

# ***Transition of Special Needs Children from the Early Childhood Setting to Primary School***

## ***Sabbatical Report 2019***

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### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Purpose**

**Through discussions with professionals and parents, identifying what a successful transition should look like.**

**Identifying how funding or lack of impacts on a positive transition and early years of schooling**

### **Introduction**

I have been the Principal at New River Primary School for thirteen years. It is a Decile 1 school. We have high numbers of special needs students, behavioural problems and children lacking in social and emotional competencies. We have a high number of ORS students and seem to be a magnet school for children with special needs. We know and have been told by Ministry staff, that there is a process for transitioning special needs children from early childhood to primary. However, it never ceases to amaze us at how different each transition is, and how it seems to be very dependent on which lead professional is involved.

The messages that kept coming through during the interviews with numerous parents was their concern, and at times amazement at how hard it has been for them to get support for their children, their feelings of helplessness, concerns about the future for their child and the burning question, “why does it have to be so hard?”

This report shares some of the experiences professionals and parents, have had during the transitioning process. Using these real life experiences, my intent was to highlight what good practice should look like.

There is no doubt that the key to a successful transition is positive relationships between all parties involved. The role of Early Intervention (EI) is to foster and strengthen that partnership, working from a 'Partnership' model, not an 'Expert' model. Everyone needs to be contributing to the partnership, otherwise there is no foundation to work from.

**“Good relationships provide a foundation for effective discussion about, and co-ordination of - systems, processes and resources. Similarly, good systems and processes will strengthen a relationship.”**

(Burgon with Walker, 2013, p.27)

Without positive relationships and trust, barriers are created. This may hinder information sharing. Everyone in the child's support team, should be involved in creating a 'transition plan' and everyone needs to be in agreement. It is important to share with parents, what a successful transition 'should' look like, but also acknowledge that every child is different, leaving opportunity for flexibility and deviation from the plan if things are not working. Due to the complexity of individual transitions, it is not always possible to predict whether everything will run to the 'plan'. There are many factors which may impact on it. For example, there may be large numbers in the child's intended classroom; there may be other children with special needs; the teacher may not be experienced; other children in the class may have needs around social and emotional competencies; the child may have experienced trauma; and the many different scenarios and influences coming from the child's home environment. From the perspective of schools, it is important that the child's support team, whilst always wanting to do the very best for that specific child, recognise that the classroom teacher's focus cannot just be on that one child, they do have a whole classroom of children to manage and teach.

**“Transition is a journey and for most families navigating their way to school is a relatively straight forward process. However, for children with special needs and their parents / caregivers, whānau, navigating a pathway to school can have many twists and turns due to the complexity of each situation. For Ministry of Education (the Ministry) providers, it is about how we co-navigate alongside parents / caregivers, and whānau, and any other service providers to give their children the best possible opportunity to learn within the curriculum, in their local school, alongside their same age peers.”**

Transition to School Guidelines for Early Intervention Providers June 2014 page 4

*M.... started as a five year old. He was Very High ORS. He couldn't be left unsupported for a second as he would run away. Sometimes there were up to five other adults in my New Entrant classroom supporting his transition and solely focussed on him. They were all talking about him while I was trying to continue with my normal classroom programme. The child was let loose in the classroom, pulling things off shelves and making loud noises. Five year olds are distracted very easily and it was difficult to keep everyone's attention with all the extra voices in the room. They didn't respect that I had all the other children to consider and manage, some of them with special or behaviour needs. They often tried to draw me into the conversation they were having, which I didn't have time for. I found the situation quite stressful." (New Entrant Teacher)*

