

Early Education



Volume 66 Spring / Summer 2020

- Teacher Led Innovation Round 3
- Teacher Led Innovation Round 4
- Peer learning in ECE
- Privatisation in ECE
- Children, families in prison and ECE practice
- Reflexes and support early learning



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Contributions

Contributions of articles and photos are welcome from the early childhood community.

Early Education welcomes:

- Innovative practice papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words and up to five keywords.
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- Think pieces with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Commentaries on management matters with a maximum of 1500 words.
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Transition to school strategies

Strengthening our practice to support whānau and tamariki

Kaye Hoffman and Hazel Lam Sam

Introduction

In 2017, we were privileged to be invited to participate in a Teacher Lead Innovation Fund (TLIF) project centred on strengthening assessment practices that support transition. As part of that process, we examined the agency and role of whānau. This article outlines the implications of those findings on our design for an effective transition process. The research brief was to design a tool that would capture and communicate information to the primary school about transitioning tamariki. We reviewed literature to see what was currently in use, both in New Zealand and internationally. We elected to cover the six months prior and six months following the move to primary school. We selected a cohort of 10 3-year-olds with whom to trial the process. Key stakeholders from each group were interviewed and the research team used reflection and analysis tools to identify shifts in practice.

We quickly realised that we had a unique opportunity to construct a process for transition that actively involved families from start to finish. Our goal was to find a way to document children's learning that truly strengthened partnership in the transition process. We wanted a transition tool that was relevant to individual children without being a tick box of skills and attitudes. Over the research period, we refined documentation, interactions and practice to enable whānau, teachers and tamariki to identify shifts in their understanding of what transition meant for them personally.

While we are still gathering data from the last of our research cohort to head off to school the results thus far have been positive. We believe that the transition

process we have developed is a practical medium for strengthening relationships between whānau and both early childhood and primary education sectors. We will provide an overview of the research process, outcomes and implications in the sections that follow.

A critical perspective on transition

Transition needs to be looked at with a holistic lens. It is not one moment in time; it is a timeline of processes around communication. In particular it is a process of effective and proactive, robust conversations between whānau, the child, early childhood teachers and the primary school community (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016; Morton et al., 2018; Woodhams, 2012).

The assessment focus for this study was underpinned by *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017a). The research from the outset was primarily concerned with measuring the extent to which the child's mana (and the mana of their family) was protected in any assessment strategy that would be developed for the transitioning child. The principle of Empowerment in *Te Whāriki* of Empowerment was central to the process.

The team had a clear understanding of what the 'transitional period' constituted, informed by the academic literature, informal group discussions and personal experience. Further, with the 2017 release of the revised *Te Whāriki. He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa, Early Childhood Curriculum* (Te Whāriki), with its reduced number of learning outcomes and better learning links to *The New Zealand Curriculum, 2007* [NZC], (Ministry of Education, 2007a) we believed that it was timely to review our understanding of what constitutes valued learning and achievement for children nearing

school age. We also wanted to review the extent to which our understanding about valued learning was shared by primary teachers, parents and whānau and reflected in the children's own aspirations and goals. This strengthened our belief in the value of one-to-one conversations with parents and teachers during this period, and the power of verbal sharing of children's progress. (Davis, 2015; Hobbs, 2014; Ministry of Education, 2014; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005).

Research clearly indicates that an ideal transition involves good understanding of the compulsory sector curriculum, excellent relationships between schools, teachers, parents and tamariki who were prepared both emotionally and cognitively for the change in their educational environment (Curran, 2015; Ferris & Moyle, 2018; Peters, 2010; Seligman, 2011). A longer transition process (Ministry of Education, 2014; Powell, 2005) and wrap around, innovative ways of interacting with children and families, such as using digital media (Peters et al., 2009), will allow more scope to tailor individual transition processes that do not cause additional workload. We discuss the research process and our key findings in the following sections.

Methods

The project design had five sequential phases. Each began and ended with a group meeting. The summary report from each phase informed the impending inquiry cycle. Our expert researcher, Dr Rachel Williamson-Dean, interviewed three different stakeholders (Kindergarten teachers, Primary teachers, Family/Whānau) in Phases II, III and IV respectively. Although the children were also stakeholders they were not formally interviewed. Instead, their contribution to the project was recorded on their own self-assessment sheets (*2 Stars & a Wish*). These documents encouraged tamariki to reflect on their strengths and interests over time, to speak their mind, and really become involved in their own learning and transition journey.

As we moved through the phases the team completed a project-specific rubric designed to monitor and evaluate teacher practice and student learning. This rubric was aligned with the assessment intent expressed in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017a) and the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) and with reference to the Standards for the Teaching Profession (Ministry of Education, 2017b) and the Education Review Office indicators (2016).

The research team was open and eager to make changes to our existing transition processes, as we were inspired by our readings, but it was important to wait for feedback from the primary teachers and whānau before we did so. There was considerable agreement between parents and teachers on the skills and abilities that students should have when transitioning from kindergarten to a primary school. These were summarised under the headings social, emotional, cultural, and physical competence, dispositions and self-regulation.

