Supporting the transition from early childhood education to school:

Insights from one Centre of Innovation project

SALLY PETERS, CAROL HARTLEY, PAT ROGERS, JEMMA SMITH and MARGARET CARR

KEY POINTS:

- The early childhood and school sectors often hope to collaborate, and their respective curricula allow for continuity of learning across the transition into school, but in practice there is often a disjunction.
- Mangere Bridge Kindergarten's Centre of Innovation project explored how this situation could be improved.
- Activities or artifacts (such as informational DVDs) that familiarised the children and their families with the school helped bridge the gap and give them a sense of belonging in the new context.
- Projects that were mutually interesting to preschool teachers, primary teachers, the children and their families helped foster relationships and closer connections.
- Picking up on the continuity of learning from preschool to school, such as through building on new entrants' preschool learning portfolios, supported children in the transition.

From 2005–8 Mangere Bridge Kindergarten carried out a Centre of Innovation research project exploring the transition between early childhood education and school. Three teacher-researchers, supported by two university research associates, developed and researched a range of strategies for supporting children's learning as the children and their families "crossed the border" between sectors. This article summarises some of the key findings from the project and provides insights into the ways in which the transition to school can be supported.

Introduction

This article presents some of the findings from a three-year (2005–8) Centre of Innovation research project at Mangere Bridge Kindergarten in Auckland. The Centre of Innovation programme, funded by the Ministry of Education, was designed to promote a deeper exploration of innovative teaching and learning processes already underway in early childhood services. The project built on a history of research by teachers at Mangere Bridge Kindergarten, which aimed to develop shared understandings between the early childhood and school sectors and support children's transition to school.

Earlier research in 20 schools and 27 early childhood services in Auckland had painted a disturbing picture of the relationship between early childhood and schools (Timperley, McNaughton, Howie, & Robinson, 2003; Timperley & Robinson, 2002). Despite a commitment to collaborate, teachers from the two sectors (early childhood services and school) had very different expectations of each other, and most were dissatisfied with the current arrangements. A recommendation from the study was that early childhood–school teacher relationships need to be more focused on how well they achieve the task of a satisfactory transition (Timperley et al., 2003).

Mangere Bridge Kindergarten's research was conducted at a time when the recently published *The New Zealand Curriculum* described an alignment between the strands of the early childhood curriculum and the key competencies at school (Ministry of Education, 2007), and the early childhood strategic plan, *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki*, recommended that both early childhood and school teachers should have an understanding of pedagogy and curriculum in the other sector (Ministry of Education, 2002). These documents provide a framework and commitment towards more positive transition arrangements than was reported by Timperley et al. (2003). Nevertheless, as researchers we were aware that these policy documents only set the scene for transitions. As Peters (2008) discussed, the 2007 *Curriculum* provides a potential bridge to support children's learning across sectors, but the strength of the bridge depends on the connections that are deliberately made by both early childhood and school teachers. This project has provided new insights into the nature of these connections and how they can be strengthened.

The New Zealand context

Although primary schooling is not compulsory until a child reaches six years of age, in New Zealand most children start school on the day they turn five. This means that any day of the week a child may be leaving an early childhood service and beginning school the next day. The first class at school is usually called the *new-entrant classroom*, and beginning pupils are called *new entrants*. The New Zealand system contrasts with the more common annual, biannual or termly intakes that occur elsewhere. Overseas, cohort entry means a focus on transition often forms a specific aspect of the school year cycle, while in New Zealand new-entrant teachers are continually overseeing school entry. For children and families the experience can be very individualistic in nature as a child may be the only one beginning school at that time.

The setting

Mangere Bridge Kindergarten is situated in a South Auckland suburb, with a strong community focus. The community is culturally and economically very mixed. In 2008 the centre's records showed the children's ethnicities as 36 percent Pākehā, 27 percent Māori, 20 percent Pasifika, 10 percent Asian or South-East Asian and 7 percent Other, which includes Australian, South African, British, Czech and Spanish.

The kindergarten is under the umbrella of the Auckland Kindergarten Association, with a parent/whānau group who support the running of the kindergarten. The kindergarten is sessional, with 43 children in the daily morning session programme and 43 children in the three afternoon sessions each week.

The majority of the children at the kindergarten transition to one of two local primary schools. Overall, 259 children transitioned to school during the three-year project.

