

PRIMARY PRINCIPALS' SABBATICAL

TERM TWO 2018

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PRINCIPAL

BUCKLAND SCHOOL

“Investigating Best Practices for Transitioning students into our school and from our school into Intermediate and Secondary school”

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank the Buckland School Board of Trustees, the Ministry of Education and TeachNZ for granting and allowing me to take this Sabbatical – it was a privilege to have this time to spend on an inquiry that aims to improve transition practices. I have also appreciated the time for reflection and refreshment, for personal growth and the chance to step back and take a break from the demands, challenges and all-consuming role of Principal.

Thanks to Angela Lindgreen (DP) for her competent leadership in my absence and to Buckland School staff for carrying on with their roles as usual. A special thanks to colleagues of local schools, ECE providers, Vanessa West (RTL) Martin Bennett (Kahui Ako Across School teacher) and to past and present parents and students for giving me some of their precious time to share their knowledge, experiences, beliefs and ideas around effective transition practices.

Executive Summary

Transition is a process that begins from the moment parents think about sending children to an Early Childhood Centre and continues throughout the various changes in setting that are made during a child's learning pathway. (ERO publication May 2015 *Continuity of learning transitions from early childhood services to school*) Fabian and Dunlop (2002) in *Crossing the Border: A community negotiates the transition from early childhood to primary school* describe transition asa holistic, dynamic experience that takes place over an extended period:

The word transition is referred to as the process of change that is experienced when children (and their families) move from one setting to another....it includes the length of time it takes to make such a change, spanning the time between pre-entry visit(s) and settling-in, to when a child is more fully established as a member of the new setting.

Purpose

The overall aim of this sabbatical was to develop a deeper understanding of how to provide for coherence and continuity of learning through successful transitions of 5 year olds into Buckland School as well as Year 6 students to intermediate and Year 8 students' transitions to college.

The following inquiry question was investigated: *What successful systems and activities can be used by schools to ensure successful transition for students into and onto their next school?*

Background and Rationale

Over recent years educators have become very aware of the importance of smooth transitions for students both into and out of schools so that their learning journey is enhanced and continues uninterrupted and at the same pace. A number of valuable reports have been produced by ERO and other researchers, supporting the need for effective transition practices. The formation of Kahui Ako (Communities of Learning) highlighted the complexity and importance of a smooth pathway of learning for students.

Our local Kahui Ako (of 17 schools) identified transition as one of three main areas to focus on together. This arose from initial data gathering that identified major differences in the way different educational providers understand each sector, the learning progressions and the approaches of the different sectors.

An awareness that our Buckland School akonga come from a range of different early childhood educational providers, (of the last 50 students enrolled, students came from 21 different ECEs), and that students also transitioned out of our school into a number of schools (Intermediate, three local secondary schools and numerous private schools), emphasised the need to inquire into our transition practices to ensure systems and structures were in place to provide the best possible transition for our students.

Methodology

The inquiry was based on a strengths-based approach which focused on identifying what systems and activities were working effectively in providing smooth transition for learners. Data was collected from the key stakeholders involved in transition: the students, the parents and educators from different educational sectors – preschool, primary, intermediate and secondary.

Initial data gathered from parents through a school survey on what parents saw as important in preparing Year 7 & 8 students for High School was used to formulate thoughts and questions to further the inquiry.

Data gathered by our local RTLB, Vanessa West, from a survey in 2017 of Year 8 students and then subsequent data that was gathered a term after their transition into college was utilized along with face to face discussions with ex-students.

Questions for each group were formulated and then visits to four early childhood centres, four full primary schools, one intermediate school and one secondary school took place where questions were asked face to face with teachers and principals. Face to face discussions also took place with students and parents.

