

## Sabbatical Report.

***Title-*** *Transition to School at 5- How can this be maximized to ensure acceleration of Learning in the First Year at School.*

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**Acknowledgements-** *A special thanks to the Education NZ and my Board of Trustees for granting and allowing me to take this Sabbatical- a time for reflection and refreshment, for personal growth and a change to step back and take a break from the demands, challenges and all consuming role as Principal at my school.*

*Thanks to fellow PAI Principals and Schools, Opaheke School, and to Alison Davis for her wisdom and knowledge gained throughout the Papakura Schools Initiative of Literacy Learning and Leadership. Thanks to my staff Ann Booth and Raj Dullabh for their leadership in my absence, and to Natalie and Sally- lead teachers in Year 1- who are so open to exploring various avenues and outcomes to always improve on transition to school and accelerated learning opportunities for year 1 students at our school.*

### **Introduction and Background.**

Over recent years school Leaders and Junior teachers have made the observation that our New Entrants in New Zealand are coming into school at five with less readiness and basic skill levels than students 15 to 20 years ago. This was identified throughout Papakura Achievement Initiative and many school leaders saw evidence of students starting school with decreased oral language and reading readiness as well as limited prior knowledge in the way of experiences in the outside world and in social settings and developing relationships. This is contradictory to the now extended hours at preschool and early childhood centres.

How does this impact on the progression of achievement across the first year at school-do students catch up? Is the task of achieving National Standards after one year at school even greater than earlier thought? Professor Shichida from Japan believes that all children are born with unique innate abilities and given the chance to develop with proper training and parental guidance they can all have accelerated learning. (*Shichida Method- Right Brain Accelerated Learning*).

There has been a lot of discussion in recent years in NZ schools in regard to relationships. This has been emphasised to me through my readings but also those I spoke to. The quality of the relationships when a child starts school is paramount to successful learning. Does that child gain the correct signals and brain development through this experience? The environment a child enters into and the environment they have left, but re-enter each and every day as school ends for the day is vital for their development. The levels of anxiety, family uncertainties are the underlying factors that are unknown or not fully known to schools-therefore the environment the child is entering through that school gate each day is a key for the next steps for learning.

This for me posed the question –How well do we currently cater for students and their families starting school at Conifer Grove School?

### **Implications**

*I needed some base line data to start with so I surveyed our current parent group to identify needs and successes to then apply to the research I had been reading,*

The survey was carried out at Conifer Grove School for parents who have had a New Entrant child over the last two terms of school. Questions were about the child's preparation for school, the way they settled into the school environment and the transition and manner in which the school ensured this was a highly successful process for parents and students.

1. 91% of parents felt their child was either prepared or well prepared for the start of School.
2. 75% of parents felt well informed and very well informed about the starting school process, with the other 25% somewhat informed.
3. 82% felt very welcomed by administration staff with the remaining 18% feeling welcomed.
4. 91% felt very welcomed by class teachers and 9 % felt welcomed.
5. 91% felt their child had settled well or very well-they were happy and settled and enjoying the change.
6. 100% of parents observed a big difference in their child's attitude and receptiveness to learning.

Comments from parents were very positive-“Keep doing what you are doing”, “My child had a great start”, “Everything was excellent” .....

These results show the capability of the Teachers, Administration and Senior Managers and the willingness to change systems, continue to adapt and adjust to ensure this starting school is effective and give students the best possible start to then address early teaching and learning from the best perspective.

Questions that remained were-What does the research show and where can we make the next step of improvements to ensure ALL families and whanau felt the same?

### **Does Date of Birth enhance Acceleration and Success at school.**

There has been a suggestion that students who are born in the summer months and start school in Term One may be advantaged and perform better. Is this a significant factor for students and does this impact on their learning across the year at school?

I could find no conclusive data or research to prove this-our current year one and two students who started in Term one were not academically significantly ahead of those who started in the second half of the year after the same 'After One Year at School period of time.

What was evident and shared from other schools as well as my own was that students who started at the start of the year are generally in classes with smaller numbers and the initial learning is more intense for the group at the start of each year. This showed that perhaps the need for well constructed and planned

initiation and transition to schools is necessary, and must be ongoing to ensure each new student is well catered for and their needs and the needs of their parents is equally met as the year progresses.

### **Transition to School and School Visits**

A smooth and successful transition to school is vital for students and whanau alike-this is where the journey starts and being welcomed, gathering information and a feeling of trust and openness sets the tone for the future of that student and their family right throughout that schooling at that school.

The Principal and Senior Leaders play a part in this by valuing this occasion and ensuring systems are in place to reassure parents this is where learning and achievement is a high priority. The Principal has an important role in meeting and welcoming parents and students -this shows they are included and welcomed as a part of the wider school community.

The teaching staff of Year One/New Entrant students also play a major role at this time, setting the pathways for the student to feel special and that their next steps in learning are important and exciting.

The relationships that are built through open and warm communication during a successful transition to school pave the way for the learning journey. A happy, stimulated and yet calm learner is a successful learner.

### **Accelerating Learning in the First Year at School**

Addressing the NZC and Key Competencies through explicit acts of teaching has been described as the basis for all best practice classroom programs. Teachers must create and facilitate the child's learning by planning activities engaging the child and relevant to their interests, needs and must work 'inside' the learning situation (*Hewitt, 2011*).

