these free information/activity packs.)

These goals were worked upon and achieved throughout the year. The Sounds Great Project coordinator, in conjunction with a team of volunteers, representative of the various parties and providers in the region, ensured that consultation and communication played a vital role in reporting progress to all stakeholders involved.

Funding for a coordinator ceased at the end of this year but a small committee of hard working community members, kept the ball rolling. Results of a survey undertaken in 2004 showed that the wider community were in favour of a dedicated facility, catering for the pre-schoolers in the Pelorus area. The committee applied to the Ministry for a capital grant and along with pledges from local businesses, as well as numerous fundraising events, a modern learning environment was finally built and established in Havelock by the end of 2007. Teachers were employed and the Pelorus Community Preschool was opened for learning in 2008.

It has continued to grow and flourish and aims to ensure the transition process for our 5 year olds, to the various primary schools, is a positive process.

Methodology

I began this year's study focus with preliminary readings of relevant literature re what recent research says contributes to successful transition from ECE to Primary Schools in NZ and internationally. I also visited our local preschool, our Pelorus Cluster Schools and Arentorp Skola in Sweden to interview teachers/Principals/parents/students to find out what they regarded as successful components of transition to Primary School from Preschool.

My first goal was to actually clarify the term '**Transition**'.

- “Transition is **not** the same thing as **orientation**. **Orientation** programmes help children to become familiar with school. It is better to think of **transition** as a prolonged process that unfolds through relationships”. (NZ Gazette 17 May 2010). Fabian and Dunlop's definition of transition is that it is a holistic, dynamic experience that takes place over an extended period of time – it includes the time from any pre-entry visits and settling in, to when the child is more fully established as a member of a new setting.
- In Early Childhood Education, the national curriculum document, Te Whariki, (Ministry of Education 2006), represents the mat on which we all may stand but what happens when children go to school? Are they required to get off the mat? Is there a pathway between the ECE mat and the school mat? – The New Zealand Curriculum (MOE 2007). Perhaps, for the lucky, the mats may be so closely intertwined that transitioning to school just feels like standing on a different part of the same mat. When the mats not only stand together but also share some of the same strands, perhaps the transition from one to the other can be made in a gentle way by children. When they stand apart, we are asking children to undertake a significant leap of faith in order to jump from the security of one into the relative 'unknown' of the other. (Transition to School: A Principles Approach.)

What conditions, does research tell us, need to be in place for successful transition?

- **Mutual views about transitioning** between the Early Childhood Centre and the local Primary Schools, that promotes continuity.
- **Building connections** between what children learn at the ECE and at Primary School – alignment of the strands in Te Whariki with the Key Competencies of the NZ Curriculum.
- **The personal qualities of teachers** – they can have a vital impact on their relationships with children and families. Showing willingness to be proactive in exploring barriers to successful transitions is very important.
- Teachers taking into account **individual differences** and the different ways children learn and make progress.

- **Input from parents and families** – what parents do to support their children’s learning and learning dispositions has been shown to be more important than parent/caregiver occupation, education or income. Supporting children’s learning dispositions are likely to be particularly relevant for long-term success. Once children are at school, families who get involved and advocate for their children are likely to assist their transitions. Having positive expectations, ensuring children have health checks, and developing suitable routines are also mentioned in the literature.

Findings

How can Principals and teachers best support children to transition as successfully as possible from ECE to school? (The MOE commissioned a literature review in regards to successful transition to school and the findings were presented in Peters 2010.) Using the four headings outlined in this report as guidelines, I will record my thoughts, observations and findings under these.

- **Working with the child.**

Teachers can promote children’s achievement and sense of belonging in school if they are able to reduce the mismatch between **what is valued in school and the child’s funds of knowledge from home and early childhood**. Often, we as schools, are assessing what children know academically, rather than valuing what they know, think and find important. (National Standards has brought negative pressure upon us from far too early an age.) ‘The ideal would be for us to recognise and celebrate the learning and experiences that all children bring to school and build on these as a starting point for development.’ In our rural community, experiences and activities such as dairy farming, hunting and fishing would be promoted.

Valuing children’s culture is very important, especially for our Maori and Pasifika students. (Asian and European are valued equally). Ensuring we are promoting individuals to celebrate aspects of their culture, to have visible aspects of their culture on display in the classroom and to encourage the speaking of the language, are all vital components for success in learning and feeling they are a part of the school family. (We have low numbers of students from other cultures.)

