

Focus:
Transitioning 5-year-olds
to School

**A Research Investigation Undertaken
As Part of Principals' Sabbatical Leave**

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Introduction

This paper is based on my interest in exploring the transition of children from pre-school to school in areas where literacy levels on entry to school may be an issue. The reason for this research was my gut feeling that the way we transition 5 year-olds to school can affect their attitudes to learning and enhance or inhibit their reactions to the opportunities they are provided with right throughout their schooling. I was seeking answers to these questions:

What is transition?

What do preschools do to prepare 5 year olds for school?

What do pre-schools think about the way schools transition 5 year olds?

What does research tell us about the way preschools and schools can effect transition to maximise the literacy learning of our 5 year olds?

What does successful transition entail?

What professional development opportunities are there for primary school teachers in the Palmerston North district which will assist them to understand the developmental needs of children and thus help with transitioning 5 year olds to school?

My findings are based on conversations, correspondence or visits with the following:

- Chris Lepper, Early Childhood Advisor, Massey University
- Sally Hogg, Central South Group Special Education
- Brenda McLeod, SLT, Central West Group Special Education
- Brian Wansborough, Ministry of Education, Wanganui Office
- Jerry Tanguay, Ruahine Kindergarten Association
- Stephanie Greaney, Education Review Office, Wanganui
- Dr Gwenneth Phillips, Child Literacy Foundation, Auckland
- Adrienne Ansley, RTLB, New Plymouth
- Maureen Scott, Literacy Development Officer, Ministry of Education Central Office, Wellington
- These preschool/ early childhood education facilities and their teachers:
 - . Somerset Kindergarten
 - . West End Kindergarten
 - . Takaro Kindergarten
 - . Kelvin Grove Kindergarten
 - . Mill St Kindergarten, Marton
 - . Taitoko Kindergarten, Levin
 - . Malamalama Moni Aonga Amata
 - . Te Aroha Noa Early Childhood Centre
- Visits to these schools, and discussion with their Principals and teachers:
 - . Westown School, New Plymouth
 - . Taitoko School, Levin
 - . Takaro School, Palmerston North
- I also had a discussion with James Abernathy, Principal of Arahunga Special School, Wanganui, but did not have the time to follow up his ideas.

I am very grateful to these people for their generosity in sparing time to talk with me and sharing their resources. I picked up many good ideas, which I will be sharing with my staff on my return to Somerset Crescent School.

What is Transition?

Aline-Mary Dunlop and Hilary Fabian define transition as “the passage from one place, stage, state, style or subject over time”. Kathy Walker in Transition to School (Education Horizons Journal, Volume 5 No 2 Autumn 1999) describes it as “moving from one situation, programme or centre to another... a process involving change which may involve location, expectations, responsibilities, personnel etc.” Within the school context, it is defined as the process whereby a child is assisted by preschool and primary school educators to become part of the formal primary school system.

The impact of the transition experience is believed to have far-reaching consequences for children’s reactions to school. Sally Peters in her 2003 study of transition states: “As Margetts (1997) notes, ‘Children who adjust adequately in their first year of school are likely to be more successful in their future progress than children who have difficulty adjusting to the new situation’” and further on, quotes the claim of Dockett and Perry (1999) that the way the transition is managed “sets the stage not only for children’s success at school, but also their response to future transitions”.

In New Zealand many children attend preschools of one sort or another. Although the compulsory school starting age is 6, the expectation of most parents is that their children will begin at the age of five. Therefore, parents and schools want to give them the best start they can get, and are anxious that preschools start preparing their children early for what they see as their first major step into the formalised educational world of primary school.

For the New Entrant, the differences between pre-school and school are considerable. Preschools have a higher staff-student ratio, allowing more individualised care, while a New Entrant has to share their teacher with anything up to 30 other children; buildings and play areas are larger at school, there are more and older children, different routines and different expectations. Another major difference is that the educational focus moves from Te Whaariki, the early childhood curriculum framework, to the NZ primary school curriculum framework and a differently-structured way of learning. For some children the change can create a cultural shock which may take some time to overcome.

The kindergartens and other preschool centres I talked with were eager to acknowledge good practice in their nearby schools and discuss ways in which effective relationships and transition strategies could be fostered to make starting school a seamless exercise for children.