Teachers need:

- Knowledge of the individual child-strengths, interests and what they have already learnt.
- The skills and knowledge that students need to acquire and the patterns of progress learners make.
- A range of instructional strategies and processes to teach various students.
- Relevant contexts for learning.
- Understanding how well their teaching practices contribute to the student's achievement. (*ERO –Accelerating student's report-2013*).

### **Interventions-Beneficial to Students.**

Various schools are using a range of successful interventions to accelerate learning and promote language throughout the first year at school. These programs need to and must be in addition to a rich language based program of fun, hands on activities and encouragement from a well resourced and well staffed school environment.

- Early Words
- Talk to Learn
- Sounds Like Fun
- ALLs PLD
- Reading Recovery support programs and parent tutor programs.
- Testing at 5, 5 and ½ then again at six to re-establish needs and progress.
- Engagement and extra support from the home for the learner.

**Findings**-from research and schools I visited and/or talked to.

*Many students are starting school with less oral and written/reading skills than 15 years ago. This then is hard for them to accelerate in the first few months at school. Then acceleration is delayed and we are seeing this acceleration happen more readily in the second year at school instead. The period of 'catch up time' takes longer than the first year and well into the second year at school. For example "After one year" at school we had a Reading result of 45% At and Above National Standards with an increase to 75% after two years at school with the same students. The Year one therefore is vital to build the learning base for Year Two students. Scaffolding of skill based explicit acts of teaching is vital in a student's learning pathways.*

*Many schools are finding that students today have a very different range of skill capabilities- such as using a tablet or I pad, ability to program a TV sky program, play e games of quite high levels and problem solving aptitude?*

*Do our school programs reflect the need for our current 5 year olds- do we need to adapt our programs more to meet the growing needs of today's 5 year olds?*

*Are our students ready for school at 5 and do we need to ensure that at year one there is a program based on preparation for more accelerated learning such as the system in Australia?*

**Next Steps for our School**

- A follow up Parent survey in Term 4 –gathering data from June to December from parents and caregivers who have enrolled a New Entrant student at 5.
- Continue to challenge the boundaries of successful pedagogy for transition, learning programs and acceleration of year 1 students.
- Re address the pre school visits to school- allow parents to have more flexibility in selecting their visit from a given set of dates (very successful at one particular school).
- Encourage parent / teacher interviews early in the enrolment process to engage parents and involve parents earlier in the intervention and acceleration process.
- Ensure the process of starting school is always valued and best practice processes are retained.

## Conclusions

A student who starts school at five who has a highly successful year one has more opportunity to be 'AT National Standards After Two Years' when the following factors or many of the following factors are aligned and present.

- A rich and language filled early childhood environment-home, preschool and /or both.
- Being read to talked to and encouraged to seek answers to their naturally inquisitive mind.
- Provided with a wide range of experiences and opportunities to play, explore, take risks and solve problems. *"Play is simply shorthand for our capacity for curiosity, imagination and fantasy.-our creative disposition"- (David Elkind).*
- An inclusive and inviting induction into the school environment
- Parents, who are engaged in the child's learning, support the school and role model and encourage and value learning in the home.
- An environment that is inclusive, tolerant and sets high expectations no matter who the child is.
- An environment where relationships with children and adults is based on trust and acceptance.
- A school where Values are embedded in the everyday life and where expectations are high, realistic and a belief that anything is possible.
- A school wide belief that all teachers of all students should work together to scaffold learning to ensure a students learning and achievement.
- Early testing to establish levels, gaps and develop pathways for acceleration, intervention and progress through each level and stage.

*Many students are starting school with less oral and written/reading skills than 15 years ago. This then is hard for them to accelerate in the first few months at school and acceleration can often be delayed with schools observing this acceleration instead more readily in the second year at school.*

*Skill sets have changed over decades and teachers and educators must also adapt their thinking and mind sets to embrace these changes-students may arrive at school with deficit language and or reading readiness yet may have the skills to download information, use the internet, handle devices and apps with ease. Many schools are finding that students today do have a very different range of skill capabilities but also have high levels and problem solving aptitude and potential.*

*Do our school programs reflect the need for our current 5 year olds- do we need to adapt our programs more to meet the growing needs of today's 5 year olds? Do we need to continue to modify and change educational and pedagogical vision and practise? Will Modern Learning Environments influence the way we teach and facilitate learning. What will be the catalyst for our newest students in an unknown and very different future?*

***" The relationship between a parent and or teacher plays a pivotal role in the childs capacity to interact with others and influences neural pathways for***

***language and higher cognitive functions.” (putting Science into Action-see reference below).***

*It is evident in all readings, observations and experiences that the practices of explicit acts of teaching, high quality teachers, parents actively and positively involved, and the need to develop and grow strong and empowering relationships will endure, and will continue to ensure school becomes a desired place to be, where students are safe and happy and will learn, achieve, progress and be inspired for the future.*

**References.**

***Early Years Study 2- Putting Science into Action*** by Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain, J.Fraser Mustard and Dr Stuart Shanker.

Education Review Office-***Accelerating the Progress of Priority Learners in Primary Schools.***

***Shichida Method- Right Brain Accelerated Learning-Professor Shichida***

***Little to Gain and Much to Lose- Nancy Carlsson-Paige and GERALYN BYWATER McLaughlin and Joan Wolfsheimer Almon***

***Learning What Comes Naturally-David Elkind***

***Early Childhood Development-Outcomes of good practice in transition processes for children entering primary school.-Hilary Fabian and Aline-Wendy Dunlop.***