



Transition to School:

A Pilot Project

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ABSTRACT

The importance of a smooth transition into school for children who have received Early Intervention Services (EI) but have not received the Ongoing Reviewable Resource Scheme (ORRS) funding has become of increasing concern to stakeholders involved with these children. The EI and School Focus (SF) teams of the GSE in Pakuranga collaborated creatively to provide seamless support for this group of children, in an effort to affect positive short and long-term educational outcomes.

Practice paper

KEYWORDS

Transition to primary school, new entrants, early intervention, parent school relationship.

Introduction

This pilot project rose from the need in the Pakuranga area to facilitate a smooth transition into school for children who had received EI support in early childhood, were not ORRS funded, but had ongoing significant needs. There had been increasing concern, especially for those children with challenging behaviour, enrolling at school without any support. Historically there had been:

- complaints from principals
- parental stress
- children starting school without adequate preparation
- inadequate Special Education Grant funding
- inadequate EI paraprofessional transition support – 20 hours, was not enough for the necessary length of time to ensure an effective transition.

GSE's local "rule of thumb" was not to accept a referral for school children until they had been at school for one to three months to allow them time to settle in and then re-evaluate the situation. By that time the difficult behaviours had often escalated and school and family relationships had deteriorated.

RATIONALE FOR THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL PILOT PROJECT

Introduction

The ten-year Ministry of Education Strategic Plan, Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki (2002) involves the development of several key goals intended to ensure the continuous forward momentum of the early childhood sector. Recognition of the significance of Early Childhood Education (ECE) has occurred through a number of policy documents, and the Strategic Plan is no exception, presenting proposals concerned with increasing quality outcomes in early childhood education (van Dam, 2003).

A major principle represented in the plan is the promotion of collaborative relationships as part of the transition process from early childhood settings to school.

It is the intention of this article to outline the significance of the Transition to School project and to provide a rationale for the implementation of a quality "seamless" early childhood setting to school transition process, where constructive collaborative relationships are developed and the result for students is positive, long-term educational outcomes.

The Importance of Starting School

Starting school is an important time for young children, their families and educators. It has been variously described as 'one of the major developmental challenges faced by children during the early years', 'a key life-cycle transition both in and outside school', and as setting 'the tone and direction for a child's school career'. It is 'a turning point in a child's life and a rite of passage associated with increased status' (Dockett & Perry, 2001, p.1).

The Need for an Ecological and Holistic Model of Transition

Kindergarten is a context in which children make important conclusions about school as a place where they want to be and about themselves as learners vis-à-vis schools. If no other objectives are accomplished, it is essential that the transition to school occur in such a way that children and families have a positive view of the school and that children have a feeling of perceived competence as learners. (Bailey, 1999, cited in Dockett & Perry, 2001, pp.1-2).

In an ecological model, a child's transition to school can be understood in terms of the influence of, and intrinsic relationships between, a number of contexts, for example family, classroom, and community at any given time (Dockett & Perry, 2001). This model outlines and describes ways in which children influence the contexts in which they live and how these contexts impact experientially on those who inhabit them.

The Concept of Children as Lifelong Learners

Cullen (2002, cited in van Dam, 2003) promotes the view that when the transition focus is on the child's learning, misunderstandings about the differences between early childhood and school reduce, and the result is a more holistic vision of children as lifelong learners.

The Promotion of Collaborative Relationships within the Transition Process

Transition to school is fundamentally based on the establishment of a relationship between the home and school in which the child's development and learning is the key focus or goal (Dockett and Perry, 2001).

According to Mitchell (cited in van Dam, 2003), children inhabit and interact with their communities and hence it is vital that all education contexts should include a collaboration of communities i.e. improving the coordination between agencies and centres as well as promoting a coherence and continuity of the early years as young children make the transition from early childhood to school. This vision of coherence and co-ordination of education providers seeks to support learners with minimum disruptions during the transition process.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) vision of a seamless curriculum sets the challenge for early childhood education to make the links between *Te Whāriki* (strands and goals) and the key competencies of the national school curriculum by extending the *Te Whāriki* curriculum to the first years at primary school.

