Transition to School: A Principles Approach

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ABSTRACT

With the onset of National Standards, early childhood teachers may feel increasing pressure to adopt formal literacy and numeracy instruction methods in order to prepare children for school. In terms of children's preparation for school, adults need to think beyond the acquisition of academic skills. This article argues that such thinking should encapsulate relationships, children's feelings of power and safety, the family and concepts of the 'whole child'. The following article considers early childhood and school settings as culturally defined spaces by using the image of the woven mat. It is argued that the four principles of the early childhood curriculum provide an effective framework for teachers in schools and early childhood centres to use in assisting children and their families to move from early childhood education to school.

INTRODUCTION

In New Zealand, entrance to school is seen as a rite of passage. For some children the very idea of beginning school can take on almost mystical qualities. An image of the woven mat is an apt one when considering the transitions that young children make from their early childhood setting to school. In Early Childhood Education (ECE), the national early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2006) represents the mat on which we all may stand (May, 2002). But what happens when children go to school? Are they required to get off the mat? Is there a pathway between the ECE mat and the school mat? Perhaps, for the lucky, the mats may be so closely intertwined that transitioning to school just feels like standing on a different part of the same mat.

Conceptually, the idea of mats as defined cultural spaces is over-simplistic, but it can be used to illustrate the multitudes of relationships that schools and ECE centres share with each other and the practices that encapsulate how these relationships might impact on children's transitions.

When the mats not only stand together but also share some of the same strands perhaps the transition from one to the other can be made in a gentle way by children. When they stand apart, we are asking children to undertake a significant leap of faith in order to jump from the security of one into the relative 'unknown' of the other.

At the very heart of the ECE mat, *Te Whāriki*, are the four principles: empowerment, family and community, holistic development and relationships (Ministry of Education, 2006). When thinking about transitions between early childhood and school in relation to these principles it is evident that not only are children making the transition but their families are also. Many teachers may anecdotally note that parents request formal activities within ECE as a method of 'preparing' children for school (and possibly National Standards). Perhaps this belief that it is 'important to parents' contributes to the seeming increasing emphasis on very formal 'school-like' provision of literacy and numeracy activities in some ECE centres that we have noticed within our own networks. In contrast to this approach, we believe that it is through the foregrounding of the principles of *Te Whāriki*, rather than through 'school imitation' activities, that authentic and meaningful connections are woven between the whāriki (mat) of ECE and the whāriki of school.

This article is based on our reflections upon the principles of *Te Whāriki* and how they might relate to practices surrounding transitions to school. We acknowledge that the four principles are complex and interwoven, but for our purposes here, we have 'teased them apart' just a little. The following sections explore each principle in the context of transition experiences.

EMPOWERMENT/ WHAKAMANA

Children's experiences when transitioning to school are important. Children who make the transition to school smoothly are most likely to experience a higher degree of academic success as well as finding that socialising with peers and teachers comes more easily (Dockett & Perry, 2003). When children feel secure and empowered in the process of entering school and see their experience as positive, it could be argued that their need for emotional safety and wellbeing are most likely being met. This is significant because when children feel safe at school, they may be more likely to exhibit behaviours that indicate *engagement-with-learning* to the primary school teacher and they may also feel more empowered to engage in classroom interactions, ask questions and share their ideas. Dockett and Fleer (1999) write:

> Children who feel safe are more likely to take risks: more likely to ask questions when they don't know the answer, more likely to persist in their search for answers and more likely to share this with others, including the adult. (p. 197)

A key component to empowerment is seeking children's views on what is important when they transition to school, as well as asking their families. Research that is concerned with families' voices is discussed later in this paper. What is important to note here, though, is that the very act of consulting meaningfully with the various stakeholders involved in the transition is

potentially empowering and beneficial. Interestingly, when children are asked about transitioning to school many appear to highlight the importance of learning the rules. Dockett and Perry (2002) liken this to adults' desire to understand their environment when beginning a new job. The difference, they note, is children's relative lack of power when it comes to negotiating those rules. In the same study, Dockett and Perry also found that children may underestimate the time it takes to learn to read and write. One child suggested that he might learn to read in between six to twelve days. Part of empowering children when starting school may be assisting them to develop an expectation for the *realities* of what school can offer in terms of learning new skills and rules (Dockett & Perry, 2002).