Data gathering

The three teachers from the kindergarten (Carol, Pat and Jemma) took the role of teacher-researchers in this action research project supported by the two research associates (Sally and Margaret). A spiral approach was used, with spirals developed from previous spirals and following the research questions. This approach is necessarily complex and recursive (Graue & Walsh, 1998) as the researchers seek deeper meanings and understanding of the situation being studied. Multiple data collection methods were used to gather information from a range of perspectives. These included:

- *participant observation* in the kindergarten and in four new-entrant classrooms
- *interviews* with new-entrant teachers, deputy principals and principals in the two local schools (10 in total, three midway and seven at the end of the project)
- four *focus-group interviews* with five- and six-year-old children at school (16 children in total)
- *20 semistructured interviews* with near-five-year-olds
- seven *focus-group interviews* of parents in groups from each school that their child had transitioned to (17 parents in total)
- *developing case studies* that exemplify specific aspects of children's transitions (13 children).

Other data included:

- *Children's portfolios*, which included Learning Stories[1] DVDs, children's work and contributions and comments from families.
- *Teaching stories*[2] *and teacher reflective journals and field notes* in the kindergarten context.

Throughout, the project intended to foster a participatory research relationship, with children, families and schools as partners. Fasoli (2003) discusses seeing children as competent and helping to construct "the joint enterprise". Joint enterprise is a result of negotiation which takes into account the perspectives of the participants and, rather than being a goal, becomes embedded in practice. This was assisted by the fact that the teachers, rather than outside researchers, gathered the data from children and families. Listening to the views of children in a range of ways included discussions around photographs and portfolios and inviting their participation in making transition books, as well as interviews with individuals and groups. Children also contributed by selecting examples of photos to be included from Learning Stories, dictating stories and commenting on valued learning dispositions and key competencies from their points of view. Parents contributed family stories, "funds of knowledge" (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and feedback on a range of transition activities that were developed and evaluated during the project. Parents and children also initiated of some of the activities as teachers responded to suggestions that participants made in relation to the shared goal of improving transitions.

Summary of key findings

The details of the project and its findings are in the final report (Hartley, Rogers, Smith, Peters, & Carr, 2009). This article considers three key themes that emerged.

1. Fostering belonging and engagement in the new place

During the project many artefacts and activities were developed that helped to strengthen the bridge between sectors. These included:

- a DVD about the school made by a group of school children aged eight and nine in conjunction with the school and kindergarten communities
- a DVD of new-entrant teachers at kindergarten showing a phonics activity used in one of the schools
- the use of the children's kindergarten portfolios in the new-entrant classroom
- visits to school by children, teachers and parents/caregivers
- visits to kindergarten by school staff
- pamphlets developed by the kindergarten teachers for families, covering a range of related topics
- transition books about the school context utilising photographs taken in school visits, and school boards in the kindergarten displaying school teachers and the children who had, or were about to, join their class.

This list provides an insight into the range of developments that took place over the three years. Three of these are discussed below. In each case both the artefacts and the processes involved in developing them were designed to assist children and families in gaining information about school and fostering both children's and their families' sense of belonging in the school context.

It appeared that developing familiarity with the new setting assisted both children and families in gaining confidence. For example, the *Welcome to Mangere Bridge School* DVD introduced key features of the physical

Throughout, the project intended to foster a participatory research relationship, with children, families and schools as partners.

environment of the school, and some of the key staff members. It also included information the eight- and nine-year-olds who developed it thought was important, based on their own experiences and from talking to younger children—for example, not to run out of the school gates. As one of the teachers noted:

> I think the DVD was great because the kids did it themselves. It's not world-class in terms of editing and filming but we thought it was giving a true story about what was happening because we like to give our kids the responsibility of doing things. (Teacher E, final interview, p. 13)

Feedback from children and their families on their use of the DVD supported the notion that it was a valuable resource that assisted children and their families to prepare for the transition to school by becoming familiar with people and places at the school. For example:

> I liked [seeing] Mrs W's class ... I saw the boys and girls telling the teachers' names, the teachers' rooms and the teachers' [room] numbers. (Child interview, 23 November 2007)

> It was all helpful ... [to see] which one is the teacher, [to know] the teacher's name and know where the toilets are. (Parent interview, 18 June 2008)

Viewing the school DVD at home meant that these issues could be discussed prior to starting school.

