

Principals' Sabbatical Report 2006  
**Focus: Transition to Primary School**

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The Purpose of the sabbatical

The purpose for this application for sabbatical leave is two fold,

1. professional refreshment, and
2. research into the relationship between preschool institutions and primary schools
3. I would like to explore the notion of the early years of the primary school employing the Te Whaariki document to enjoy better learning outcomes for our children particularly those from Maori family backgrounds.

I would like to explore the movement of students from preschool to primary school and answer the following questions:

- Does the transition impede the progress of students?
- Are Maori students affected greater than non Maori students during the transition?
- Are Pacifica students affected by the transition and does the duality of language help or hinder learning progress?
- Are the teachers in Primary schools aware of the Te Whaariki document and the preschool approach? and
- Is the learning momentum maintained in the transition?

This would be completed in the context of looking at improving learning outcomes for the cohort of pupils aged 4 -6. The link to our school and its importance is when we look at our Year 2 children and their academic progress we find a wide range of ability which does not seem to reflect the quality preschools that our children come from. There are nine preschool providers who contribute to our school. Two are Kohanga Reo and seven cover kindergarten. Play-centre and five independent preschool providers.

The proposal should identify:

- Links to improving learning outcomes
- Links to issues important to the school
- Links to the school's strategic or annual plan
- Links to personal professional development issues for the Principal
- Links to developing professional leadership practice
- Links to current primary sector priorities.
- How the outcomes could be shared and with whom

## 1. Professional Refreshment.

This is arguably the most important part of the sabbatical leave provisions that NZEI has been successful in getting for Principals. The time to reflect on best practice and to simply take a break from what has become a seven day a week job with responsibility and expectations from a wide range of people is essential to the well being and mental health of principals. The endless demands of time and attention made on Principals from children, teachers, parents, ancillary and specialist workers together with Boards of Trustees can become simply too much. The “holidays” at the end of each term are seldom this. Maintenance programmes and contractors who need to work during “no children times” still need to be checked upon and supervised as the ultimate responsibility for this lies with the principal. If things go wrong the Principal has to fix it, if they go according to plan then others are quick to acknowledge their input.

It has taken at least three weeks for the day to day “school stuff” to be freed from my mind so that I can focus on the questions I set myself. The daily visits to school as a caregiver dropping off and picking up children has not made the separation of school and sabbatical easy. The frenetic pace of life as a Principal has been difficult to adjust to what some would like to see as cold turkey cut from school. Trust in those stepping up to positions of responsibility has to be given freely and provided good systems are in place and adhered to, a complete break from the daily stress of principal-ship has to be good for everyone involved.

## The Relationship Between Preschool Institutions And Primary Schools

This is an area of growing concern for me as a Principal of a medium sized (350) contributing primary school in a provincial town that is experiencing rapid growth in population and rapid development of the stretched infrastructure of a once sleepy almost stagnant rural town.

The two state primary schools that service the town together with the three private primary schools are all experiencing expansion. The pre school sector that services the schools has currently 9 providers of pre school or early childhood education centres. These range from kindergarten playcentre church based groups to trust and private enterprise institutions. All provide the opportunity for early learning to take place in a caring and focused forum. The variability between the centres is of little consequence as all are staffed by enthusiastic and generally well trained early educators. It is not my intention to evaluate the quality of the centres in their provision of early learning experiences but to focus on the transition to primary school and offer possible explanations of the learners that begin to wane by the end of Year 2 of the primary school. These are anecdotally boys who enter school as enthusiastic if somewhat physical learners who are a casualty of the system rather than inappropriate or poor teaching. Those children who at the end of Year 2 or at about 7 years of age that are not engaged in learning. Often

called the “sand pit” boys (children) or the least engaged and sometimes non-compliant of the cohort.

My reflections, reading, discussion with colleagues in both primary and the pre school sector together with visits to early childhood centres have confirmed the following major aspects to good pre school pedagogical practise:

1. staff responsiveness to children
2. staff guiding children in their activities
3. staff asking open ended questions
4. staff joining the children in their play
5. children being able to select from a variety of learning activities
6. the provision of print saturated environment.

These aspects are confirmed in the key findings from across the four reports of “Growing Independence – A Summary Of Key Findings From The Competent Learners @14 Project” Janet Rivers NZCER 2006, Longitudinal research carried out by Cathie Wylie, Edith Hodgen, Hilary Ferral, Rachel Dingle, Jean Thompson and Rose Hopkins. All have a lasting contribution to performance nine years on for the children in the study, “Competent Children, Competent Learners” project. The quality of the centre reflects all or most of the identified criteria. This is very important for children beginning primary education as it places them well on their learning pathway. Nearly 98% of all children entering our school have a pre school background of more than two years. This also has implications for the teachers, the child and the programmes that we set. The transition from one sector to another and the continued learning journey should be as seamless as possible.