Pere (1994) writes that 'empowerment' is where people believe and feel that they have their own power. In the context of transition to school, this would suggest that practices concerned with empowerment would take an individualised approach to children's feelings of safety, as well as those of the child's family (i.e., avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach). Positive relationships and effective communication would be foregrounded, as would be positioning the child as competent and capable. This view is corroborated by Dockett and Perry (2003).

RELATIONSHIPS/ NGĀ HONONGA

There are a multitude of relationships involved when a child transitions to school, for example: between the child and their new teacher; the family and the teacher; the family and the child; the centre and the school; the centre and the family; the child and other children (both at school and centre); and, the family and other families. On a very basic level the interweaving of relationships is dynamic and complex. We discuss some of the various relationships in the next sections, but for now, we wish to focus on the relationships of the transitioning child with other children.

Moore (2001) sought to understand children's experiences of transitioning to school as well as explore some of the strategies that could be implemented to mediate children's concerns about their experience. The research spanned many months, which suggested that a 'transition' is not limited to the few weeks before a child turns five years old and the few weeks after they begin school. For the children who participated in the study, the greatest anxiety they held about assimilating into the culture of the school was to do with peer relationships. 51% of the children studied reported incidents of bullying in their first few weeks of school, frequently by another member of their class. Among this group, they were able to resolve issues independently of a teacher approximately 39% of the time. A project was introduced that made explicit what bullying behaviour was and strategies that might be used by children to counteract it. Afterwards, the transitioning children were able to resolve problems independently from an adult 95% of the time by their 24th week at school (Moore, 2001).

Of the transitioning children in the study, 86% reported anxiety about friendships. The anxieties included not finding anyone to play with at lunchtime, not knowing how to integrate into particular groups, being able to sustain friendships for only very short periods of time (e.g., lunchtime), and having a peer refuse to play with them. Strategies that the primary school teacher

implemented appeared to have a positive effect – again by week 24. Some of the strategies included buddying-up children just before the bell rang for breaks, adult facilitation of outside games, and active role modelling of group integration strategies. Incidentally, the strategy of integrating into a group by asking, 'Can I play with you?', appeared to be frequently unsuccessful (Moore, 2001). Brent Mawson has noted from his own research into collaborative play that for many children, being willing to accept any role delegated to them by the desired group may be an effective entry strategy (personal communication, 20 June 2008). Research like that of Moore's (2001) and Mawson's can inform the type of strategies that teachers can assist children in developing in order to experience socially rewarding interactions.

Teachers also played an important role when children experienced persistent exclusion of peers. When teachers assigned classroom management roles to this group, evidence indicated that there was a significant increase in the frequency of positive interactions with others at playtimes. Children also appeared to develop more friendships as a result (Moore, 2001).

Breaking into the play cultures of school can be an isolating and difficult time for many children. This can be true even when the child has existing strong relationships with other children before starting school. Norris (2001) noted that very few friendships of the boys that she studied survived the transition from kindergarten to school. The research by Norris (2001), Moore (2001) and Dockett and Perry (2003) strongly indicate that those of us who are involved in transitions must be prepared to listen attentively and be responsive to children as they grapple to understand their social experiences. There must also be an onus on schools to acknowledge peer interactions and playtimes as extremely powerful sources of anxiety for children and to find innovative ways to support children through this – not only in their first few weeks, but rather, over time. The importance of this is further emphasised when we realise that academic progress appears to come more easily for those children who have positive social interactions at school (Moore, 2001).

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY/ WHĀNAU TANGATA

The dynamic between teachers and families can be highly complex, regardless of whether it is an early childhood setting or a school that is under consideration. According to Ramsay, Hawk, Harold, Marriott and Poskitt (1993) authentic consultation and inclusion of families is imperative not only during a child's transition into school, but throughout their education. It is only through ongoing communication that we can come to understand the child holistically and across contexts. It is also through communication that we can understand families' aspirations for their children.