Findings

Early Childhood to Primary School

A smooth and successful transition to school is vital for students and whanau alike – this is where the school journey starts and feeling welcomed, building a feeling of trust and openness and having the opportunity to share knowledge of the child, sets the tone for the future of that student and their family right throughout the schooling at that school. The expectation in the New Zealand Curriculum is that curriculum “...provides for coherent transitions and opens up pathways to future learning”. *“The transition from early childhood education to school is supported when the school:*

- * fosters a child’s relationships 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 (NZ Curriculum p41/Te Whariki p58)*

Parents and staff interviewed identified the importance of building positive and responsive relationships including effective communication. These needed to be open, warm and reciprocal. Parents wanted to be given the opportunity to share their child’s interests, strengths and areas of need as well as the opportunity to express their fears and worries (this was especially evident with first time school parents.) They wanted to have questions answered and have their children prepared for school. They wanted to be confident that their child was in a safe and caring environment and that their teachers would respond to their emotional and social needs as well as their academic needs. They wanted to know that their child would ask for help if they needed it and that they would be responded to in a caring way. They worried about their child not being able to make friends, not being able to read and write and getting lost in the ‘big school’ or being bullied by older students. Interestingly none mentioned safety in regards to their child coming from an ECE with double locked gates to open playgrounds in schools. School staff however were very aware of this issue.

Schools identified a number of different systems they used to transition students. These varied from school to school and this was an area that some schools felt they could improve on, particularly in consistency of following the systems they had in place. They acknowledged that time constraints and changes in personnel often meant there were differences in what parents and new students received. Systems included: school visits by preschools of children who would be transitioning into that school, school visits by the child and parent(s), parent meetings prior to starting, brochures, principal/senior leader meetings with parents, face to face discussions with teachers, information on websites, enrolment packs including ‘All about Me’ sheets, where parents could inform teachers of important information on their child. One school had put together an informative power-point presentation which they shared during a parent meeting prior to the child beginning. This

included skills and experiences which would assist children in ensuring they were ready for formal school learning. Schools indicated that they had had parents who had withheld information about their child and that receiving honest information from parents was crucial for schools to be able to provide resources for the child from the onset.

ECEs and schools all identified additional effective transition practices for children who were identified with additional needs. These included the involvement of: parents, MOE, RTLBs, SENCO, ECE teacher, classroom teacher and involved meetings with parents and specialist staff involved with the child, extra funding, and a 10 week transition phase. These practices were an opportunity to build relationships and knowledge of the learner. They also ensured the environment was prepared to meet the needs of the learner.

The building of positive relationships of schools with the ECE providers children came from, was also identified as vital. Where the majority of children came from a limited number of ECE schools felt they were successful in building these relationships but this became more problematic for those schools where children came from a wide range and number of ECEs. Three of the preschools visited had formed working groups with other preschools and new entrant teachers and met regularly to share their knowledge and programmes. These groups were seen as highly effective in developing positive relationships and the sharing of information was seen as strengthening the practices of both ECEs and schools in transitioning students successfully.

The majority of the ECEs had individual profiles that students were given when they left and parents were encouraged to share these folders with schools. A couple of the ECEs also had a written report based on the strands of the Te Whariki curriculum: wellbeing, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration. These reports were sent to the school. New Entrant teachers appreciated these, provided they were not lengthy reports. One ECE asked that schools send back a response sheet to let them know how the child had transitioned. There appeared to be very little information from the schools back to the ECEs and this was an area that would be beneficial for schools to investigate further to assist with transition.

ECEs all commented on the pressures that parents placed on them to be providing formal literacy and numeracy programmes that were similar to new entrant class programmes. They noted how important it was for ECEs and schools to educate parents in what was important for early childhood development and how the Te Whariki curriculum aligned with the NZ Curriculum.

New Entrant teachers spoken to did not expect children to be able to read and write when they began school but identified dispositions and skills as important for successful transition. These included: self- management skills such as being able to open lunch-boxes, hang up bags, toilet themselves, keep themselves and others safe, being able to articulate their needs and wants. Being able to make friends, build relationships with peers and act appropriately in a range of social situations were seen as helping children transition quickly, feel they belong and become connected with others and the school. Being confident, resilient and having a willingness to learn and take risks while exhibiting curiosity and interest in their world allowed them to continue their learning journey. Having sound oral

language was stated by all interviewed as vital, along with having good gross motor skills and developing fine motor skills as preparation for formal literacy and numeracy learning.