### A Summary Of Differences And Similarities.

|            | Primary School<br>5 – 11 years of age   | Preschool<br>3 – 5 years of age   |
|------------|---|---|
| PLAYGROUND | <p>static "adventure playground"<br/>static fitness trail designed by adults<br/>sand pit<br/>flat space for "organised games" cricket, netball, football<br/>flat open areas for races and running<br/>one small hill</p>  | <p>variety of moveable play objects – log sections, cubes, plastic sheets<br/>create and construct objects<br/>space to roam, run sloping section<br/>"mazes" of up and down activity<br/>ramps, planks, bales of hay<br/>sand pit and water play adjacent and mixed</p>  |
| CLASSROOM  | <p>Content of planning for learning is dependent on The NZ Curriculum Framework documents and school policies. Often teacher directed<br/>Displays – up at adult and above children height, although not always.<br/>Teacher at the front of the room<br/>Ratio of 1:23 at least<br/>Often whole class teaching - doing the same activity at the same time<br/>Focus on learning tasks<br/>Formative approach – we are learning to .....</p> <p>Reading writing and maths<br/>Occasional Child Support Worker assistance<br/>Natural tones and pastel colours</p> | <p>Content of planning for learning is dependent on The Te Whaariki documents and institution policies. Often child interest based<br/>Displays – down at child height<br/>Mirrors and light boxes<br/>Teachers all over the place, inside outside<br/>Ratio of 1 :8 at the most<br/>Small groups for teaching<br/>Teacher aides to help with lunches and snacks preparation<br/>Opportunity to "play" rather than learning to do an activity<br/>Interest activity directed and assisted by the teacher<br/>Some pre reading, writing and maths activities but nothing formal<br/>Natural wood and quieter tones usually</p> |
| PHYSICAL   | <p>Lots of children - 350<br/>Lots of classrooms - 14<br/>Big school - a member of the smallest set<br/>Huge variety of sizes and shapes and physical prowess<br/>Maturity and developmental stages huge range infants to sub teens<br/>Lots of smart children who know the rules for the playground</p>  | <p>Limited number of children – 32<br/>Only two rooms or sessions<br/>Most of the children the same age / stage of development and maturity or at least close to one another<br/>Adults to mediate if rules transgressed<br/>Small younger children separate from 4+s</p>   |
| SOCIAL     | <p>Sophisticated and a behaviour code that needs to be understood before being included.<br/>Few rules other than be sensible and don't hurt others – however quite complex<br/>More complex relationships with older – younger children<br/>Same gender friendships<br/>Syndicates encouraged to play together with like age range, e.g. marbles<br/>Rules for interaction both imposed and self or group generated.<br/>Continued Focus on social skills, turn taking talking appropriately, asking questions using inside voices,</p>                          | <p>Adult in support role to help learn/establish rules<br/>Practice at social skills part of the day i.e. lunch, turn taking,<br/>Rules relatively "black and white" and uncomplicated.<br/>Play with a few friends only usually same gender but fluid<br/>Focus on social skills, turn taking talking appropriately, asking questions using inside voices,</p>   |

The daily pattern of activities observed at the preschools I visited, generally followed similar organisational patterns. The day begins with a free choice of activities upon arrival so that the process of settling in and parents departing is unobtrusive. The activities range from construction blocks to cutting and colouring, gluing and sticking, the dress up corner to the sitting and talking to friends. The activities are sometimes planned with materials deliberately placed within easy reach to those that are stored in boxes or shelves easily accessible to the children. The emphasis is on using and exploring familiar materials and places within the centre. Staff meet and greet the children using their names and speaking to them often about something from the previous day or some other aspect designed to put them at ease. Parents are usually welcome to stay and enjoy the first few minutes of the session but most depart quite quickly. This is more to do with other commitments of the parents rather than a non welcoming environment.

This session continues for perhaps an hour as the children arrive over this period signing in to the register. The teaching staff join in with groups of children and encourage them to discuss and explain their activities. The questions are open ended and invite thinking and the expression of the children's ideas. I was reminded that the centres do not provide adult constructed answers for the questions posed but the staff are trained to tease out the ideas and allow responses that encourage thinking and reasoning. Often recall of what was done yesterday provided a basis for further discussion. No right or wrong answer was required just sound expression of thoughts. Staff often continued putting out other resources and equipment that could be used later in the day as much is stored away at the end of sessions. Planning for what equipment is put out is designed to guide children in a variety of activities using various senses and stimulations.

The next part of the day was the most formal part where the teachers worked with a group of children after initial discussion. The formation of these groups was fixed in one centre so that the teacher worked only with these children until they graduated or jumped off to school. This strict grouping was done on age and as one child moved to school another younger would join the group so that there was always a spread of ages from 4 – 5 years old. At another centre the groups were fluid and based on interest in the activity while at another the groups remained the same but the teacher rotated through the groups during the week exploring the activity in a similar way. The most refreshing insight into this part of the day was the enthusiasm the teacher imparted to the children. They really "sold" the idea of learning to the children.