Research Tells Us:

- The social and emotional areas of development are the most important for a positive start to school. Children who start school without this readiness may exhibit learning and social problems which worsen during puberty.
- The greater the difference between home and school, the less likely it is that a smooth transition will be effected.

- The transition process takes time – up to a year – and needs to be managed carefully. There are a number of practical strategies which can be implemented to help the process.
- Cooperative partnerships between the early childhood centre, parents, homes and the school are vital to ensure that children move from one to the other with ease.
- That readiness is an issue. There are no conclusive findings concerning the best entry age to school, ie, 5 or 6, or about the best way to enrol new entrants, ie. on their birthday or in cohort groups. What *is* important is that the programme is developmentally appropriate for the individual child.
- That many children at the New Entrant level do not have the ability to participate in formal instructional practices.
- That school entry policies and attitudes to parents are crucial.
- That parents, children and educators see the important factors in effecting good transitions to school as:
 - . the child’s social adjustment
 - . the child’s disposition and attitudes, eg. willingness to try new things, to take instruction, etc
 - . the child’s feelings about school, often in the context of having friends at school
 - . an understanding of the rules
 - . the child’s self-care ability
 - . the ability for the child to separate from the parent
- That parents see the New Entrant teacher a crucial aspect of transition for their child, and a blueprint for what they should expect from the others in the school. If parents have a good relationship with the teacher this sets a standard for their continuing interaction at primary school.

Some points about Te Whaariki:

The Te Whaariki curriculum framework is New Zealand’s first national curriculum statement for the early childhood sector and has been gradually introduced to early childhood settings over the past eight or nine years. It puts the child at the centre of all learning. The individual, their knowledge, skills and attitudes are the starting point, and the emphasis is on getting early childhood settings, home and family actively involved with each other, to lay strong foundations for successful learning.

The focus of the curriculum is the socialisation, care and education of children, incorporating biculturalism, and the perspectives of other cultures and children with special needs. The symbol of a mat (Te Whaariki) is a metaphor for the way its principles of Relationships, Holistic Development, Family and Community and Empowerment interweave with its strands of Wellbeing, Belonging, Exploration, Communication and Contribution.

Each strand has goals with learning outcomes which are evaluated, and each child’s learning is assessed and reported on to parents. To enable continuity, each strand also discusses ways to link learning with the NZCF when children start at school.

Topics studied are usually interest-based and encompass learning social, literacy, numeracy and physical skills, concept development and independence skills. Te Whaariki assessment focuses on “learning dispositions”: Does the child take an interest in the topic? Are they able to become involved? Can they persist until a task is completed? How well do they communicate with others? Children work on group and sometimes individual learning stories, while their educators are observing their actions and reactions. Observations are written up. Children’s learning stories are discussed regularly with parents and their portfolios are taken home at the end of the year.

The Te Whaariki curriculum framework recognises and has strategies built in to it to acknowledge the influence which outside communities and social contexts have on a child’s wellbeing, learning ability and learning environment. Having space and a place in the early childhood centre for parents/ caregivers and educating them in a safe and friendly setting are seen as vital. In the settings I visited, it was evident that teachers use “teachable moments” to talk with parents about Te Whaariki and the learning goals for their children, and parental input was valued. Children are being taught a values curriculum, and this is obvious by the way teachers and parents relate to the children and in the children’s response to different situations. Often a “value of the week” is highlighted in some way and children are taught its meaning in context.

What happens currently in the early childhood setting to transition children to school?

All the early childhood teachers I spoke with saw transition to school as being an important aspect of their role, and it is clear that Te Whaariki has been helpful in narrowing the traditional differences between the early childhood and school settings. Not only did they talk with me about the ways they incorporate “preparation for school” into their daily programmes, but were also helpful in their suggestions about the ways Te Whaariki can be used in primary school classrooms.

Three kindergartens and one early childhood centre saw it as vital to have separate programmes for their 4 – 5 year olds; it is significant that these three were in the lowest socio-economic areas with poverty and deprivation as real issues. For them, “filling the gaps” is an important concept. One kindergarten keeps afternoon sessions for this age group only, another centre has three afternoon sessions a week for 4 – 5 year olds, with a higher ratio of adults to children. Another kindergarten works closely with its nearby school to incorporate aspects of the special New Entrant programme which children encounter when they start at school.

