

Principal's Sabbatical Report

Transitioning five year olds into the context of primary school

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support of the Board of Trustees and Staff of Western Heights School. The sabbatical was an opportunity to continue my involvement with the working group to improve school attendance with a focus on the first year of school. The sabbatical also gave me time to reflect, spend time with my family and create the space to re-establish myself as an individual away from the principal role, which I have had for over 15 years. Wonderful outings with my daughters and grandchildren cannot be undervalued and I appreciate the sabbatical system for giving me that time.

I was able to meet a number of dedicated school and early childhood leaders and I witnessed a range of knowledge and observed sound imbedded practice. At a time of challenging change and pressure from the Government, it was very confirming to see that schools are there totally for their students.

Purpose

Action research project on transitioning five year olds into the context of primary school.

Rationale and back ground information.

As president of the Waitakere Area Principals Association for 2008/9 I represented WAPA for two years as a member of the 'Waitakere City Improving Schools Attendance Initiatives working groups. These groups had been established to improve school attendance and promote the importance of attendance at all school levels. The focus of the first years of schooling group included early childhood education and this was where I was most involved. The proactive initiatives that have emanated from the Waitakere Area Improving School Attendance programmes have included resources such as 'I am Five' brochures, 'Starting School' magnets and 'School is Cool' brochures and also a best practice for attendance procedures guide for schools. A leave pass system was introduced to all schools in the area with full active support of the police and shopping malls staff and other community groups. During that period a questionnaire was also conducted with early childhood facilities as part of the early childhood first years of school action group's data gathering. An analysis of this questionnaire demonstrated that many children attended ECE centres at varying distances from the schools they would eventually attend.

The information demonstrated induction and transition was erratic, non-aligned and contact with schools was inconsistent. In many cases induction was difficult and nonexistent. There was a growing group of Pacifica and Maori children attending early childhood centres in the Waitakere area.

We could see a need for early childhood and primary school teachers to have a better understanding of the contexts of experiences of the children from these groups.

I could also see a need to investigate and share models of successful best practice transition processes to both schools and ECE's so children get the best start at five.

Methodology

- Initial contacts were made with a range of Early Childhood Education centres.
- Schools of varying deciles and sizes were visited.
- A survey questionnaire was sent out to all primary schools in the Waitakere area.
- Meetings were arranged with associated agencies such as health/social workers.
- Information was collated and shared with the principals visited.

Findings

Procedures for transitioning the almost five year old student to primary school as perceived by the head teacher or principal.

Schools

- All schools had different systems and processes when inducting and transitioning students.
- All schools had varying degrees of contact with ECE's and parents of new entrants.
- Several schools have reception classes for the newly five children. These were mainly decile 3 and below schools.
- Schools with high numbers of English second language speakers had language for learning programmes for the new students.
- Parents of the nearly five children were involved in the process in many different ways from formal meetings that were education focussed to general 'walkabouts'.
- Children attended preschool induction sessions in most schools if the children were pre enrolled. These ranged from two to, in some schools, ten sessions before the child's 5th birthday.

Early Childhood Centres

- Kindergartens in nearly all cases had close ties to their local school.
- Some kindergartens contributed to more than one school and this made transition processes more challenging.
- Early Childhood centres in the commercial area of the city relied hugely on parents to make contact with schools, as these centres did not have an identified zone and contributed to a large number of schools.
- Several ECE's took up the challenge and attempted to collect information from their 'local schools' on the induction process.
- ECE's including language nests and kindergartens on school sites had very good relationships with their schools and made the most of the geographic closeness for ease of transition for their students.

Some of the challenges and issues for the transition process as perceived by the head teachers and principals.

Primary School

- Low decile schools had significant numbers of students who were not involved in transition events and the process.
- Staff in lower decile schools provided reception induction classes for the children who lacked formal preschool attendance.
- A significant lower decile schools had over 50% of their five year olds arriving on their fifth birthday having not pre-enrolled.
- Several low decile schools in the area surveyed had over 50% non English speaking new entrants and Language for Learning programmes were provided.
- Transition of the five year olds in low decile schools found parent engagement a challenge when support for learning was required.
- Children, particularly boys have not attended preschool and are not ready for school, because they have no quality play experiences and opportunities to develop socially. This statement was repeated in several survey returns.
- There was a lack of oral language skills and variety of readiness with a significant number of five year old students.
- One school's documentation supported the statement that children were arriving with less basic word and number knowledge than 3 to 5 years ago.
- All schools surveyed were endeavouring to set up communication processes with the community using other agencies and technologies.