Appropriate assessment practices. Within the first month of beginning school, the children are given literacy – oral, written, reading – and numeracy assessments. From these we can begin to develop suitable instructional programmes for teaching and learning.

Making links between learning in ECE and school. The child brings their portfolio from the ECE for teachers to view and is contacted by the ECE if there are ‘special needs’ requirements we need to be aware of. These include physical, social, cultural and academic. Allowing release time for the Junior Class teacher to visit the ECE on a regular basis is a goal to focus on this year.

Fostering relationships and friendships. The development of positive relationships between the child, parents and educators is a key feature of transition to school. Ensuring the environment is supportive and nurturing is very important. Providing a ‘buddy’ to look after a new pupil is very helpful, as well as teaching games children can play together, helping children to find someone to play with and focusing on a “Friends” unit of work at the beginning of year or term. This would include activities to support children’s confidence and communication, along with social skills such as listening to others, cooperation, taking responsibility for their actions and avoiding hurting others.

Children’s whole experience of school. We need to identify children’s concerns and address them immediately. Ensuring the playground is a safe and welcoming place to be- older children are there to help and look after you, teachers are visible and accessible at all times, there are plenty of play resources and knowing where the toilets are and when to go are all worries that can be easily solved. Rules are in place to help us and what is not regarded as acceptable can be explained in a quiet and non-threatening manner. (Loud voices can be scary.)

- **Sharing Information**

We endeavour to provide parents with as much information and practical advice as possible, to ensure smooth transitions for all.

Visits – Approximately a term or two before their children turn 5, parents are advised to arrange a meeting with the Principal and Junior Class teacher, of their child’s prospective school. At this meeting the child and parent(s) are introduced to Staff and students, are given a guided tour of the school, given the enrolment pack (includes pamphlets illustrating ways parents can help foster children’s literacy and numeracy skills;) and dates for future visits are arranged. These involve two half day visits – parents welcome- and two full day visits, over the space of 4 weeks. Questions, queries and any concerns can be raised now and talked through or discussed as the visits proceed.

Transition pamphlet - Our school produces a Parent Information Booklet entitled “Preparing Your Child for School Entry”, which we give to parents at the initial meeting. It covers such topics as ‘Enrolling Your Child’, ‘Appropriate Expectations for Children Starting School at 5’, ‘You can help Maths Development by:’, ‘Things my child can work towards knowing in Literacy’, ‘Helping with Early Literacy’ and ‘Practical things parents can do to help their child when starting school’. The Junior Class teacher talks through the various ideas/expectations with the parents as well.

Welcome DVD – Linkwater, Grovetown and Canvastown School Principals saw a need for another form of information for parents, as well as the paper formats they shared with them. Thanks to Helen Redshaw, (Principal/Teacher Appraiser), a DVD of photos from our individual schools, were put together in an informative and entertaining way, to showcase what happens during a typical school day. It was aimed at making the transition process for children, easier to understand. We trust that parents and children find this tool helpful.

The Canvastown School Information Booklet – Arranged in alphabetical order, this booklet gives brief outlines/guidelines of the schools vision, values, curriculum programmes, key competencies, staffing and specific information crucial to the effective daily running of the school.

Developing and maintaining a website and school display board are two other options for promoting our school and what happens in our rural community.

Learning about children and their families – reciprocal sharing of information is important for all. The ECE portfolio allows the child's routines, knowledge, skills and previous learning experiences to be shared with the New Entrant teacher. As we have a similar Student Portfolio system operating, it is a positive step in continuing to showcase the students' successes in learning and for teachers/parents to be aware of the progress and development they are making.

- **Working with families**

The benefits of a home-school partnership are 'the most powerful way for schools to understand and meet the needs of diverse students.' (Fletcher 2009) Better home-school communication is likely to foster understanding on both sides and strengthen respectful relationships. Finding both time and place for dialogue is key as well.

Report formats, six monthly checks, three way conferences and the end of term portfolios are all information sharing experiences. Involving parents in assisting with the classroom programme is another way to make them feel at ease, informed and helpful. Gayle sends home newsletters each term requesting assistance in the classroom with specific activities and is always well supported. Granny Reading is encouraged from members of the wider community and is very much appreciated by us all. They provide yet another aspect to the classroom environment.