Phase V of the project involved dissemination of our findings and it was around this time that we began to receive a lot of feedback from whānau in our selected cohort about their children's participation at school. For instance, Parent P wrote: "The transition period is amazing and it's just wonderful to have captured some moments pre- and post-school commencement and seeing the network of all those kindy kids, our bright stars of the future".

In the six-month period following a child's transition to school, the research team actively engaged with past students and whānau. We found it easy to do in digital form and because many of the families lived nearby, we would see them when we did school visits. We also noted an increasing frequency of families dropping in to talk about their children's engagement with primary school.

Actions that engage whānau in the transition process

As the project evolved, we acknowledged that, in order to sustain whānau participation, an effective approach to transition needed time and commitment from teachers. Weaving the key factors of a successful transition together was not always easy; challenges we faced included time-pressure and ratio restrictions. For whānau, similar issues arose with limits on their time, work commitments and language barriers. Families with English as a second language (ESOL) had much to contribute to their child's transition experience, but sometimes did not understand the process because they came from different education systems. We needed exceptional relationships with our main feeder schools so that whānau were getting accurate, current information. We kept documentation simple and found that the more we involved whānau, the more supportive the network became, and communication was aided by utilising other ESOL families as translators and, with care, Google Translate. To engage families in the transition process we used a range of strategies

that research indicated would give the best results. These strategies are described next.

Face-to-face

Honest, empathetic conversations with whānau about their child's learning builds a sense of trust. A supportive medium that strengthens wellbeing for children and staff is *kanohi a kanohi* (face-to-face) approach. Te Papapa Primary School, for instance, has an extremely successful Transition Teacher who uses this model with ECE teachers and families. This results in richer understandings and authentic partnerships. Peters (2010) emphasises that, particularly for Māori children, the relationships between everyone involved in the transition can have immense impact on the learning journey.

In our research we used this model in day-to-day interactions as well as setting aside time for a whānau hui and child assessments such as *2 Stars & A Wish*. Face to face time was central to the transition process. Discussions were undertaken in a quiet place, with a relaxed approach. It was a time to focus on supporting the child to articulate their shifts in learning and set themselves new goals.

Regular school visits

As part of our research process, we undertook to get to know our two main feeder schools—Oranga and Te Papapa Primary—better. Each school had a different transition process.

At Oranga Primary, we continued to have transition visits 2-3 times per term, where we would take a small group of children to the school who were transitioning over within the subsequent two terms. We would spend an hour in the new entrant classroom and in their outdoor environment. Our ratios allowed for two adults to eight children, which generally meant whānau accompanied the transition group so that the ratio remaining at kindergarten stayed within regulations. Participation in a primary classroom gave our children and parents an idea of what school is all about and was a chance for tamariki to catch up with old friends and for whānau to chat to the classroom teachers.

We did notice when a parent accompanied us on school visits their child would often act differently than when they were on their own. They were less likely to move out and explore the environment, choosing to stick closely to their parent. Our suggestion is that a balance should be achieved and at least some visits should be without whānau.

At Te Papapa Primary the Head of Junior School organises and runs the 'Little Learners' programme that starts six weeks prior to a child's school entry. The teacher either visits or emails the pamphlet with the dates, times and information about the Little Learners programme. We pass this information on to the relevant parents. The biggest difference with this unique programme is that it is a whānau approach in which parents, grandparents, or other family members can be 'transitioned' too. Whānau become familiar with the school programme and environment and get to know other whānau with children transitioning over the same period. We have noticed that the children that go through this programme are confident and enthusiastic and have no anxiety issues moving from kindergarten to school.

We did find that children who had older siblings in the school transitioned to school more readily than children who had not previously been exposed to a school environment. On school visits primary teachers remarked that the children involved in the research project seemed more at ease, adapted quickly to the new environment, and made quick progress in their school learning. The chance for children to experience for themselves what the classroom environment is like was important to their wellbeing within the transition process.

We discovered early on that communication between the school and ourselves required a single point of contact at each end. Otherwise, transition dates were missed, and critical pieces of information, such as parent information workshops, slipped under the radar. It also helped that there was one person in the kindergarten who was able to share back to the team and whānau the different programmes run by each school. Having said that, all teachers need to have the relevant facts to support and guide parents in this transition process.

Our research revealed that when it came to choosing a primary school there was many misunderstandings about the roles of kindergarten and school, and that word of mouth often spread rumour rather than reality. As De Candole (2013) notes, many parent decisions on school enrolment for their children are based on hearsay and external influences, rather than on accurate information. Like De Candole, we also noted that parents underestimated the time it took to research schools, do the required paperwork, and begin transition programmes with their children.

