

Ian Dewar's  
Principal's sabbatical leave report  
2014

*~ as researched while on sabbatical leave in term 3, 2013.*



Research topic:

# “Catering for children starting school at 5 who are not ready for school.”

~ To research what environmental and curriculum changes schools need to undertake in order to cater for the seemingly increasing numbers of 5 year old students starting school at developmental stages that are closer to the pre-school curriculum than the national curriculum level 1.



## **Context:**

I am the Principal of Tawa School, a decile 8 school of approximately 350 children in Tawa, Wellington. In recent years we have had a number of children starting school who, whilst outside the official special needs category, start school with such limited social and academic development that they do not seem ready for the Primary School environment. Many have had limited or no pre-school experience and some come from tiny and/or remote Pacific islands with limited social contact. Even with the best efforts of caring and able teachers to adapt the curriculum for these students, they often still struggle with the 5 full days a week programme, struggle with the social aspects of both the classroom and the playground environment, and struggle academically. Whatever the background of these students, they present as needing more of a pre-school developmental type programme rather than the standard New Zealand junior primary school programme. They don't qualify for extra assistance under any of the current special needs criteria and start with the same expectations on them as all other students despite the realities of their developmental stage. They need a more flexible approach to their programme and a more flexible environment. This problem is exacerbated by the current Government led trend to assess and rate all students from the time they start school, and the corresponding pressure on schools to get these children "At" the expected level, and in the last 2 years the expectation has been to get them to that level in an "accelerated" time frame! This would appear to be exactly the opposite of what these children need – they require the time and space to develop at their rate!

The challenge is how to cater for these children within a New Zealand primary school context ~ I looked at what other schools, both within New Zealand and in the UK are doing to adapt their environments and curriculums to cater for the wide range of developmental needs of students entering the primary school system.

The following report also considers what policy and organisational type changes might be needed to allow these children to successfully integrate into school and to be successful in the New Zealand primary school system.

(Note – this research is not an analysis of 'transition from early childhood education to school' but rather the ability of the ongoing junior school programs to cater for all children.)

## **Factors from the New Zealand primary schools organizational structure:**

### **→ Starting school and transition to school in New Zealand**

New Zealand is quite unique in both starting school at 5 (even though legally children don't have to start until they are 6) and starting school on their birthday. This presents both a range of developmental challenges for such young students and transitional challenges with students starting throughout the year.

### **Starting school at 5 :**

Sally Peters in her "Literature Review: Transition from Early Childhood to school" (2010) noted "*The practice of starting on or just after their fifth birthday means that children in New Zealand, although not the youngest internationally, are relatively young on entry to school compared to other western countries.*"

The PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) study showed that only 4 out of 56 countries had a school entry age under 6:

Age of entry to school (in years) in 56 countries (Suggate, 2009)

School entry age (in years)	Number of countries
4 years	1 country
5 years	3 countries
6 years	33 countries
7 years	19 countries

Interestingly, Sally Peters literature review (2010) notes "*Suggate (2009) analysis of reading achievement indicated no benefit from early entry to schooling and some potentially negative consequences for some children's long-term success. It seems reasonable to conclude that because of their young age on entry, New Zealand children may require particular kinds of support compared with their overseas counterparts*".

This statement would apply even more so for children who start with earlier developmental stages. Currently our system does not cater well for them.

### **Starting school on your birthday:**

New Zealand is fairly unique in having children start school on or close to their birthday. Typically, overseas countries start in cohorts such as at the start of a school year or start of a school term. Cohort entry allows timetabled and planned programmes for catering for entry to school needs. It is way more challenging catering for children starting throughout the year whilst still catering for the other children who have already started.

Sally Peters (2010) notes; *“transition to school programmes described in overseas literature usually relate to groups of children starting together rather than the continuous enrolment of individuals. However, in New Zealand, teachers are continually overseeing school entry.”*

*“Although it has been proposed that starting on their birthday provides a more individualized and personal event for the child (Neuman, 2002) the reality is that children often find themselves involved in bewildering large group activities during their first days, with no particular arrangements made to support transition.” (Ledger, 2000; Peters, 2004).*

These issues are even more exacerbated for students whose developmental stages are such that they still need the early childhood education type curriculum – individualised, holistic and developmental based (as expressed in Te Whāriki).

