

Issues to Address in the Transitioning of Children from Early Childhood Education to Primary School

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The focus of my sabbatical report was to investigate and consider strategies, resources and best practice in order to help Bethlehem School transition children and families to become part of our school community.

However before focussing on the transition of children into school two other factors need to be considered, especially in relation to our current New Zealand setting.

- 1) At what age should children be able to transition from early childhood centres to primary school?
- 2) At what point after reaching the qualifying age should children start primary school?
 - (a) When they reach the entry age for school i.e multiple intakes (at our school 60 plus per year)
 - (b) At the start of each term (4 intakes)
 - (c) At the start and middle of the year (2 intakes)
 - (d) At the start of the year (1 intake)

National Standards and the assessment of student progress in the first 3 years of school based on time at school has highlighted concerns and queries that I have had for a number of years:

- Why do we have rolling starts for children enrolling at school as they turn five?
- How ready are some boys for school at this age?
- Are we better to start children who are around the same age as a group, once or twice a year or at least at the start of each term?
- Would this be a more suitable way of utilising resources such as staffing and teaching spaces?

I believe that we need to review our current enrolment policy and decide what will be in the best interest of our children and our schools.

Key Questions:

1. What is the rationale behind current NZ policy that entitles children to start school when they reach the age of five?
2. How do NZ schools deal with the continuous stream of students entering school at five to begin their formal education?
3. What is best practice for successfully transitioning students into primary school?

A Brief Snapshot of the Establishment of our Education System

1840's – 1850's	Schools set up and run by churches or individuals on a private enterprise basis, fees were charged, up to a shilling a week.
1853 – 1870	Six provincial councils (governing bodies) became responsible for education within their own areas, consequently schooling systems in each province developed differently affected by funding and local attitudes. Church schools continued but there was also a move towards the establishment of publicly funded schools controlled by the councils through education boards and local committees.
1870's	It had become quite evident that schooling across the country had major inequalities and there was a growing demand for a national system of education. Debates in England regarding universal schooling also had influence on local views.
1877	The 1877 Education Act established the Department of Education to centralise control of schooling. Twelve regional education boards were also set up to provide some local control and influence along with local school committees.

The Education Act 1877 also mandated free and compulsory education for children.

“The Act was set out to provide, first, elementary schooling (i.e. schooling at the primary level) that was free for all children aged between five and fifteen, secular and (in general) compulsory for all children aged between seven and thirteen. Second it set out to provide impartial control of schooling.”

The Politics of Learning and Teaching in Aotearoa – NZ E.Coxon pg 45

I am still unsure of when the compulsory age for primary schooling changed from seven to six but the **Education Act 1989** states:

Part 3 Enrolment and attendance of students

20 *New Zealand citizens and residents between 6 and 16 to go to school*

(1) Except as provided in this Act, every person who is not an international student is required to be enrolled at a registered school at all times during the period beginning on the person's sixth birthday and ending on the person's 16th birthday.

I have had numerous informal discussions with early childhood educators and junior school teachers who refer to instances of 5 year olds entering school who are just not ready for or are just not at the right stage in their development to begin formal schooling. Boys in particular seem to vary substantially in their readiness for school.

From a pedagogical perspective are we pushing our children too quickly?

Do we need to look more closely at where these children are at before transitioning and introduce more pre-school type activities and programmes to better meet their needs?

Should there be more consultation between pre-school, primary school teachers and parents about when a child should be transitioned into school? Who should have the final decision on when to transition?

With primary schools under huge pressure to progress student achievement and meet National Standards, does this work in opposition to trying to meet the needs of children in their early years of school?

Should Year 0-2 students be subjected to National Standards assessment?

By only reporting from Year 2 or 3 onwards it would provide more time for inequalities related to readiness and experiences to be addressed without labelling some children as failures before they turn 6.

It is interesting to note that information from a table (Suggate, 2009) used in the “*MOE Literature Review: Transition from Early Childhood Education to School*” states that:

- only 4 countries out of 56 countries had a school entry age under 6
- 33 countries had their school entry age at 6
- 19 countries had their school entry age at 7

Data for the table was taken from countries participating in 2009 PISA Study.

Why are we so out of sync with other OECD countries in relation to starting ages?

If our compulsory schooling age were to be raised and schools were given the flexibility to decide on the number and timing of intakes:

- Would our children be disadvantaged by starting as 6 or 7 year olds?
Recent research certainly indicates that this would not be the case.
- Would our children be better off by beginning school with their peer groups and friends?
Surely this would allow a better level of social and emotional stability at a time of significant change for children and parents.
- Would early childhood centres and schools benefit from these changes?
Knowing that there will be x number of new entrants starting on this/these date/s would allow schools to be more efficient in their planning of transition programmes, funding, staffing and accommodation.