Ways in which the preschools I visited focused on transition:

- Teaching social skills. Most of these kindergartens teach the Values Programme
- Teaching communication skills, including
 - . asking questions
 - . taking turns
 - . conversing with others
 - . using quiet inside voices

- Teaching literacy and numeracy skills, including:
 - . letter and number recognition
 - . recognition of their own name
 - . stating personal needs
 - . following instructions
 - . movement and music activities
 - . 1-1 correspondence
 - . literacy and numeracy games
- Teaching physical skills, eg. climbing, taking turns, group activities
- Teaching group interaction skills, eg. cooking, ICT, writing corner, maths games, outdoors games, group projects
- Teaching concepts using practical and visual resources
- Empowering parents to see themselves as part of their children’s educational equation
- Working closely with parents/ caregivers and specialists on behavioural, emotional and special needs issues

These are all part of the Te Whaariki curriculum. All preschool centres emphasised how much they valued the relationships and interaction they have with the schools to which their children transition.

Early Childhood Educators’ suggestions to assist transition:

Educators:

- Have an understanding of Te Whaariki so we can understand and appreciate the work which is being done by preschool centres.
- Establish formal ways in which the New Entrant and preschool teachers can have time to share professionally with each other: create two-way communication systems for the adults.
- Share relevant professional development programmes.
- Give feedback to the preschool about how their children settle in to school
- Plan an activity together for the 4.5 – 5year olds
- Establish formal ways for the New Entrant teacher, and some senior management from school to visit local preschool centres on a regular basis.
- Explore ways the New Entrant teacher can be given time to interact with prospective families.

Children:

- Help 5 year olds to become confident in the school setting by giving them older buddies or buddy classes. Make them part of the transition process
- Ensure that New Entrants know the school layout and key personnel before they start
- Write “Welcome to ...School” booklets which parents can read to their children. These booklets describe the school’s culture for the child.
- Have a school/ preschool buddy system whereby both centres can participate with each other, eg. seniors reading to preschoolers; preschoolers joining in at concerts

- Treat the first 6 months of school at least as a transition time (some children need longer).
 - New Entrant classrooms need to be flexible so that children who have not yet learned to sit still can move into a quiet independent activity while still listening to the instruction
 - incorporate “developmental” type activities into the classroom, eg, parts of machines, building equipment, magazines, whiteboard & pens, maths equipment, items of TV or movie interest, cutting & pasting equipment, and other items which cater to children’s interests and encourage independence and positive interaction
 - incorporate aspects from Te Whaariki into the NZCF so children can move into the school culture seamlessly
 - focus teaching around children’s interests
 - don’t get tied into formalised school assessment. Investigate other ways of assessing individual learning: learning stories, continue portfolios

Parents:

- Make time for the New Entrant teacher to meet with new parents, sit down with children’s portfolios and use them as a sharing time starting point.
- Principals hold a “cuppa and chat” session each term for prospective parents to meet the principal, learn about the school and go for a walk around the school.
- Provide a “Welcome to our School” pamphlet/ booklet which tells about the school and give suggestions on how to make starting school a pleasant experience for their child
- Have a “parent-friendly” place where they can use the photocopier – use a computer – make a cup of tea etc – so they feel comfortable and welcomed in the school environment.
- Incorporate sessions with a visiting speaker or theme, eg. speech language therapist, videos about the school curriculum...

Three innovative ways of investigating transition to improve students’ literacy levels in Manawatu – Taranaki – Horowhenua:

FirstChance:

This programme was developed by Dr Gwenneth Phillips, Child Literacy Foundation, for low decile schools. The aim is to improve teaching skills by focusing on the specifics of teaching reading.

- It has been operating in the Porirua East schools for some time and there is now a move to open up the programme for Horowhenua and Manawatu schools. I viewed it at Taitoko School, Levin, which has been a trial school for Horowhenua.
- Started as a school improvement project to tackle ongoing low literacy levels, through Maureen Scott, Literacy Development Officer, MOE. She was associated with the “I Can” schools programme in Porirua East, aiming at using FirstChance to help raise literacy achievement. Taitoko School became part of this group and the New Entrant teacher travelled to Porirua fortnightly to be trained in the FirstChance techniques.