Implications

- There is substantial evidence to demonstrate that a large number of new entrant students in low decile communities do not attend formal early childhood education centres. The current partnerships that contribute to transition need to include stakeholders and outside agencies together, such as health and welfare agencies that were evident in the small sample surveyed.
- Current initiatives between the MOE and other sector groups need to continue to explore the integrated approach that is being promoted by the school sector.
- Schools have to evaluate the success of their current transition programmes on an on-going basis, so that the readiness for learning needs are met.
- Schools that understood the culture of their catchment zone were designing school programmes that enhanced teaching and learning to accommodate readiness factors.
- ECE's need to be encouraged to make closer links to their contributing schools by working in partnership with parents at an earlier stage than currently exists. ie: up to 6 months before the child turns 5.
- Most primary schools that recognized the importance of transition were using 1:15 staffing for the purpose managing processes and events. These schools had made the initiatives a high priority in their strategic planning.
- Schools that included entry assessments in their early contact could provide teachers with hard data to support initial literacy and numeracy programmes.
- Where schools provided a formal feedback to parents with constructive feed forward there were examples noted of improved learning outcomes at the end of the first year at school.

- Where parents/caregivers had early school experiences in a foreign educational setting outside of NZ, primary school leaders had to clarify and develop understandings related to the NZC and the methodology used in NZ junior classrooms.
- The transfer of data for transient students caused many concerns for the initial schools of enrolment. The lack of formal processes across the district level highlighted the need for a common student management system to hasten the importance of transferring academic progress.
- All schools were concerned about the number of children arriving at school without early childhood education experience.

Personal reflective observations

- I found that the data gained from the original questionnaire was misleading and did not give an accurate picture of the relationship between schools and transition in our city and the findings did not reflect a comprehensive picture.
- Face to face interviews were far more enlightening and answers could be expanded and explained.
The nature of the questions has to be very open and directed for a useful response. The design of a questionnaire is a skill in itself.
- With the introduction of National Standards, a significant number of schools will be challenged by the transient nature of their students and the transition systems that will be needed for the new students enrolling in all year groups at the schools on an ongoing basis.
- The government expectations and requirements for children after one year at school will be a challenge for lower decile schools, where a significant group do not attend any ECE facilities.
- Several schools interviewed retained a frightening number of their 5 year old intake with one school having only 18% of that group at the end of year 6 and several others with less than 50%.
- A significant group of schools received students who had attended more than four primary schools in the children's first two years at school, therefore the need for schools to have a self review process on induction, transition and data gathering is important to enhance these students learning. This has to be paired with the building of successful trusting relationships with all stake holders.
- The number of children who do not attend any formal organised preschool education is significant and this is an area of concern for not only schools, but for government policies and direction which will have an impact on the Ministry of Education's National Standards expectations.

All schools visited showed genuine empathy and understanding of their school community and were demonstrating some innovating ways to report student progress to their families using a variety of methods.

I was very impressed and respectful of the work all the schools visited were doing to effect change and improve learning and children's wellbeing.

Conclusions

In September 2002, the NZ government released *Pathways to the future: Nga Huarahi Arataki*. This policy statement was in support of the ten year plan for the early childhood education sector. The document identified three core goals as a major focus.

Goal 1 - To increase participation rates in ECE.

Goal 2 - To improve the quality of ECE services.

Goal 3 - To improve and promote collaborative relationships across and between sectors.

In my very small sample of research in one region of NZ and in a very diverse suburb of Auckland, I could suggest that after nine years, we still have a long way to state that these goals are being achieved. In many sample schools, the enthusiasm for early childhood education is high, however the ability for primary school leaders to facilitate transition is difficult when non attendance is prevalent and continues to be a concern.

The theme of collaboration between early childhood services and schools has received considerable attention in recent years. Studies in South Auckland have shown that collaborative action by early childhood and primary teachers was able to make a difference in raising the reading and writing levels of six year olds who participated in the study. (Keith, M 2002) The programme provided professional development for early childhood and new entrant teachers. The study concluded that “professionals can and must form their own effective community of learning” and that teachers must take responsibility for the outcomes of their teaching, not believe that factors in the home and the child are the cause for lack of progress.”

The schools where successful transition existed were involved in serious teamwork between early childhood services, parents, whanau, and the community. They were able to ensure the transition between the ECE and the school was as seamless and painless as possible.

Special thanks must go to Margaret Campbell, the manager of the Waitakere City Improving School Attendance programme, for her dedication and support. The project continues with our working group building successful partnerships with health and other community workers to produce a “Top Tips For Engaging Community Field-workers in Early Learning.”

Parents + Engagement = Child’s Learning Success.

*“Local solutions are the key to extending early childhood education participation.”

COMET Chief Executive Bernadine Vestor

References and readings

The web search produced a plethora of informative, supporting articles from not only our NZ Ministry of Education site, but education sites all over the world.

Stephen and Cope, 2003 *An inclusive perspective on transition to primary school.*

European Research Journal, Volume 2 Number 2

Dalli and Te One. *Early Childhood Education in 2002: Pathways to the Future.*

New Zealand Annual Review of Education 12:2002

**Bridging the ECE gap for a small group of children still missing out.*:NZ Teacher, Education Review 2010