It does need to be noted however, that even despite the New Zealand contextual issues listed above that make providing a successful transition to school for students at earlier developmental stages, it is not, however, a unique problem to New Zealand. Peters (2010) discusses these transitional challenges internationally. *“For example, in Scotland, it is suggested that owing to the behaviours typically favoured in the classrooms there, “any child who prefers to work alone, is reluctant to speak in a group, who needs adult reassurance about his or her work or who speaks little to his or her teacher is at a disadvantage and can be considered a ‘problem’ by the teacher” (Stephen & Cope, 2003, Pg 271).”*

## So what can we do about it?

### Investigation method:

- I visited some other Wellington area & UK primary schools to look at different approaches to initial junior school programmes, particularly schools who have created different physical environments to allow for flexible programmes
- I travelled to the UK to look at their 'Reception' programme for 4 - 5 year olds ~ which is based on 50% of all learning being outside in the first year of school  
~ Note: my wife and I immersed ourselves in this experience by also taking 6 months leave from our Principal positions to teach in a London school (Echelford School, near Heathrow airport) before our official term of sabbatical leave.
- I looked more closely at the Te Whiriki (Early Childhood curriculum) to see what aspects could be transferred into the primary school environment i.e. having more of a developmental based programme.
- Research reading
- Interviewing Principals and New Entrant/ Reception teachers

### Findings:

#### ☞ **Many students need longer and more substantial transition to school programmes.**

They need time to ease into the school environment, to adapt to the expectations and demands of 5 full days a week of school and the type of learning expected at school.

- ☞ Some students have not had early education or not successfully developed through the early education developmental stages. Some are still developing their large motor skills and still need lots of the associated 'big movement' type activities – running, jumping, climbing, exploring. Some are still learning to socialise - to share and co-operate, sometimes just to have other people around. Schools need programmes and environments so such children can still learn in those early developmental ways.

- ☞ In England, the current thinking for children in their first year of school (*which can be anything from 4 to just turned 5 years of age, depending on their birthday as they start school in September of the year in which they will turn 5*) is that:

- ✓ the children should be able to do any part of their learning outside (that means all inside programmes are duplicated outside (i.e. if they reading area inside they must

have a reading area outside – all schools with reception classes have specific outside areas for Reading, Writing, developmental, Maths, creative play etc)

- ✓ Reception children should have 50% of their day outside!
  - ~ typically English schools have half of their Reception staff based outside throughout the day (regardless of the weather – the outside areas generally have roofing and shelter) and children are encouraged to spend half their time out there.
  - ~ staff “assess” children’s progress equally both inside and out.

Having seen this programme in action in several schools in southern England, I was very impressed with how this approach allowed children to learn in the environment most suited to them and at their own pace. They were still actively supervised (as staff were equally split inside and out) and their development assessed, teaching was just as specific and teachers had clear next steps for all their students, portfolios of progress were extensive and reflected the children’s learning from both the inside and outside environments.

The outside areas were not just seen as play areas – they were consistently described as outside classrooms and had the same learning and behavioural expectations as the typical inside classrooms.

The outside work spaces were not entirely open spaces but rather included covered & sheltered work areas (which was important as the expectation was that these spaces are used all year, regardless of the weather!), plus sheds for such activities as reading, writing and imaginative play.

The official expectation that children would spend half of their day outside was difficult to achieve – some children needed lots of encouragement to go out at all, others to come back inside, but generally most students did choose a mix of learning spaces to suit their needs and what they were asked to do. Staff did sometimes struggle with the teaching expectations outside, particularly in cold weather (Note – all students and staff had “wellies” [gumboots] at school for use outside in wet weather.)

The photos on the following 4 pages show some examples of the outside classrooms philosophy in England:

**Outside classrooms in 3 southern England schools:**

**Echelford School (London) “Reception classes” outside learning areas (for 3 classes) :**



- outside developmental area



- outside “reading” shed



- outside “Writing” area



- outside dress-up /imaginative play area



- outside adventure play area

(attached to Reception classes – able to be supervised and able to be closed off)

**Booker Hill School (High Wycombe) Reception / Infant area :**



- outside 'Reading' shed (& storage)



- outside 'Writing' shed



- "Music wall" and group work tables



- weather proofed outside areas



- water play & construction area



- climbing frame (being used as a fort)