There seems to be a significant variation in the transition process followed by Early Intervention caseworkers. One Principal commented that, depending on who the caseworker is, *'it is a bit of a mystery tour'*. It is really important that everyone involved is kept up to date and well informed. The ideal situation is that schools are involved in the transition process at least six months before the child starts school. At a very early stage, parents should be supported by the Ministry staff involved, to have a good look around at different schools, encouraged to make a decision about which school their child will attend and enrol them early. Sometimes schools have had no prior knowledge that a high needs child may be enrolling in their school until a few weeks before they are due to start. Often parents are blamed for procrastinating about which school their child will go to. If this is the case, and the child has turned five with no enrolment made, then the transition process should still be taken slowly. Schools shouldn't be put under extra pressure to get things organised for the incoming student, e.g. finding a suitable teacher aide and specialist teacher if there is ORS funding; meeting with agencies involved; building relationships with parents and most importantly getting to know the child and how they will cope in the school environment. In New Zealand, children are able to start school at the age of five, but legally do not have to be enrolled until their sixth birthday.

*"... we had transition meetings with the professionals involved and the family of K... who was about to start school. The early childhood centre he attended thought an ORS application should be applied for, but the Early Intervention caseworker from the Ministry didn't agree. We didn't know him very well at that stage. A plan was agreed on by everyone and transition visits were arranged for K... to attend with his mother. Sometimes they would turn up and sometimes they didn't bother. Because he wasn't coming regularly, he didn't have the opportunity to get used to routines, the classroom, his classmates and me (the teacher). Each visit was like starting all*

*over again. It was hard, as I didn't get the chance to build a relationship with him. Everyone still kept pushing for him to start on the initial date decided, but the parents hadn't done their bit, they didn't even meet us half way, but still had all these demands about what they wanted to happen." (Teacher)*

The transition to school process needs to begin at least six months before the child is due to start school. During this time, the planning process can begin, school visits made and relationships between the child, parents and school staff can develop. The transition to school team needs a designated co-ordinator, someone that both parents and the school can contact for information and seek guidance and clarity over any issues which may occur. It is vital that parents understand the importance of transition visits, and that they make sure their child is attending school on the day and time decided upon.

The more familiar the child is with the school environment, the easier and more positive the transition will be. Culturally responsive practice should be part and parcel of any positive transition and ideally should also be provided through the early intervention service. Allowing schools time to get to know the child, their family / whānau, helps them ensure that their culture, language and identity are valued and provisions for these included in the transition to school planning. It is vital that regular review meetings are held with everyone involved and continue these after the child has started school. If everything is going well, then the time between meetings can be extended.

**"Effective transitions have early planning, parent engagement, strong relationships between school, ECE, parent and Ministry staff. There is clear communication across all stakeholders, and planning takes account of the needs for continuity for the child. There is a clear and shared understanding about resources."**

(Burgon with Walker, 2013, p.72)

The process different schools use to transition children into their school differs greatly. It can range from children having visits only one to two weeks before they start school, to the process beginning six months prior to school entry. For children with higher needs, the sooner the transition process begins the better. The majority of these children have difficulty coping with change at the best of times, so the more familiar they become with the school environment in a low key manner the better.

*“The school has a transition to school programme that starts 6 months before children start school, one afternoon a week. My child was not forced to do whatever everyone else was doing. The school was happy for me to bring items that gave him comfort. He still loves going to visit this room even though he’s in another classroom.” (Parent)*

For some parents, going through their child’s enrolment process can be an anxious time for them, especially if they have low levels of literacy. One school I spoke to have employed a person to support parents during the enrolment process. Spending time in the early childhood and Kindergartens that feed into the school allows them to get to know and build relationships with children and parents and act as a liaison person between family, early childhood and school. Parents can be supported with the enrolment, for example, filling out forms and school visits. Learning, behaviour and developmental issues can be identified and if it hasn’t already happened, the appropriate intervention can be encouraged. The school can also be given a ‘heads up’ if they are unaware of a pending enrolment, particularly if the child has special or additional needs.