The vision of seamless learning communities involving multiple partners including parents, families, whānau, hāpu, iwi, people from the different Pacific Island groups, other ethnic communities related ministries and their agencies, is essential in providing an early childhood service that responds to the diversity of communities, families and their children (van Dam, 2003).

The Significance of the Pilot Project

The need for additional support in transition to school was documented in local service profile meetings in November 2004. The significance of this project should not be underestimated and may be seen to complement the goals of the strategic plan for early childhood, *Nga Huarahi Arataki* (Ministry of Education, 2002), which aims to better align policy in early intervention and schools for children and young people with special education needs by looking at what makes a smooth transition from early childhood to school.

Implementation overview:

1. The District Management Team agreed to allocate resources to the pilot as it aligned with the strategic direction of the district plan.
2. EI and SF teams developed the rationale, implementation process, criteria, application and parent consent forms.
3. All schools in the Pakuranga area were sent information on the pilot project with a covering letter explaining the initiative.
4. Following the referral process through the EI team, 11 children met the criteria and were offered support.
5. Once explained to the family and school, nine children were involved in the project and two schools opted to wait and see how the nominated children would settle in first.
6. Length of support varied depending on the enrolment date during Term 2, 2005, from three to 10 weeks. (See Appendix 1 for an overview flowchart of the transition process).

EVALUATION OF TRANSITION TO SCHOOL PILOT PROJECT

Evaluation Questionnaire on completion of project:

- i) Feedback on the pre-entry meeting:
 - a) It was an opportunity for open discussion with GSE and the family, around the child's specific learning needs and strengths.
 - b) Prior knowledge of the child was helpful in setting up systems of support, placement, and organising the teacher aide.
 - c) Pre-entry visits to the school were able to be arranged.
- ii) Feedback on fieldworker's transition planning:
 - a) The schools and parents reported an ease of contact with GSE personnel, and their level of support was appreciated.
 - b) Schools appreciated having the EI fieldworker involved and contacting the school for the length of time needed for successful transition to the next service.
 - c) The transition process was made much easier by having the EI fieldworker's support.
- iii) Monitoring during transition:

Both schools and parents appreciated the ongoing support and discussion which resulted in constructive, practical strategies for the classroom; they felt encouraged and took children's learning and developmental needs on board – One school developed a very detailed IEP and the necessary monitoring and data collection sheet.

- iv) Changes for future consideration:
 - a) Children starting later in the term would have benefited from a longer period of support.
 - b) The school would have liked copies of reports from specialists, formal assessments and the ORRS application.
- v) Examples of successful transition for the child:
 - a) Academic learning was boosted.
 - b) Settling into routines and general school systems happened quickly.
 - c) Teachers understanding of the child improved.
 - d) The child's self confidence increased and their anxiety was reduced.
 - e) Safety issues for a child were monitored more closely.
 - f) Transition allowed the child's needs to be met more successfully.
 - g) School visits prior to the child starting were successful.
 - h) Transition ensured that support targeted to specific needs was available.
 - i) The child's initial experience of attending school was a positive one.
- vi) Examples of successful transition for the teacher:
 - a) The process lessened teacher workload.
 - b) Responsibility was shared, especially around safety issues.
 - c) Teacher confidence improved – teachers felt supported and experienced an improved understanding of the child's needs.
 - d) Teachers experienced less disruption in the classroom.
 - e) The teacher had time to adequately prepare for the child and prepare the programme for the teacher aide.
- vii) Examples of successful transition for the school:
 - a) A more positive attitude developed towards the child.
 - b) Transition allowed a more positive integration process for the child.
 - c) There was increased awareness shown by other staff and they understood the need to plan for following year's placement.
 - d) The school did not need to resort to 'special measures' for the child, such as decreasing class numbers.
 - e) The child was successfully integrated with their peers and not singled out as different.
 - f) With a preventative plan in place, safety issues were addressed immediately.
- viii) Outcomes/next steps:
 - a) In a comparatively short time schools developed clear goals for the child and engaged the most appropriate support agency – GSE, RTLB, or determined that no further involvement was necessary.
 - b) The schools had taken over responsibility for the child.
 - c) Schools and teachers were willing to continue using 'visuals' for communication after seeing its effectiveness and the systems already set up.
 - d) Good communication was established with the families and was more likely to continue throughout the year.
- ix) Further comments from schools:
 - a) These comments were mostly related to the next step for the child's programming, however one school saw the transition programme as essential to ensuring that children with specific needs were transitioned into school as seamlessly as possible. They considered the pilot project had definitely been a huge step in the right direction and should continue.
 - b) Some schools now had a clear direction to access additional support for the child.
 - c) One school was confused about the EI teacher's connection to GSE and did not realise they were part of the Pakuranga GSE team.
- x) GSE Staff comments on the most valuable aspects of the project:
 - a) With some support available in class, the teacher was able to get to know the child.
 - b) The pressure on parents was eased.
 - c) Transition enabled the school focus team to get to know the child and understand issues prior to a behaviour referral being made to their team by the school.
 - d) Allowing a handing over period from EI to SF was a supportive process for parents.
 - e) The SF and EI teams spent time together discussing and setting realistic criteria so that the process they ended up with, worked.