At Bethlehem School we start NE's on the first Monday following their 5th birthday.

I believe that there is a need for government to allow schools to make decisions appropriate to their situation. In a smaller rural school, rolling intakes can be handled more easily than a school of 300 plus students. Schools need the flexibility to make informed decisions about when it is best to start a child or a cohort of children.

One of the biggest issues that we face as a school in relation to the enrolment of 5 year olds relates to the varied range of knowledge, skills and experiences that they arrive with. We still have a noticeable number of children who come to school with no pre-school experience and very low levels of oral language.

Setting up classes for the start of the school year is always a difficult task for schools especially if information about future new entrant enrolments is sketchy. Based on my experience and knowledge of NZ schools this is done in one of two ways (with small variations):

1. The use of a Reception class and a Reception class teacher who would start children and then eventually move those students on to other junior classes at various times during the year.
2. A “next cab off the rank” approach with a Reception class staying with their teacher until full at which point a new Reception class and teacher would be started.

Which option a school might choose will depend on the size of the school, the stability of the roll, the quality and experience of the junior teaching staff as reception class teachers and having reliable info about future NE enrolments.

I was fortunate during my sabbatical to visit a number of early childhood centres, one on our own school grounds who we have a strong link with, a local Montessori preschool and in Helsinki I visited the Elka Day Care Centre. Each visit provided a wonderful insight into the development of social skills as well as an early introduction to core knowledge and skills.

At Bethlehem School we are usually made aware of more needy students being enrolled as new entrants, especially if pre-schools have sought assistance from GSE or other support services. In these situations, opportunities for observation in their pre-school settings are arranged, transition meetings with parents, support workers and teachers are held, and issues such as having a managed enrolment process or levels of in-class or out-of-class support can be discussed.

We are also fortunate in having the majority of our NE children coming to us from one pre-school centre which is based on the school site, so the proximity and regular interaction allows a smoother transition for students.

We do however have a growing number of Day Care Centres who are not in close proximity and there is a need for us to develop stronger links with them.

During my sabbatical I was able to spend time reading and contemplating thoughts about transitioning children from early childhood education to primary schooling.

Although there were some interesting transitioning strategies from overseas settings, because of the way in which children are enrolled into NZ primary schools, I found two local sources of information particularly useful:

- Literature Review: Transition from Early Childhood Education to School
Report to the Ministry of Education 2010
Sally Peters
- Crossing the Border
A community negotiates the transition from early childhood to primary school
Carol Hartley, Pat Rogers, Jemma Smith, Sally Peters, Margaret Carr

The current school curriculum (MOE 2007, pg 41) highlights that transition is supported when the school:

- fosters a child's relationship with teachers and other children and affirms their identity;
- builds on the learning experiences that the child brings with them;
- considers the child's whole experience of school;
- is welcoming of family and whanau

An important starting point for teachers from both sides of the "border", expressed strongly in the two documents above, is to develop an understanding of the links between the two curriculums, Te Whariki and the NZ Curriculum.

There were a number of strategies, resources and practices suggested in "Crossing the Border" including:

- the use of portfolios
- the transition to school photo display board / model AA sign
- the "Welcome to School" DVD project
- the extending of the Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) across borders
- developing mutually familiar language, routines and practices to help pave the way to positive participation
- targeted and general school visits for children and parents
- bite sized information - pamphlets and packs for parents "things that they want to know"
- the buddy project and the tuakana/ teina relationships

At Bethlehem School we use many similar strategies and practices to transition children into school but as mentioned in "Crossing the Border" there is no one right way or right combination of strategies, resources and practices. Needs are different for each setting. School's need to consider what will work in their situation, with their staff, their parents and their children.

I will be sharing these readings and ideas with our reception and junior school teachers to seek their thoughts and ideas.

I will also be suggesting that we survey some of our recent and soon to be transitioned families to find out "How they found the transition process?" or for those still coming. "What they'd like included in the process?"

Acknowledgements

The Politics of Learning and Teaching in Aotearoa – NZ E.Coxon pg 45

*Literature Review: Transition from Early Childhood Education to School Report to the Ministry of Education
2010 Sally Peters*

Crossing the Border

*A community negotiates the transition from early childhood to primary school Carol Hartley, Pat Rogers,
Jemma Smith, Sally Peters, Margaret Carr*