A graduated transition plan does work really well. A plan such as this, allows the child, family and classroom teacher to get to know each other gradually. The child attends school in small chunks of time. This is slowly increased as they learn to cope with different parts of the school day. Break times are always problematic, so having support for the child at these times is important. Depending on the child, that may not be an ongoing need. If the child is not coping, then pressure should not be applied to the school to increase that time. If the child is not ready, then it is setting them up for failure. We need to be mindful, that special needs children have developmental delays in some form, so they are very rarely ready or able to cope with a full school day at the age of five.

*“Once I understood the graduated transition plan, I felt better about it. It was very stressful when he started in the classroom. The main stress is other people and them not understanding his cues and he ends up lashing out. It takes other people awhile to pick up on those. Communication has been fantastic and I have always tried to have good communication. (Parent)*

It is a very anxious time for the parent of any five year old starting school. If your child has special needs, that state of anxiety is greatly heightened. They are confronted by so many things that are new or foreign to them. There is so much information to take in, such as how the system works, what are the specific roles of the educational caseworkers, what funding can be applied for, what supports are available for their child and their families and on top of all that trying to decipher the educational jargon used. If the child is ORS funded, they will usually come with an entourage of experts to meet their varying needs. This can also be confusing for

parents, remembering who everyone is and what role they are playing in their child's life. There is no doubt the process can be very overwhelming and some parents are better equipped to deal and cope with it than others. Many parents voiced that they didn't understand what was happening and if they were to go through it again, they would react very differently. Meetings with the professionals involved in their child's transition can be very intimidating for parents. Some parents couldn't understand why it seemed to be such a battle to get the support they thought their child needed and deserved and why that battle continued after they started school.

*"A major difficulty was not understanding the process. If I knew now what I knew then I would have made sure the process of transition to school was started earlier. Even though the Special Education IT was involved a year and a half prior to my son starting school, the actual transition to school did not start until very close to the time he was due to start. The school didn't know him. The IT said he was too clever and capable to get funding. The supporting teacher aide from the early childhood centre was helpful, she made him a book and came along to some of the transition visits with him. It was concerning that once he started school all the support and funding he had stopped." (Parent)*

*"I didn't get much information from the Early Intervention person from the Ministry, I got more from the Kindy. If I had the same understanding as I do now, I would have been more assertive for my son, but there was so much I didn't know or was not explained to me fully." (Parent)*

Generally relationships between parents and Early Childhood Education staff are positive, but sometimes, for a variety of reasons, breakdowns may occur. Many parents know that their child is going to need extra support and so can work positively with the Early Childhood setting to make a referral to Learning Support. However, there are some parents who are not aware of the developmental needs their child may have. This puts the responsibility onto the Early Childhood Centre / Kindergarten, to have a discussion with parents, as soon as they have identified issues. Parents should be encouraged to consent to an Early Intervention referral. Unfortunately, some parents are just resistant to a referral being made.

*"We identified that this little girl had very obvious learning and behaviour issues. We tried to talk to her Mum about a referral for her. Unfortunately she was really dominated by her own Mother, who at the time was supporting her with the care of her daughter. The Grandmother would not allow consent for a referral. This meant, she started school with no support." (Early Childhood Centre)*

*"... started school as a five year old. There had been no contact from the Early Childhood Centre to indicate he may need extra support. It always takes a while to get to know new children and work out exactly what their needs are. There were*

*lots of red flags for us. We contacted the Early Childhood Centre to find out more about him and they told us there had been no Early Intervention. It was evident that he had developmental delays in many areas, as well as conditions that were effecting him physically. We went through all the usual channels to get support for him, RTLB, Learning Support - Speech Language, OT, Physio, Health Nurse, Strengthening Families, Paediatricians. At the end of his second school year, we managed to get ORS funding for him. There was obviously a breakdown in the system somewhere, for it to take so long to get him the support he needed.”*  
(School)

The creation of ‘Positive Start’ teams has been very valuable and has helped bridge some of the communication gaps that occurred in the past. Many schools, Early Childhood Centres and Kindergartens are now participating in these groups. They are supported by RTLB and representatives of other supporting agencies. Through these groups professional relationships have been developed and lines of communication opened up and strengthened. The Positive Start Teams are organised geographically, so that Schools are meeting with the Centres that mainly feed into their school. The purpose of these meetings is to work toward better outcomes for all involved, improved transitions, open communication and the development of relationships.