Another key source of information was a personalised transition book showing features of the school environment, such as the toilets and the drinking fountain, along with key members of staff. These were developed with the children during some school visits. This process overcame the concern one school teacher expressed regarding more generalised transition books that adults created for children, which she felt potentially "robbed children of the opportunity to find out for themselves". The children were able to gain confidence by finding out, recording their discoveries and revisiting them later with others. The kindergarten children and their families were thrilled with this record of their visit, and parents noted that they found it particularly useful for discussing the imminent commencement of school for their children.

Once at school, the early childhood portfolios could empower children, enhance their identity as a learner and provide a rich resource for connecting the funds of knowledge from home and the early childhood centre with the new learning at school:

> She [the parent's new-entrant child] used to take me to the book in the morning and we'd flick through and she'd pick out her friends yeah so and I think it was just another sort of comfort thing for her, something she could look back on and sort of ... pick out her friends and even though she wasn't at school with them anymore [because the friends had gone to a different school] she still had a visual thing for them. (Parent interview, 1 November 2007)

> I've noticed that even the most shy of children when they've got their portfolio with them they just seem to have this sense of confidence, it's that ownership over something and the fact that the other children in the class are acknowledging their prior learning and lots of rich experiences. (Teacher C, final interview, p. 12)

New-entrant teachers noted the role the portfolios seemed to play in fostering both a sense of belonging and engagement:

> I guess it's like us starting a new job and moving to a new country, everything is new but if they come with this little treasure, that's something that's theirs, something they can talk about, something they share and particularly for children who are really shy or having English as a second language, they don't even need to talk, they can just sit and show and share and often you see that happening and you realise they are really valuable and really powerful. (Teacher D, final interview, p. 10)

The portfolios were empowering for school teachers, too, as they provided insights into each child's funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005). Some teachers commented that this would take a lot longer to develop without the portfolios, especially when English was not the child's home language.

In addition, as Learning Stories were written by new-entrant teachers and added to the portfolios during children's school visits, and later discussed at kindergarten, they provided insights about school for younger children and families. Commenting on a Learning Story a new-entrant teacher had written about a child not needing any help with a maths activity on a school visit, the parent of this child noted:

> I thought it was cool 'cos it explained that you know she had said something about she didn't need any help and if she did she would ask. So she obviously had a confidence there that I wasn't really aware of that you know she can cope … she'll be fine … (Parent interview, 1 November 2007)

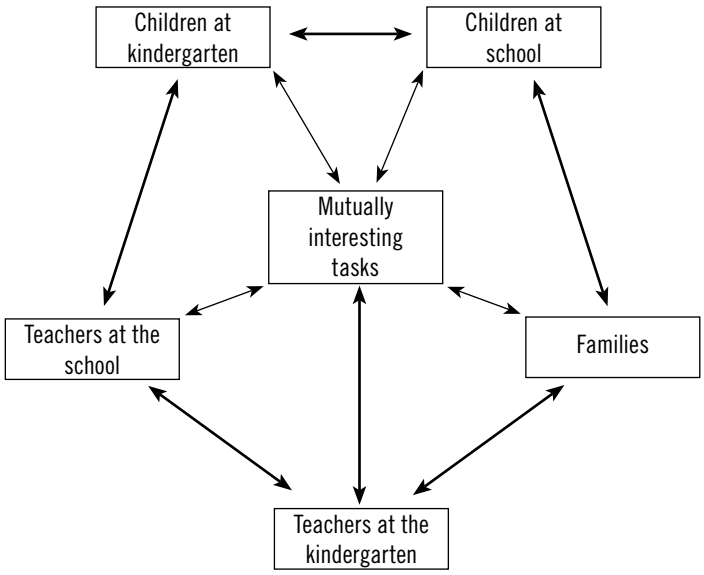
Whilst all of the strategies listed at the beginning of this section were successful, they highlighted the dynamic nature of transitions and the complexities involved. Each had to be revisited and evaluated. For example, the DVD required reshooting and editing to keep abreast of staff changes. Portfolios raised issues because some families expressed concern at this "treasure" going to school. Steps taken to address this initially involved protecting the

portfolios in kete [woven bags] designed for this purpose, and storing them on wooden "trees" in the new-entrant classroom (that the school had made for this purpose). However, the children used them less frequently than when they were stored in a way that made them more visible. This led to considering ways of creating a backup if the original was damaged in some way. Changing staff in the new-entrant rooms also meant that the portfolios were used in different ways. Reflecting at the end of the project, the new-entrant teacher who had first instigated their use noted that new staff did not always know the history behind an activity such as this, which meant it may not be used as effectively as when it had first been initiated. She felt that it was important to revisit and discuss the reasons for any strategies that were implemented.