- Dr Phillips asks interested schools send their 6-year net, PAT results and any other literacy data to her in full. She analyses the data and tells the school whether or not they can benefit from the programme.
- FirstChance teachers receive professional development to help them master the teaching of reading and writing. By the end of their training, they understand the key teaching tasks, know precisely where each child is and know how to take them from where they are now to an accelerated level.
- The FirstChance programme involves changes in understanding and a different philosophy about the way children learn to read and write. It provides for very specific teaching.
- It aims at bridging the gap between low and high decile schools and is focused at the transition to school level. After the student's first year of schooling the aim is to achieve a profile similar to a normal distribution.
- Rather than changing curriculum literacies to match the home literacies or the home to match the school, the programme is about teaching teachers to manage the mismatch.
- In the NE room there is a big focus on oral language and comprehension and setting children up for success. Groups are kept small (3 is ideal) so the teacher can observe children's learning and make on-the-spot changes to shape their teaching.
- Teachers are constantly modelling when talking or introducing stories to them. They don't ask "What do you see..." Instead, they describe to the children what is seen, thus giving them the vocabulary
- Teachers' discussions with children are planned in writing, are around conversations, and provide the frameworks for their successful speaking, reading and writing
- The programme involves a lot of "reading to" with each group, and children experience many books. The teacher puts the book on the floor allowing children to follow the words as s/he is reading.
- In practice, the teacher takes each group on the FirstChance programme 3 times a week. The rest of the class carries out meaningful reading tasks and activities while one group is being instructed. On the other days each group carries out planned activities and one day is set aside for "free choice" ie. developmental activities.
- For Writing, the teacher provides the experiences and the vocabulary to scaffold learning.
- FirstChance teacher participants must have strong classroom management skills. The school must also have teacher aide classroom support in place to assist management and student learning.

Using Te Whaariki in Primary Schools Pilot Programme:

- This pilot is operating at Westown School, New Plymouth. It is the result of a collaboration between Brenda McLeod, Speech Language Therapist, Group Special Education Central West, Adrienne Ansley, RTLB and a group of teachers from the school. The RTLB leads the initiative with support from the SLT, and is based at Westown, which is decile 5.
- The pilot is about providing professional development for teachers around the overarching principles of Te Whaariki in order to improve the learning competencies

of students with delayed language at the primary school level. Teachers find it difficult to teach these children using the NZCF.

- The pilot focuses on teaching teachers to relate their learning activities to the early childhood curriculum so there is less pressure on the child.
- While this is especially useful for New Entrants, the Te Whaariki curriculum can be easily integrated across the school. Several teachers across the age group levels at Westown School are now successfully incorporating aspects of the early childhood curriculum into their classroom practice. Learning outcomes for selected students with low language levels and moderate special needs have improved and teachers feel more confident to work with them.
- The RTLB gives ongoing support to the 4 teachers in the school using Te Whaariki in their classrooms. These teachers have found TW so useful that they believe all teachers should have had the PD.
- The emphasis in the classroom for low language level students is on meaningful activities, discussion, observation, making models, games etc, using digital camera and video and other practical ways to record.
- The teachers use the tiered teaching system, ie teaching in groups according to level, using lots of visual prompts and scaffolding for the TW group.
- The TW philosophy can be applied to all areas of the curriculum at all learning levels, as well as for literacy and maths. Westown teachers integrate TW planning into their weekly workplans and long term plans.
- The pilot has happened as a very low-key initiative, but has been so successful that GSE is in the initial stages of collecting data from junior tests and samples for a more formal pilot scheme at Waitara East, a decile 2 school.

Te Whaariki Pilot in the Rangitikei:

This pilot is in its infancy and involves incorporating Te Whaariki into classroom programmes in a cluster of Rangitikei schools. It is being facilitated by MOE/ Group Special Education, Central South.