*“Our school is involved in a ‘Positive Start’ group which meets regularly. It is great because we have been able to get to know teachers from Early Childhood Centres and Kindergartens who feed into our school. This makes it much easier for us, when we have a child with special needs coming from a specific centre, to discuss what their needs are. We now visit these centres and observe the children in that environment and talk to the teachers prior to them starting school. That alone gives us so much more information about the child’s behaviours than any professionals meeting we might have.”* (New Entrant Teacher)

**“Relationships can be enhanced and valuable information gained if teachers from the school visit the early childhood education service to observe the child in that setting, and talk with the early childhood educators. This should be encouraged as part of the transition process.”**  
(Transition to School Guidelines for Early Intervention Providers, 2014, p.11)

Early Intervention caseworkers have at times made decisions for parents without giving them all the information or showing them all their options. Specialist Schools are an appropriate option for some children. In some cases parents have not been informed that this could be a possibility for their child. To

withhold this information from parents is unfair. Even if the parent chooses the mainstream option, at least they have been allowed to make that choice themselves and the choice they make will be well informed. Parents should also be made aware of all available funding options that could be applied for upon starting school. It is alarming for them to think, that as soon as their child starts school the funding they currently have finishes.

*“No I didn’t show the parent our local specialist school, I feel that he has more potential than that.”* (EI caseworker)

Prior to school entry, the decision whether ORS funding will be applied for, rests with the supporting educational agency support worker. Children who are eligible for High ORS can have an application submitted six months prior to their school start date and other ORS applications can be made four months prior to them starting school. A successful ORS application means the child will receive specialist teacher, teacher aide support and a small amount each term to cover any needed resources.

For some children, it can be determined at an early stage, that an application for ORS funding will be made. For others, there can be uncertainty as to whether an application will be successful or not. At times the early childhood caseworker makes the choice not to apply for ORS. However, it is important they do not make this decision on their own. Once again relationships and communication are vital and the views of parents, early childhood and other agencies are really important. If a child has developmental delays, the determined cause of those delays should not influence whether or not an ORS application is made. If a child will meet the criteria at that stage in their life, then an ORS application should be made. To say the child has potential, or the reason for their developmental delays is environmental should not be used as a reason to not apply for ORS funding. The child’s environment, without serious intervention, is not likely to change quickly. The neural pathways that have been damaged enough to cause those delays in the first place are not going to mend overnight, or quickly. It is pure speculation that a child may or may not make accelerated progress once they start school.

*“From the time children are born, their brains develop in response to their interactions with the environment. Stress, neglect and abuse can all damage a child’s cognitive development - sometimes permanently. Neglect that takes the form of decreased stimulation can result in a child who will struggle to learn. An infant’s brain has neural pathways - physical structures that are strengthened in response to activities in the environment. If there is little or*

no stimulation in a child's environment, the neurons, or brain cells, in these pathways wither and die", according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Beth Greenwood. Does Lack of Stimulation Affect Cognitive Development in Children? <https://living.thebump.com/lack-stimulation-affect-cognitive-development-children-15323.html>

For adults who work with children, it is important to recognize that "nature" and "nurture" are not parallel tracks. Instead, the tracks are woven together and influence each other's pathways in ways that may vary greatly depending on the individual child. The adaptations that occur as a result of these mutual interactions mean that the early experiences and early learning environments that adults provide can affect all domains of human development.