2. Goodwill and professional relationships between teachers in action

Earlier studies had shown that goodwill alone was not sufficient to develop effective transition relationships (Robinson, Timperley, & Bullard, 2000; Timperley et al., 2003). We found that both goodwill and interest seemed to be important, and where these exist, joint projects that were mutually interesting were a valuable way of fostering relationships, not just between teachers but between other members of the school and early childhood communities too. We developed a framework for analysis which considered who the tasks were of interest to, and the relationships between different groups (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 DIAGRAM FOR ANALYSIS OF JOINT PROJECTS



A pattern began to emerge indicating that the projects that were most effective in fostering relationships were those that involved as many of the groups shown in Figure 1 as possible (teachers at kindergarten; teachers at school; children at kindergarten; children at school; and families of children transitioning to school). In addition, the degree to which the joint projects were *mutually* interesting was important. For example, the *Welcome to Mangere Bridge School* DVD was particularly effective in fostering relationships between the teachers and other participants in both sectors. This activity included all five groups and was of interest to all. Whilst all the tasks offered some benefits, those that involved fewer groups or were driven by one group's interest, as opposed to mutual interest, did not appear to be as successful as those that had strong mutual interest for a range of participants. This framework for analysis proved helpful for modifying activities. For example, when feedback indicated that an activity had not engaged the interest of a particular group, steps were taken to understand why and address this.

Interviews, observations and teacher journals over the course of the project indicated that effective professional relationships between early childhood and school teachers involved mutual respect and a balance of power. These relationships take time and persistence to develop, and have to be renegotiated through staff changes and as projects develop. Flexibility, commitment and a "can-do" attitude were found to be important. From time to time teachers in both sectors may feel discouraged. However, the positive benefits for all the transition participants (children, teachers and families) indicate the value of developing these connections. This was highlighted in some of the final comments from the school teachers:

> I really like the relationship we've got with them [Mangere Bridge Kindergarten teachers] and that's a really positive thing … the relationship is so important and just the way they've included us in everything. (Teacher B, final interview, p. 14)

> I think they [the kindergarten teachers] are stunning truly. There's only so many hours in a day and I think that the progress that they've made in moving forward in terms of the transitioning and taking us with them has been wonderful. I can't think of anything else they should do. I think the children who live in this community are so lucky having the opportunity to go to Mangere Bridge kindy and the teachers there have gone the extra mile in terms of what they want for their children when they leave kindy and we're really, really, happy to be part of that journey. It's been a privilege for us really to have been able to be a part of it from our perspective and I'm excited about the possibilities of what could happen next. (Principal E, final interview, p. 15)

> Well, I've been involved in it for a long time and I think it's absolutely wonderful. I think we're very lucky here to be involved with a preschool that's a Centre of Innovation and we have very close links with the staff at the preschool there for the benefit of the families and the children involved … There are no issues, absolutely no issues with them and we

… by working together, teachers in early childhood education and school can develop a "bridge" to aid children and families in navigating the transition to school …

> hope that they're really happy with us and we just want to continue from where they start with a child. (Teacher G, final interview, pp. 3, 16)

3. Recognising the continuity of learning journeys

In this community the kindergarten provided rich opportunities to learn. Aspects of the learning opportunities were explored through the dynamic integrated multiliteracies that children were engaged in. These included children creating movie scripts by drawing the picture, orally telling the story to the teacher who then wrote it down, using those scripts and acting them out and filming the results. The resultant literacy artefact, a DVD of the story, was then able to be revisited time and time again and was valued by the child. Comments from parents included:

> We were all very excited about *Paul's Knight Movie* [one of the many DVDs developed as described above] and getting to see all the children participating in the movie. Our family sat down to watch the movie and were very excited to see N being a dragon. She often wants to be a dragon when she plays at kindy, so it was nice to see her being a dragon in the movie and participating and having fun.
>
> We were so proud of her and loved watching the movie and showing it to her grandparents & uncle/aunty. We can't wait to see the next movie—thank you Mangere Bridge kindergarten for a special movie experience.
>
> After watching *Alice's Dog Movie* [another DVD developed as described above] James' sister commented 'mum tell him to stop we've watched it 8 times this morning'.

The research also analysed the key competencies evident in the documentation in a kindergarten child's portfolio, using the descriptors from *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). The practices children were engaged in were not only valuable in their own right, but also acted as priming events (Corsaro & Molinari, 2005) for the transition to school. *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) shows the alignment of key competencies with the strands of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Sensitive new-entrant teachers picked up and built on these competencies, and portfolios could record this continuity. In a sense the portfolios can be thought of as "passports", which could support identity as a learner moves across contexts.