At another centre where the teacher had recently attended a conference on inquiry learning and was very enthusiastic and successful in using these techniques to engage the children. Another session was a formal pre writing and pre maths activity that the children would experience later at school. The

tracing of letter shapes and colouring in of a worksheet was the focus here although only occasionally are work sheets provided. The children talked moved and were reminded about what they were doing during this period. One group was learning social skill in taking turns in a game. The game had been modified so that the turn taking was most important. Later winning strategies would be developed. Matching of letter and sequencing of shapes were also "taught" to the children during this phase of the day. The opportunity to practise and to discuss was most important and many of the hands-on activities were done and redone underlying the need for children to repeat and learn.

The activities often involved art work of pasting, cutting, painting and constructing. Discussion and questioning were also part of the learning activity.

To enable me to have an appreciation of the directions of preschool education in an international setting I chose to attend the Early Childhood conference in Sydney. This provided me with a quick overview of current thinking and four different state systems to consider when viewing our new entrant intake at Riverview.

#### The Sydney Conference

2006 National School Conference EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION P – 3.  
Best Practices and Learning

This conference presented two very intensive days of lecture type presentations of an hours duration and by the end of the second day I had been bombarded with such a huge range of "best teaching strategies for P – 3" that I needed a break. The content ranged from very practical ideas and suggestions for classroom practitioners and junior school team leaders. It also presented "best practise" from a range of specialised programmes currently being delivered in Australian primary schools and preschools. Much of the presentations reinforced that what we are delivering at Riverview is considered to be best practice and fall within the area that was being celebrated. However much of the successful stories were being delivered in low decile schools very well funded by the state and federal governments and had only limited relevance to our situation. It was relevant to many New Zealand schools however and if Principals are looking for a convenient conference for their new entrant to Year3 teachers I would recommend this worthy of consideration. Certainly the cost of going to Sydney was no more expensive than going to Wellington or Christchurch and considerably cheaper than Dunedin. The quality of delivery varied from excellent to pretty average but this fits well with my experience of conferences in general.

Topics covered ranged from developmental programmes,- its okay to play-learning to read- working around the developmental needs of children,- moving from oral to literate,- the use of big books in the classroom, -

unlocking talent through art, - using blogs in early childhood - defining a developmental programme for first year primary and effective learning centres.

The session that I found most intriguing was the Why It Is Okay To Play – Using Play As A Method Of Reaching Outcomes In Literacy And The Arts delivered by Carole O'Neill from La Trobe University which reinforced the notion that although educators have known for many years that play is an essential element in the development of the human mind and the learning process, less and less time is available in the classroom that is crowded with curriculum and expectations of measurable outcomes. There is less and less room for play and in particular dramatic play. Educationalists such as Montessori, Erickson, Piaget, Vygotsky and many others have analyzed and categorised play and recognised that play is an important element in learning especially at pre-school, however little or no time is available in primary school class rooms for this most valuable part of learning. Play it seems is relegated to the play-ground in most schools.

The plea for more play is based on the premise that we know and acknowledge that children learn through play. Literacy and numeracy are reinforced through play and together with a stimulating environment, such as that is recommended by the Reggio Emilia as the third educator- and other philosophies, children learn. Play does not mean abandoning the curriculum but it does create the expectation of time within the day to learn through play. This struck a chord with me and I believe we at Riverview can certainly provide for this in our new entrant / Year 1 classrooms.

Teaching to the developmental needs of children supports the international research on brain development. This research highlights the child developing as a human being, significantly influenced by the environment, culture and family, and community. All this experience is at school. Successful learning is dependent upon all of these elements. The influence the school has in providing this may be a lesser or greater part of the whole experience, but is certainly the one we as teachers can provide. The environment is not limited to physical alone, but encompasses emotional and intellectual environments.

The theme underlying this lecture was that not all children are ready to learn at the same point in time, and that the skilled educationalist must recognise this and provide differentiated programmes to accommodate this. This requires a philosophical shift for many teachers and a commitment and understanding of the unique stages of maturation and development children are in during the first two years at school. The developmental curriculum therefore requires a careful and specific use of language that reflects the child's stage of maturity. Children's interests are the predominant means of learning experiences and when unfolded and expanded are a means of ongoing engagement in particular learning areas.

Many of the differentiated and play-full experiences used for illustration, revolved more around equipment such as sand and water, construction blocks and creative use of boxes and cardboard sheets than work sheets and book recording. The teacher was the questioner, the extender; the facilitator of the child's thinking and reasoning. The listening to what the children had to say and contribute to their development as learners is a skill needed for this type of learning. The recording of the learning was another skill for the teacher by way of digital camera and notes rather than work sheet and tick boxes. Grouping children with the same developmental needs (although often viewed by parents as streaming) provided like staged children working at refining ideas, reflection on outcomes and recording or producing through play activities.