Within the authors' networks there appears to be a strong belief from some early childhood teachers that parents' aspirations include formalised literacy and numeracy activities in order to prepare children for school. This phenomenon was also noticed by Peters (2002). There is very little research that elicits parents' views about this in New Zealand. Interestingly, however, the findings of Dockett and Perry (2003) overwhelmingly indicated that for Australian parents the most important thing was for children to be socially adjusted (i.e., to 'fit in') and to understand the rules of school. Knowledge and skills were notably low on their list of priorities. This begs the question about the

extent to which *all* families are regularly and authentically consulted with about their aspirations for their child during their transition to school.

When we were thinking about the early childhood teachers' responsibilities in enhancing children's transition to school, we also wondered whether this should also transcend to practices that may enhance transitions for families. There is a developing body of research about the challenges of building relationships and communication between school teachers and families. Ramsay *et al.* (1993) noted that it can be structurally difficult for schoolteachers to build relationships with families and vice versa; however, families can actively utilise certain strategies to build rapport with teachers.

Ramsay *et al.* (1993) explained that teachers appeared to hold as much anxiety about communicating with families as families did about communicating with teachers. Some teachers felt that families approached them only when there was a problem. This may mean that they unwittingly began interactions with defensive body language, which in turn could be upsetting and off-putting for the families. Other common problems cited by Ramsay *et al.* (1993) included expectations of immediate responses by teachers to family members. This is something we have noticed within our own teacher-parent relationship. Natalie Plowman makes it her endeavour to follow-up concerns shared by families, but sometimes she needs time to reflect upon them, especially as she is frequently balancing a multiple number of concerns, needs and requests at any given time. By anticipating that there will be a hiatus between information shared by the parent and an in-depth response provided by the teacher, frustration and anxiety can be mediated between both sides of the partnership. For the teacher, it means that s/he can keep any negative default settings in check until s/he has had time to fully process the information shared.

Effective interpersonal strategies, such as 'anticipate a wait before the teacher responds', can be shared with families – hopefully not in a way that is aimed to institutionalise them before they have even begun school but to assist them in beginning to process the cultural shifts that they will experience when they and their child makes the transition to school. Other strategies that were inferred by Ramsay *et al.* (1993) included for families to find ways to contribute to school life on their own terms, and to find out what teaching 'was like' for teachers in order to build empathy. When teachers feel supported by parents they may find that communication about the 'difficult stuff' is easier to engage with. In a sense it may seem that we are advocating for a certain level of 'coaching' for transitioning families in regards to working with school teachers. It is important to note that we fully acknowledge that the responsibility still lies with school teachers to proactively seek and nurture connections with family members.

HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT/ KOTAHITANGA

Holistic development is concerned with not only viewing the many interwoven dimensions of the child but with also conceptualising the child across time and within relationships. Even so, it is interesting to consider how often our practices around transition to school are aligned with a siloed approach rather than a holistic one. Peters (2003) notes that when we are focused on school readiness as being about skills, such as naming colours and reciting the alphabet, we are adopting a deficit perspective of the child's skills

and knowledge. In other words, we are attempting to 'fill the gaps' between what the children appear to know and what we think they should know for school. This can cause anxiety for children and their families.

In Peters' (2002) interviews of school teachers, many stated that their preference would be for early childhood teachers to foreground social, self-help and perseverance skills. The school teachers felt that parents rather than school teachers drove concerns about academic performance. Unfortunately, the assessments at school may give parents the impression that literacy and numeracy are the most significant skills (Peters, 2002). This is probably further compounded by the introduction of National Standards for literacy and numeracy. In regards to 'school readiness', Ledger, Smith and Rich (1998) remind us that it is a term that is institutionally constructed rather than a universal truth.

Another area where 'holism' could be reflected on is the practices that separate the transition to school from the child's experience until they have nearly reached school age. Dockett and Perry (2003) warn against this practice, saying that effective transitions entail 'long-term individualised transition to school programmes, not just short-term orientation sessions' (p. 32). These effective long-term programmes, however, will ideally avoid separating literacy activities into a formal silo; for example, having a set time for worksheets and other highly teacher-directed literacy experiences. Shuker (2001) writes that:

> Children's knowledge about literacy develops through activities and learning experiences that are interwoven across the different … areas (p. 23) … [and that] language and literacy goals are achieved best in the context of meaningful literacy experiences. Early Childhood teachers need to integrate challenging literacy experiences with high quality play. By weaving the two together they can ensure that the child's overall skill and concept learning and development are nurtured sufficiently for them to become successful readers when they begin formalised instruction. (p. 26)

Formal instruction in early childhood might arise out of a desire to ensure that a child is ready for school. Interestingly, adults' beliefs about a child's readiness bear no correlation to their actual experience of transitioning (Norris, 2001). Emphasis should be placed on protecting children's sense of positive identity as they seek to explore, 'Who am I within this new place and within this group of new people?'. It is important that we take note of the fact that children who are transitioning will likely pay close attention to the implicit messages that are transmitted through classroom and playtime rituals, rules and practices. It is of no surprise that for children, the key thing to focus on when transitioning is learning the rules of school (Dockett & Perry, 2003).