(Klengel et al., 2013; Mehta et al., 2013)

*"I didn't have any idea about the ORS process, it was never explained to me, and it was never applied for. Obviously because the IT either didn't think he was eligible for it, or she didn't want to do it. Now the school are writing one."* (Parent)

Going through the ORS application can be an unpleasant experience and a stressful time for parents. A written ORS application is made in the negative, it is all about what the child cannot do and can be a bit depressing for a parent to have to come to terms with. Involving parents in the process and advising parents how the finished application will read, is very important. However, it is important to try and be as positive about it as possible, and not scare parents to the point that they don't want the application to be made.

*"I was really freaking out about the ORS process. The Early Intervention teacher from Learning Support had built it up to be a really negative and unpleasant process. People knew I was anxious. The Principal at my child's school talked to me and said, that we just needed to go through this process to get what my child needs and deserves to support him at school and the ORS application is just a bit of paper, and once it's away I would never have to look at it again. This put it all in perspective for me and made me feel much better."* (Parent)

Some schools opt to use 'Outreach Teachers'. The funding schools receive for their ORS students is transferred to the Specialist school who employs those teachers. In all identified instances, this had been a very successful partnership.

*"The Outreach teachers are highly skilled and dedicated to our special needs children. They are well planned and organised. They take such a load off our shoulders, by organising and leading IEP meetings, ensuring we have the appropriate resources and making sure everyone knows what's happening. Their communication is great, they keep us all really well informed of what is happening"*

*with individual children. We have six ORS funded students, so it is a big job.” (Principal)*

“Once a student is in ORS, their funding stays with them throughout their time at school. Around 1 percent of students receive this support at any one time.”

ORS has two levels of need: ‘very high needs’ and ‘high needs’. To meet ORS criteria, students must have either ongoing extreme or severe difficulty in any of the following areas:

- learning
- hearing
- vision
- physical
- language use and social communication

or moderate to high difficulty with learning, combined with very high or high needs in any two of the following areas:

- hearing
- vision
- physical
- language use and social communication

Students are eligible when they meet one of the nine ORS criteria

Overview of Ongoing Resourcing Scheme, Ministry of Education

<https://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education/ors/>

(Last reviewed: 12 June 2019)

*“There is always great excitement when an ORS application has been approved. Then we go through the process of assessing student need against a Rating Scale which will determine how many support hours they will receive. This then goes to a moderating panel who make the decision. The number of hours allocated never seems to be enough to meet the need.” (School)*

Once funding has been approved, schools receive it in a bulk amount inclusive of GST. They can then use it in whatever manner they wish. Schools are then required to pay the 15% GST, from the net amount, which has been calculated at the current hourly rate of \$20.70. This instantly diminishes the net amount, so there is not enough funding to pay the teacher aide at that hourly rate. Unfortunately, the GST cannot be claimed back by schools because it is being paid out in salaries. Schools also have to pay Teacher Aide holiday pay, which is not included in the net amount. This system definitely places a financial burden on schools who have large numbers of ORS and other funded students.

Most schools believe that the number of hours an ORS child receives is never enough to cover need at the best of times, and will ensure that they are given the allocated support hours, by topping up the funding. One school principal chose to deduct the GST and the teacher aides holiday pay from the amount their ORS children received. This significantly diminished the number of hours each of those children were entitled to. This didn't seem to be common practice, as most educators believe the child recipient needs and deserves the benefit of every cent of funding they have been allocated. Parents of these children were extremely upset at that outcome. One parent commented,

*"We were so pleased when he got ORS and then got more hours than we were told he probably would. After a year at school, suddenly three and a half hours a week was deducted from my son's time, because of GST and Teacher Aide holiday pay. No one told us that had happened and we couldn't work out why his teacher aide wasn't with him as much as in his first year at school. We had a very long battle with the Principal, but finally, I think he got sick of us, he gave back two of the deducted hours. My son is still getting less support than what we were told he was initially allocated."* (Parent)

The process should be consistent across all schools. Individual children should not be disadvantaged because one school is cash strapped or the Principal makes a business decision which does not consider the needs of the child or for that matter, the child's teacher and other children in the class.