#### Childspace workshops and in service day.

Childspace is a private provider of early childhood education organisation that is keen to share their ideas on organisation and physical environments within New Zealand. Their workshop covered leadership and systems organisation that they have found most successful in the five centres they run all in Wellington.

For me the similarity between the requirements of ERO and Ministry of Education of pre school and school were very familiar. The systems for gathering data and the learning process were less familiar although with our portfolios and those of the ECE sector becoming more and more on the same wave length it will not take much adjustment. The physical environment and the enthusiasm of the presenters in sharing how they have adapted and helped create wonderful child focused learning areas for their pupils was enlightening. It was also gratifying to see the representation from the five main ECE groups of Kerikeri also at the workshops. Each has unique physical environments now but each has a desire to make their centre child focused and friendly to great learning. All will make our task of helping those children to continue on their learning pathway complimentary to what has already happened.

The emphasis on child size and a variety of learning centre within the facility was striking. Aesthetically and artistically designed to be in sympathy and harmony with ECE children yet functional was the aim and this was achieved by using material readily available to us all. The sympathetic treatment of natural found objects and those sourced from suppliers was strikingly simple and something we can take on board and incorporate into our new entrant area and classrooms.

#### The Pre School Sector and the New Zealand Settings.

I have tried to visit as many different types of early childhood education settings as was practicable. These have included a "play group" set and functioning within a primary school, a kindergarten within the school

environment, private enterprise early childhood centres a state kindergarten, playcentre and a church group focusing on music and movement for very young children.

Those with most relevance to the primary school new entrant class are those who work with 4 year olds as a specific group. These are the kindergarten, play centres and private providers. The four year olds are often in specialized groups with a focus on more advanced or appropriate work for primary school although this may be in blocks of time of about 15 -20 minutes during a whole session of three hours or more.

Most of the early education settings I have visited in New Zealand have had the teachers doing this style of recording for the children's portfolios or learning stories. The use of digital and video camera has greatly increased and the immediacy of images is seen as a positive aspect of data gathering. This gathering and reflection on learning data needs to be shared with the new entrant teacher so that a overview of the child's developmental stage is clearly sensed and understood so that the transition is at an appropriate pace. This aspect could be further developed with the child's portfolio being available and on display for the other children to learn about their new classmates. The early childhood education teachers were really enthusiastic about this as a mechanism for induction into the new entrant classroom. The visits that are currently done between preschool and school could be enhanced by using the portfolio as an introduction mechanism. The closer the liaison between the two settings, early child hood and school, the easier the transition from one to another for the child.

#### Conclusions:

- Links to improving learning outcomes, the liaison between ECE and Schools need to be strengthened. This could be done through closer professional group contact, formal and informal. Our current practise of the Deputy Principal with responsibility for the New Entrants visiting the ECEs on a regular basis needs to be extended and enhanced. The involvement of other teaching staff in shared PD and experiencing the others situation will help here. Release Time could be provided by the school perhaps through CRT.
- Links to issues important to the school, through awareness of the issues that are of concern at school and closer conversations and appreciation of the requirements of readiness and for all a better understanding of developmental theory and its direct impact in the classroom.
- Links to the school's strategic or annual plan, so that important dates and times can be celebrated together. So that professional development that is relevant to both groups can be planned and visiting experts can be utilised. So that we

consider common entry dates to school and discuss the issues around this for our children.

- Links to personal professional development issues for the Principal and teachers, see above. Also the closer the relationship the better the transition.
- Links to developing professional leadership practice, so that there is an interchange of ideas and expertise between the school and ECE and that it should not be one way only. Exchange days could help and the sharing of professional practice and tutor teacher knowledge.
- Links to current primary sector priorities, the National emphasis on improving literacy and numeracy level of all children impacts on both the school sector and ECE area. Professional development recently undertaken by Riverview has focused on formative assessment, literacy, numeracy and inquiry based learning through ICT all have implications for our ECE colleagues. Sharing this development with each other and the style of environments provided for the children that can make transition seamless.
- How the outcomes could be shared and with whom, open communication between institutions and colleagues with parents could be a good starting point. Already the involvement of the child in his or her learning is evident. This should be extended so that parent/caregiver-teacher and child are equal partners in the learning journey. It is a combined effort and involves expertise in each domain. The mechanism for this sharing is open communication enhanced by the use of the portfolio and learning stories and the child lead conferences that occur at school.

Finally

Roland S. Barth in Educational Leadership (March 2006) wrote;

One incontrovertible finding emerges from my career spent working in and around schools:

The nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else."