Each of these programmes are interventionist and aim to prevent failure, focusing on low decile schools and students with developmental delays. They each have a strong professional development focus and explore the best use of the classroom teacher and their teaching time. Each programme is also strongly supported by mentors from special education who have established relationships of trust with the teachers with whom they are working. They are available for troubleshooting, classroom observations and professional feedback, and assistance with individual children. These are all vital aspects of good staff training and classroom change.

Innovative ways four preschools in the Manawatu are approaching transition:

- Preschool A, a Pasifika early childhood centre, is very aware that there is a need to “headstart” their children, and provide a literacy/ numeracy programme for 4 – 5 year olds every afternoon, five times a week.

- Preschool B, in a small rural town, runs a programme for 4 year olds every afternoon. This also has a literacy/ numeracy focus and an emphasis on the Virtues programme.
- Preschool C, in a city suburb, does not have a special programme for over 4's but places a big emphasis on literacy, numeracy and social skills and meeting the needs of boys. Gender issues are important in this preschool.
- Preschool D, a Christian-based centre in a city suburb, runs a programme for 3 – 5 year olds three times a week with a literacy/ numeracy focus. The Virtues programme is also taught here.

Each of these early childhood centres is very aware of the need to incorporate parents into their cultures so they can be empowered as parents in our educational systems.

Availability of professional development programmes around transition for Primary School teachers:

To make transition a successful operation for all 5 year olds, it is important for teachers to ensure that a child's experience of their new school is not overly stressful. In this time of huge teacher and school accountability for student achievement, we also need to be sure that we are not expecting too much from some who are developmentally delayed.

Feedback from preschool educators and from my own readings during this project is that, while we are doing really well in most areas, we seem to be expecting too much and too soon from some children in their first year of school. I would like to see professional development programmes for primary teachers incorporating information about (a) the way children's brains grow and develop, and (b) ways we can teach to specific needs so that we can understand and cater for their learning requirements more precisely. We also need to feel free to adapt the current primary school curriculum to incorporate aspects of Te Whaariki.

In 2006 Group Special Education Central South will be hosting the facilitators of the New Plymouth Te Whaariki project in Palmerston North.

Conclusion:

One of the questions which I've been reflecting on for a number of years is *Why is it that some of the 5 year olds who arrive at school bright-eyed and eager to learn lose this attitude, often before the end of their first year?* The sad truth is that many children in decile 1 – 3 schools particularly, arrive at school still operating at the 3 – 4 year-old level of oral language development, and teachers are often frustrated by their apparent inability to learn. Some "transient" students, whose families shift frequently, and who can be found in higher decile schools as well, fall into this category too. Research tells us that these are the ones who fall by the wayside later on.

This period of study has enabled me to see more clearly the importance of good transition in filling this deficit. If this is done and we take the pressure off these children by adapting our methods of teaching, we will prevent negative attitudes to school and learning.

My study has led us to re-evaluate the way we introduce 5 year olds to Somerset Crescent School. The practices we have are sound and we will continue them, but in a different way. We will make sure that the New Entrant teacher is given more time to talk with her preschool colleagues and the parents of her new students, and has a teacher aide resource in the classroom. We will also ensure that all teachers in the school have an understanding of Te Whaariki and human development and be more able to adapt their programmes so that all children can meet with success and enjoy being members of the school community.

In summary:

- Ensure your New Entrant and Year 1/2 teachers have a good understanding of child development
- A professional development programme which incorporates an exploration of Te Whaariki is strongly recommended
- Establish and maintain a great preschool-school relationship. Invite preschool teachers to be part of your school culture, eg. shared professional development, the occasional morning tea etc
- Ensure that your New Entrant teachers meet with preschool teachers regularly to share ideas, successes and concerns. Assist them to work collegially to break down barriers
- Find ways to bring parents to school and to help them learn school culture and expectations. Listen to them and provide an area in your school where they feel welcome and safe
- Establish procedures for enrolment which help the child and their parents to feel comfortable and know how the school works
- Value the preschool's assessment portfolios and read them with the child's parents
- Have regular exchanges with your preschools and invite them to school events
- Look at the set-up of your junior classrooms. Do they need to be adapted for those students who are developmentally delayed?
- Look at the curriculum we are teaching. What are our school expectations? Are they too high for some students with slower development? Are we placing them under too much stress too early? Can we look at assessing them differently?

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