- **Personal Qualities of Teachers**

Teachers are likely to be successful in supporting transition if they adapt their practices in response to difficulties that children experience, instead of locating problems when they occur, in the child. (Stephen & Cope 2003). A positive teacher attitude is likely to be a vital aspect of this process. (MOE 2008).

There are a number of ways in which individual teachers could be supported and resourced, in order to support children's transition to school. These include:

- time and support to become ethnographers of culture;
- small class size;
- a flexible curriculum;
- training and professional development;
- acknowledge the special role of the new entrant teacher; and
- providing resourcing for transition activities.

Findings and observations at the Arentorp Skola, Sweden

- **The Preschool centre and Primary school are both on the same site, with the one principal overseeing and being responsible for both educational centres. Unlike us, they only have one curriculum document for preschool, primary and secondary levels.**
- **The Preschool** building has recently been upgraded and is now a modern, two-storey building with a large well-equipped playground outside. There are separate rooms for each activity area i.e. building blocks in one, jigsaws and small games in another, technology materials in another etc.
- The preschool caters for up to 80 children at one time, ranging from 1 year olds to 6 year olds.
- Parents pay for 1 and 2 year olds. At 3 years old, children qualify for 15 hours, free educational time.
- Parents have to attend 3 days per week so children don't get upset.
- All children eat on-site. They have their own kitchen. Meals are funded by the Swedish MOE. The kitchen is state of the art.
- Tables and chairs - child-size - are in every room.
- No potties are used for toileting – all use special, small-sized toilets.
- All children in prams sleep outside, regardless of the weather conditions. The day I was visiting it was pouring with rain and all prams were lined up outside, under a roof type shelter, similar to our old bike sheds. No one was crying. All were sleeping soundly. They were well covered though.
- Many of the older pre-schoolers were outside as well, in their raincoats and gumboots, having a wonderful time in the sandpit and on the playground. All were keen to show what they were doing/learning.
- Their curriculum focuses on Values, Influences, Development and Cooperation – closest translation I could get.
- Preschool teachers help out in the primary age classrooms during the day – a bit like a Teacher Aide. (Full time workers I'd say.)
- Teaching staff have to be on site from 6 am to 6 pm. This includes Primary teachers as well.
- In their main school holidays, June 14th – August 22nd- the preschool is only closed for 1 week; Primary schools for 3 weeks. Each primary teacher has to give up one week of their holidays to supervise those children of parents who work.
- After school care is mandatory in all schools.

As both centres are on the one site there seems to be a seamless transition for the students from Preschool to Primary School.

- In the Spring, (Swedish), the parents are contacted by the New Entrant teacher for a formal/informal meeting with them and their child. It is a sharing time for both parties of information, concerns, expectations etc. All staff felt they had a good relationship with parents.
- At 6 years plus of age, the children are classified as New Entrants and all start school at the same time. No one starts on their birthday; they start as a large group. (Great idea). These children are at school for a full day – from 8.20 am when instruction starts, to the end of the day, at 3 pm. They only come for 4 days a week though.
- When they are 7 plus years old they are officially classified as Primary School students. (I found that these students were quite confident and self-assured. They were certainly well prepared for the transition.)

Conclusions

Collaboration, communication, consultation, liaison and positive relationships are some of the key words that stand out for me. All parties involved in the transition process need to be on the same page, understanding, sharing and working towards the common goal of providing the best possible scenario for each individual student. (I think we are achieving this within our cluster of schools.)

For teachers, while orientation programmes help children to become familiar with school, transition programmes take a much broader focus and should be planned and evaluated by all involved. There is no one right way but it is important that these are developed and evaluated in our local context. What is important for our Cluster (our unique identity) may not be relevant for another – rural vs urban.

The preschool and primary school need to stand alongside one another and have a mutual understanding and respect of each other's curriculum documents and the expectations in each, for learning and development.

Primary Schools have National Standards – the focus changes quickly from one of promoting social well-being to one focusing more on academic achievement. (Ministry/ Government focus.)

Although it is not always practical or possible, especially in small rural areas, having the two educational organisations on one site, is very conducive to successful transitioning of students - the physical barrier is gone.

We are one of the few countries whose children start their primary schooling at 5 years of age – perhaps starting at the age of 6 years would be a more realistic option.

We must always be consulting and sharing with our local and wider community, on a regular basis, to ensure we maintain quality transition programmes that promote success for all. (This process is well underway in the Pelorus area.)

References

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