The implicit messages within rules and practise may inform children of how they are viewed within their new setting. For example, Norris (2001) observed that the social structures within some classrooms meant that the teacher reprimanded boys more frequently than girls and also spent less time interacting with the boys. The boys within Norris' study were keen to explore their identities in relation to masculinity but were frequently 'pulled up' for their highly gendered play in ways that girls were not. Similarly, some children found difficulties in managing the physical aspect of transitioning (Norris, 2001). For

children used to free play and a great deal of physical activity, it must seem a significant and difficult shift to move to a structure that places controls on when you can go outside to play. Where children are experiencing a dissonance with the rules, structures or practices of school it is possible that the implicit messages that are received place the locus of the 'problem' squarely on the shoulders of the child. While we have no answers to address this issue, it is certainly one worthy of further in-depth exploration and reflection by school and early childhood teachers alike.

Another aspect to holism and transitions is moving beyond acknowledging merely the academic dimension of the child and considering how might the spiritual sides of the child be nurtured. How is the transition celebrated and marked? One of the authors recently heard a story of one school that holds a powhiri (a Māori welcome) to welcome new children *and their families* to their new class. The following quote from Reedy (2003) highlights why acknowledging the multiple facets of children is important:

> The child was, and still is, the incarnation of the ancestors: te kanohi ora, 'the living face'. The child was, and still is, the living link with yesterday and the bridge to tomorrow: te taura here tangata, 'the binding rope that ties people together over time'. The child is the kāwai tangata, the 'genealogical link' that strengthens whanaungatanga, 'family relationships', of that time and place. The child is also te ukaipo, 'the favoured, the special'. The child is also the repository of the teachings of yesterday, the enhancement of the dreams of today, and the embodiment of the aspirations for tomorrow – the hope and survival of the family.   (p. 58)

Holism may also encompass not only the school and families but also the ECE setting in a more integrated and interwoven way. Much has been written about the importance of communication between the ECE teachers and those of the school. Norris (2001) writes:

> Improved communication between early childhood and school teachers would assist children in their transition. The gulf between the two sectors is a systemic problem, related to historical and philosophical divisions between compulsory and non-compulsory education in Aotearoa/ New Zealand. Who then, should be responsible for the transition to school?   (p. 26)

She goes on to cite Simpson (1997), who asks: 'Why isn't it called transition from early childhood?'. Our combined transition practices must protect the child's sense of themselves as active learners, risk takers and competent, contributing people. Part of this surely includes listening to the children themselves. Dockett and Perry (2002) remind us that we cannot improve education unless we listen to those who are experiencing it.

CONCLUSION

As ECE people, we see transition visits that are often highly successful but they are not by any means an indication of how the child's actual transition into the school will occur (Norris, 2001). What are our obligations in preparing children and their families for the 'longer haul' of transitioning over many months, as well as the challenges inherent in transitioning to school without causing them greater anxiety? McNaughton (1998) asks whether we have in place ongoing methods for sharing our understandings after the transition is made. As every child, every family and every community is different this is a challenging question to answer. We believe that the four principles of *Te Whāriki* are a sound starting place for reflecting upon effective and responsive strategies for both ECE settings and schools. The image of woven mats is one that inspires questions about where cultural differences at an organisational level are positioned in relation to each other. Through the conceptual weaving of the four principles with notions of transitions we believe that the move from ECE to school can be viewed as highly complex and requiring thought beyond preparation through acclimating children to formal instruction. With 'compassion, reassurance and consistency' the transition can be an exciting and positive one (Howard, 2006, p. 238).

Waiho i te toipoto, kaua i te toiroa

Let us keep close together, not wide apart

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