Conclusion

This article has provided a brief summary of some key findings of a three-year project (see Hartley et al., 2009). This research has provided valuable insights into the ways in which transition experiences can be supported. It clearly demonstrates that by working together, teachers in early childhood education and school can develop a "bridge" to aid children and families in navigating the transition to school, and support the continuity in learning shown in the alignment of the strands of the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and the key competencies at school (see Ministry of Education, 2007). However, the complexity of transition experiences was also highlighted. Strategies which initially appeared straightforward, such as taking the portfolios to school, revealed other issues to consider as the research cycles explored each aspect more deeply. As other communities draw on insights from this study it will be important to remember that there are no easy answers, or simple recipes. Transitions are dynamic, multifaceted (Ghaye & Pascal, 1988) and complex, and the notion of "effective transition practices" as described in the strategic plan (Ministry of Education, 2002) must be constantly revisited and evaluated within local contexts, taking into account the views of the multiple participants in the process.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge with thanks the funding from the Ministry of Education for the Centre of Innovation project discussed in this article. It is important to note that the views expressed are those of the authors and not the New Zealand Government. We are also very grateful to the colleagues, teachers, children and families involved, who have allowed their experiences to be shared. We appreciate the support of Dr Anne Meade throughout the study, and for her comments on a draft of this paper.

References

Carr, M. (2001). *Assessment in early childhood settings.* London: Paul Chapman.

Corsaro, W., & Molinari, L. (2005). *I Compagni: Understanding children's transitions from preschool to elementary school.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Fasoli, L. (2003). Reflections on doing research with children. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, *28*(1), 7–12.

Ghaye, A., & Pascal, C. (1988). Four-year-old children in reception classrooms: Participant perceptions and practice. *Educational Studies*, *14*(2), 187–208.

González, N., Moll, L. C., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities and classrooms.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Graue, E., & Walsh, D. (1998). *Studying children in context: Theories, methods and ethics.* London: Sage.

Hartley, C., Rogers, P., Smith, J., Peters, S., & Carr, M. (2009). *Across the border: A community negotiates the transition from early childhood to primary* school. Unpublished Centre of Innovation Final Report to the Ministry of Education.

Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum.* Wellington: Learning Media.

Ministry of Education. (2002). *Pathways to the future: Ngā huarahi arataki: A 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education.* Wellington: Learning Media.

Ministry of Education. (2007). *The New Zealand curriculum.* Wellington: Learning Media.

Peters, S. (2008, September). Learning dispositions to key competencies: Navigating learning journeys across the border from early childhood education to school. In S. Dockett (Chair), *Images of transition*. Symposium conducted at the European Early Childhood Education Research Association 18th annual conference, Stavanger University, Norway.

Robinson, V., Timperley, H., & Bullard, T. (2000). *Strengthening education in Mangere and Otara evaluation: Second evaluation report.* Auckland: The University of Auckland.

Timperley, H., McNaughton, S., Howie, L., & Robinson, V. (2003). Transitioning children from early childhood education to school: Teacher beliefs and transition practices. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, *28*(2), 32–40.

Timperley, H., & Robinson, V. (2002). *Partnership: Focusing the relationship on the task of school improvement.* Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Notes

1 Learning Stories (Carr, 2001) are narratives written by teachers using observation and interpretation—"noticing, recognising and responding"—and illustrate the child as a capable and competent learner (Ministry of Education, 1996).

2 Teaching stories are reflective stories written as teachers respond to children's key learning events. These lead to further responsive planned interactions and events. The teaching stories may be displayed as a part of ongoing planning documentation for children and parents to contribute their perspectives and ideas.

SALLY PETERS is a senior lecturer in the School of Education, University of Waikato.

Email: speters@waikato.ac.nz

CAROL HARTLEY is the head teacher at Mangere Bridge Kindergarten.

Email: mangerebridge@aka.org.nz

PAT ROGERS is a teacher at Mangere Bridge Kindergarten.

Email: mangerebridge@aka.org.nz

JEMMA SMITH is a teacher at Mangere Bridge Kindergarten.

Email: mangerebridge@aka.org.nz

MARGARET CARR is Professor of Education at the School of Education, University of Waikato.

Email: margcarr@waikato.ac.nz