Set up a transition wall [photo of transition wall]

Making the transition process visible to whānau developed familiarity and created a culture of positive engagement with school. Families saw photos of tamariki engaged in the classroom and wider school environment as well as confidently walking to the school with their backpacks. They saw that going on a school visit is a strategy that was easy for them to replicate. Narratives about the school visits were shared on Storypark as well as on the Transition Wall. Parent voice was also shared this way and of particular significance were the visits back to kindergarten from parents and children who had already transitioned to school. These visits showed evidence of a strong, positive connection between ECE, primary and home.

Weekly planning that includes specific reference to transition

[Photo of whānau forms & what I want teachers to know form]

Knowing a bit about children before they start was something primary teachers were interested in, but all reported that portfolios took up too much time to read. We experimented with a range of documentation and settled on four key documents:

- *Whānau Hui*—a one-page form for whānau, which was filled in at the start of the transition period.
- *Two Stars & A Wish*—a self-assessment sheet completed around twice per term for each child.
- *Whānau Assessment* and *What I Want the Teachers at School to Know About Me*—a single sheet each for whānau and tamariki to be completed shortly before the school start date.

Both whānau and tamariki reported that these forms were useful; tamariki in particular enjoyed talking about what they could do at kindergarten and what their goals were. Children's experience of talking through *2 Stars & A Wish*, where they articulated two things they were good at and set a goal for themselves, increased their participation in the curriculum planning process. The Whānau Hui form served as a springboard for teachers to work alongside children and their families so by the time children went to school, they were confident in their ability to set and achieve goals, as well as recognize their strengths and learning capabilities.

The Whānau Assessment and 'What I Want the Teachers at School to Know About Me' forms similarly allow whānau and tamariki to actively reflect on children's learning while at kindergarten and look for a 'what next' step. It must be stressed that these forms are not about academic learning, rather they empower families to see tamariki as capable learners, thereby minimising anxiety about transition and increasing positive engagement with learning opportunities.

The child self-assessment, teacher knowledge of the child's strengths, interests and dispositions, alongside whānau feedback were condensed at a weekly meeting to generate a narrative on the child's learning. We continue to refine this type of document, but the process remains the same. It is a reflection on the child's learning, using input from previous assessments, learning stories, children's self-assessment and goal setting, as well as parental shared knowledge. Overall, parent response has been positive and relationships with parents are built on the interests of the child, and enacted into the curriculum. Whānau involvement in planning and regular discussion ensures that when the need arises for Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) or Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings with the school then our relationships with whānau are already well established.

Leadership

Our personal experience prior to and during this project suggests if there is not a teacher overseeing the whole transition process then often areas will be missed. This could be a rotational or term-based role. It is clear that a teacher is needed to run each transitional program to co-ordinate with parents and the head teacher/junior head of each school. Making sure transition happens smoothly requires committed teams who have clear understandings of their role in the process (Powell, 2005).

Measuring our practice against the rubric provided an opportunity for objective reflection on different aspects of the transition process. We were able to make adjustments in our pedagogy, documentation and approaches to whānau using research-based information. This resulted in robust, easy to use, assessment and planning practices which focused on the individual child.

Impact on learners and their whānau

The beneficial impact on learners and whānau in this research project was demonstrated through qualitative data collected during the six months subsequent to children moving into primary school. This data was gathered from personal conversations with parents and primary school teachers, as well as written conversations, via Storypark.

Parents commented that children were doing well in school, had fond memories of kindergarten, and that the transition process had been a positive experience overall.

Parent E said: “I think all the support the Kindy team have given her to transition to school has really shown as she has settled so amazingly well”.

Parent J said: “he has found his old friends to play with when they were in Kindy so he settled in quick ... Thank you so much for your support I really appreciate it”.

Whānau involvement in the transition process helps to spread the knowledge that being ready for school does not mean children need to acquire specific academic skills and knowledge. Teachers need to work together with tamariki and whānau to create an environment of communication, along with engaging, child-centred learning experiences to help children become—and see themselves as—competent lifelong learners. Whānau who transition alongside their children are a great asset to both the ECE and Primary sector.

Conclusion

The research project revealed that paper-based assessment tools are not often read, shared purposefully or contributed to by all parties. This finding suggests that ECE Services might be better to prioritise verbal conversations during the period of transition and allocate the time for them to take place. The challenge then is to enable resourcing for those conversations to take place because contributions from children and whānau are what make these conversations authentic.

Because each primary school takes a different approach to transition, ECE teachers have an important role in knowing about the differences and communicating them effectively to parents so that they can make an informed choice. Likewise, schools have a role in ensuring parent information

for new families is current, readily accessible and targeted to parents’ needs. We would go as far to suggest that schools consult with parents on how they find the starting school experience and include questions that incorporate the months leading up to arrival on their child’s first day. This would give schools a better indication of what parents are finding challenging and what could be improved. This suggestion is particularly relevant where communities have families who may not have a strong command of English or English literacy yet, or those families who come from a different country where the schooling system here may be very unfamiliar.

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