GSE staff commented that the differences between this process and previous transitions were the relationships that developed as EI and SF teams worked together. Transitions were made easier by offering schools some in-class support for the children whose needs bordered on extra funding for learning, but who did not qualify for this, especially those who did not receive ORRS funding. They also noted that with this process the schools became much more involved and supportive of the child and family.

CONCLUSION

This project was received with great enthusiasm by both EI and SF at Pakuranga GSE. It proved to be an opportunity for collaborative practice and effected positive outcomes for the children and schools involved. Schools acknowledged the support as it allowed them to plan more effectively for these children. At the conclusion of the project, the schools indicated that they intended to continue their support of these children and their families.

The children who received support settled into school well and the parents were happy about the transition process. The project has certainly proved worthwhile to replicate in other areas and hopefully will lead to more research on a national level.

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AUTHOR PROFILES

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**APPENDIX 1
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL PILOT PROJECT**

Identification:

- Approximately three months prior to starting school.
- Initial brief discussion – child’s situation to be presented at the weekly Friday EI meeting and put forward for inclusion on their agenda.

Parental Consent:

- EI fieldworker to discuss the project with the parent/ caregiver.
- Consent form (a new one) explaining the project and giving written permission for a formal application to be made to the project.

Selection:

- EI fieldworker completes the application form.
- Project panel meet to consider applications – weekly time slot put aside. (Panel to be made up of EI & SF team representatives.)
- Eligibility – meets criteria (determination of support).
- Approval or decline letter to fieldworker and parents (school notified on confirmation of approval).
- If approved allocation forwarded to SF team (ideally the person has already developed a positive working relationship with the school).

Transition Meeting:

- Approximately 10 weeks prior to school entry.
- Transition meeting to take place, including parents, EI and SF field workers and school.
- Transition Plan or IEP from Early Childhood Centre developed and shared between all those involved. To include frequency of visits between EI and SF field workers and clarification of roles.
- Transition visits started.
- Teacher aide appointed by the school.

Starting School:

- Informal monitoring as agreed in transition plan – EI or SF fieldworker.
- End of week two evaluation of progress between parent, GSE and school.
- Introduction of data collection sheet for completion by teacher/ teacher aide.

Review Meeting:

- Dependent on individual child’s time scale for the project.
- Formal review meeting with family, school and GSE to evaluate transition process, success for child and recommendations.

Project Evaluation:

- Final review meeting of project with principal of school and GSE, using semi-structured interview.

KEY

- SF: School Focus Team
- EI: Early Intervention Team
- IEP: Individual Education Plan
- GSE: Ministry of Education, Special Education