**Booker Hill School (High Wycombe) continued:**



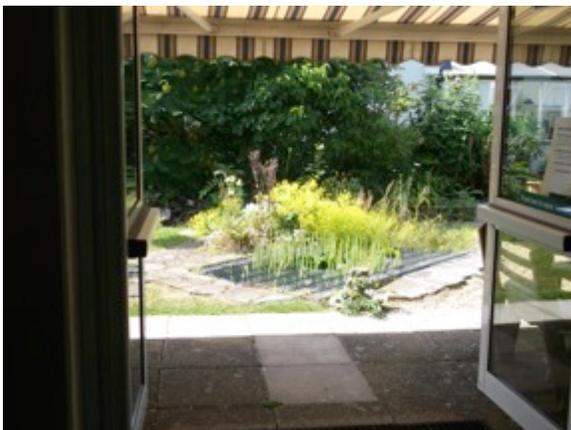
- group work & art area



- construction area (multi use)



- inside 'imaginative play' areas (repeated outside)



- Infant classes gardens (& lunch area)

**Butlers Court School (High Wycombe) Reception / Infant area :**



- construction & art area



- sandpit, construction & art areas



- reception classes general outdoor work & play areas



**Outside classroom / development space in a NZ school:**

**Titahi Bay School (Wellington) – developmental work area**



Developmental work area, used by whole school.  
*Structured / planned developmental programme timetabled for all classes.*



**Tawa School (Wellington) – my own school**



We have started developing an outside area attached to our New Entrant class.  
~ have a fenced off area for developmental programmes.

## **Suggested areas for change to cater for students needing earlier developmental stage programmes:**

Based on my readings and experiences visiting schools who are trying different approaches to cater for these sorts of issues, I suggest schools consider:

### **Environmental:**

- ☞ Creating more flexible physical learning environments that allow for children to be learn outside but still within a contained / supervisable area attached to the classroom.  
~ For students who need more time doing the physical type developmental activities, they can spend some time outside while still be within the supervision of the teacher.
- ☞ Building sheltered outdoor learning areas that allow children to work outside even when it isn't sunny & warm (i.e. work outside throughout the year)

### **Planning / curriculum / staffing :**

- ☞ Recognise outside learning as valuable and provide outside learning activities as part of the ongoing programme
- ☞ Provide staffing to support students who need / would benefit from learning outside more – who need physical developmental activities
- ☞ Build 'developmental' into the ongoing programme for all students (not just juniors)
- ☞ Provide PD for New Entrant / junior class staff on the early childhood education programme – familiarity with how pre-school programmes cater for students with those less developed physical and social skills.

### **Policy / programme structure - organizational changes:**

- ☞ Students used to start school with part days for a few weeks, going home at lunch time or 2.00 p.m., until they were ready for full school days. Schools could consider again allowing this for students who present as struggling with the demands of 5 full days when starting school.
- ☞ Up until the 1980's, junior classes routinely built a rest break into their afternoon – often having a nap time where every child was encouraged to sleep for a short period. Schools could again consider an option of providing a suitable rest area for Year 1 students who need to have time out / rest during the day. Such a rest can make the student more productive in their

learning for the rest of that day as opposed to spend a lot of the day tired and unfocussed.

- ☞ Build assessment of 'readiness for school' into enrolment & induction process. Interview parents about the issue of their child's readiness for 5 full days and the social & developmental demands of primary school.  
~ have an acceptance that not every child will be ready for a full, typical primary school programme when they first start school, and promote that it is OK for children to be at that stage.

# Sally Peters (2010) review for the Ministry of Education of literature on transition to school comments that "Almost any child is at risk of making a poor or less successful transition to school if their individual characteristics are incompatible with features of the environment that they encounter."

- ☞ It is vital that the school acknowledges that some students will not have a successful start to school and that the school needs to change what they do to meet the child's needs – not expect every child to fit the school's normal programme.

### **Summary:**

It is my intention to explore at our school, with the support of the Board, staff and community :

- ~ developing outside learning areas that allow students to learn in different spaces & ways
- ~ building outdoor learning into our programme
- ~ creating developmental learning into the programme for wider age levels
- ~ developing how we assess and plan for students' readiness for school

Ian Dewar  
January 2014.

## **Acknowledgements:**

I would like to thank the staff's of the following schools for access to their school and the generous donation of their time :

- Echelford School, Ashford, Surrey (London), England
- Booker Hill School, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, England
- Butlers Court School, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, England
- Titahi Bay School, Titahi Bay, Porirua, Wellington

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