Rarely is a child covered for a full school day, which is thirty hours a week, and that doesn't account for children being brought to school prior to a 9.00 am start time. It seems odd, that a child who is assessed as having very high needs for 23 hours of the week, then has the ability to function independently for the seven hours plus they are not funded for. Once again this puts huge pressure on school resources if they have to top this time up, especially if the school has a number of ORS students.

*"We have a Very High ORS child who be dropped off by the Go Bus taxi, any time between 8.30 am and 8.55 am. Because the taxi driver isn't allowed to undo or do up his seat belt or help him out of the car, we have to have someone waiting for the taxi to turn up each day to get him out of the taxi and then at the end of the day get him into the taxi and buckle him up. T... needs to be supervised every minute of the day. He has five hours teacher time and eighteen hours teacher aide time. For us, there is a shortfall of seven hours funding which we have to find for him, and that's not counting the time he arrives before school starts".* (School)

Along with a specialist teacher, funded children will receive teacher aide support. It is really important that the teacher aide has good guidance, a programme to work to and is trained in how to support the learning of special needs students. ORS children who have communication difficulties get support from the Learning Support Communications Therapist. Unfortunately, it seems that this resource is not always adequately resourced, and these children, their families and the school, very rarely see the specialist. Teachers and teacher aides working with children who have LLI funding get specific training, but this doesn't seem to happen for ORS students, unless specifically requested by schools. Unfortunately, some teacher aides, are not meeting the specific needs of children in their care, because they have not had appropriate training and are not following a programme developed by a specialist.

*M... is supposed to have ongoing speech therapy as he cannot talk. However, the visits by the Speech Language therapist don't seem to happen very often. I thought they were supposed to keep in contact with me so we could support the programme that had been put in place when he started school, but I've only heard from them once and M... is nearly eight". (Parent)*

Sometimes because there is inadequate funding, schools may 'piggy back' children on to others who have funding. Teachers may utilise a teacher aide who is funded for a specific child, to support other aspects of their programme and other children in the class. This is not an ideal thing to do, but unfortunately is driven by insufficient support, funding and large class sizes.

*"Although my daughter has a teacher aide, I often hear from other parents that they are pleased their child is in my daughter's class because her teacher aide can also help their child. This upsets me, as I know my daughter needs the support of her teacher aide, who is often working with other children. My child has difficulty doing anything unsupported, so I wonder what she is doing while the teacher aide is with other children." (Parent)*

Life is challenging enough for children with additional needs, so it is important they receive all possible support available to them. Sustaining their self esteem and having positive experiences in the classroom is vital so they can make the best possible progress and continue to feel good about themselves. Being accepted and supported by their peers and the school community impacts hugely on the way they will function in the school environment. Children learn from and copy the behaviour of adults around them. It is therefore critical that adults model empathy, understanding, patience and tolerance toward children with additional needs.

## **Conclusion**

Even though each situation is different and more often than not, highly complex for each individual, transition is most effective when the needs of individual children are met and appropriate support is given to parents who may be intimidated by or have difficulty understanding the enrolment process. Professionals involved and parents should have regular meetings, leading up to school entry and review meetings should continue after the child has started school. These meetings need to identify if the needs of the child and family are being met, what progress is or has been made and where to next. Parents should be involved in any planning alongside agencies, early childhood and school staff. Leading up to school entry, there should be ample opportunity for school visits so the child can become familiar with the school environment. None of these things are difficult to do or organise, but it is the way they are executed which is the key to success. It needs to be a team effort with open communication, commitment to the plan and the opportunity to build positive relationships.

(Burgon & Barwick, 2013; Burgon with Walker, 2013; docketts et al. 2011; Ministry of Education, 20007, 2013; Peters, 2010)

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