ECEs were pleased that schools identified the dispositions above as these were the areas that they also placed emphasis on during their play based learning. It was interesting to note that several of the new entrant teachers had adapted their school programmes to include play based learning into their programmes to help with transition and improve continuity of learning for children moving from ECE to school. There are a number of research projects available to support this type of learning for new entrant classes; these include research completed by Keryn Davis, (Project researcher, CORE Education Nov 2015 *New-entrant classrooms in the re-making*) and Sally Peters and Margaret Carr (University of Waikato.)

When questioned on whether any additional practices to aid transition for our Maori and Pasifika students were in place, no ECE or school had specific practices although all valued the experiences these children brought to the school. One person of Maori heritage stressed the need for schools to take the time to know where on the cultural spectrum the whanau was and what their expectations culturally were for their child. They also expressed the need for schools to take the time to build connections with the whanau that promoted a reciprocal learning relationship.

Primary School to Intermediate

Our local Intermediate school has a range of systems in place for transition of students from contributing primary schools. These include: visits by senior leaders and Year 8 students, open evenings to showcase the school and provide information for parents and children, visits by Year 6 students and their families to the school, completion of enrolment forms, testing for the accelerate class, discussions with Year 6 teachers and a digital platform to pass on individual information of students. For students who have been identified as having additional needs extra meetings with RTLBs and SENCOs are held and there are opportunities given for extra visits for students to meet with their new teacher and familiarize themselves with the school.

Keys to successful transition and continuity of learning for students is the sharing of full and accurate knowledge of the student by both the parents and the contributing school. Once the child begins they are placed in a class and a learning community. A range of class activities are programmed to help students get to know one another and their teacher, and build relationships so that they can make connections and feel they belong.

It has been identified that systems for transition of students from full primary schools are more problematic due to conflicts around poaching of students, which in turn affect numbers for these schools. Due to this the intermediate school does not visit full primary schools therefore some misinformation circulates. Parents however have the opportunity to visit the intermediate school and enrol their child. It has been agreed that the transference of information on students from full primary schools can be improved and the digital platform that is used for contributing schools will be used in future.

Year 8 to High School/College

The Education Review Office (2012) identified 12 successful indicators for students transitioning to Secondary School. These are:

1. Have a sense of belonging in their new environment and feel included in the activities and programmes that are on offer
2. Have created positive connections with peers and staff
3. Feel that their teachers know them and show a genuine interest in them which includes knowledge of strengths, interests and learning needs
4. Feel that their language, culture and identity is valued and understood by the school
5. Have a sense of belonging and purpose at the new school
6. Take responsibility for their learning journey
7. Make progress
8. Understand that their new learning has connections with previous learning and is set at a level that provides them with some challenge
9. Feel that their learning journey is interesting, relevant and above all fun
10. Feel that their whanau have been included in decisions about their learning journey
11. Have a sense of being both physically and emotionally safe in their new environment
12. Opportunities are provided for them to experience new activities and extend their interests and skills.

The commonalities of transition systems used by the three local colleges included: visits by members of the senior leadership team and often ex-students of that school, open evenings for parents and students to view the school, availability of a prospectus, enrolment afternoons/evenings where parents and students had the opportunity to notify the school of important information the school needed to know. One school was particularly proactive and provided a powerpoint presentation and a resource booklet for students during their visit. During the enrolment process they also discussed with students their educational expectations and hopes.

All schools had orientation days in the year prior to the student starting, these included a powhiri, activities to get to know other new students, lessons such as science, visits to specialist classrooms and in some cases testing.

Requests for information from the previous school varied from reference letters to the completion of information sheets indicating: academic levels, sporting and cultural strengths. The schools identified these as being valuable in identifying student academic levels and interests and how their learning journey could be continued. Secondary schools, however also accepted that at times the information did not get disseminated to all teachers and that in some cases teachers did not trust the information or even understand the results. Contributing school teachers also felt that the information they had gathered over the years was not used to its full value.

For one secondary school, very thorough face to face discussions were had on all the enrolling students with previous teachers. These discussions were seen as highly valuable by both groups and aided in giving the new school knowledge of the individual learner and

the opportunity to place the student appropriately as well as to prepare additional resources where necessary.

All schools agreed that the meetings for students with additional needs between SENCO, RTLB, and specialist staff were highly valuable and that transition for these children was generally very effective.

Systems that were in place in the schools for the first few days included a powhiri for students and their parents to welcome them, group meetings with older students who acted as support and positive role models.

The idea of a waiata to be used during powhiri taught to all the Kahui Ako akonga was well supported by schools.

Students who were interviewed about their transition felt that it had been a very positive experience and believed that activities that were provided for them to form relationships with other class members were valuable in helping them feel that they belong at the school. They did say, however, that not all teachers gave them the opportunity to share with new class members and that in some classes they knew very few other students. Students felt that teachers, on the whole, were helpful, responsive and interested in getting to know them, their strengths and weaknesses. All spoken to felt confident to express their needs and wants. Things that had worried them prior to starting had not been issues. These included: being unable to find their way around the school, being unable to follow the timetable and make class, being fearful of older students, not keeping up with the work and homework demands, not knowing what was expected of them. Those with older siblings at the school said that it was good knowing their brother or sister was in the school but that they didn't see them very often. One student felt it would have been easier for her had she had someone from her previous school with her, although others felt it was good to get to know new people and that they met up with their previous school mates frequently. Some of the students from smaller contributing schools who had technology lessons either at the intermediate school or the secondary school and who were involved in sports and extra curriculum activities outside of school time considered these helped them to know many of the other students prior to starting their new school.

When asked what advice they would give Year 8 students, one student summed it up for the others by saying "Don't overthink it." Other advice included: working hard during the year to be prepared academically, challenging themselves and being risk-takers as Year 8s, being confident to take on leadership responsibilities, to listen carefully to morning notices of events and meetings and not being afraid to get involved in new activities.

Parents valued the preparation for high school that primary/intermediate schools had given their children and all interviewed (except one) expressed the view that their child had transitioned well into high school. They felt the transition systems the schools used had worked well for their child. They listed similar things to new entrant parents that they had worried about: that their child would not make friends, that they wouldn't cope academically with the subjects (particularly new subjects), that they wouldn't adapt to the size of the school.

The need to build positive relationships with the school and have good communication channels were vital to parents, particularly those of students who were not good at passing on messages. They valued on-line applications where they could check newsletters, school events, activities, achievement and progress reports of their child etc. Parents (particularly those who had been very involved in previous schools) wanted opportunities to be involved in the school and to have their views heard. Parents wanted teachers who were approachable and responsive to their child and who would extend and encourage them to be involved in a wide range of learning activities.

Next Steps

From this research the following emerged as actions that could be worked on further by educational institutions in our area in the future:

- Promotion of relationships between ECE centres and schools
- New Entrant teachers knowledgeable about the ECE Curriculum and ECE teachers knowledgeable about the NZ Curriculum
- Parent education to inform, obtain parent voice, inform and alleviate misconceptions about ECE/Schools
- Better knowledge of each sectors' programmes/structures through visits/discussions
- Reciprocal information from ECE/Schools, Schools/Intermediate, Primary/Intermediate schools & Secondary Schools on individual students
- School systems to ensure all information is available and passed on to all teachers involved with the learner.
- Implementation of a digital platform for sharing student information between the intermediate school and full primary schools who contribute Year 7 pupils.
- Facilitation of community meetings to provide opportunities for contributions by members of all sectors to a coherent pathway tool (which includes learning focuses and capabilities) to enrich learning opportunities by ensuring coherence and continuity of learning for akonga, both over the years and across settings.
- Combined waiata that can be used by all schools to promote belonging of the Kahui Ako/School

Conclusion

Investing in effective transition benefits the students in our care by allowing them to adjust positively to their new environment. We all have an obligation to all of our students to ensure that we are doing everything possible to ensure they are happy, confident and safe (physically, emotionally and culturally) in each of the learning environments that their learning pathway takes them. We must be aware of the crucial elements and conditions that need to be present when children transition from, and to each step on their journey. As educators we must make every effort to ensure their transition is smooth and that systems and practices are effective for each student and their family, so that continued presence, participation and learning achievement is attained.

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