

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRES AND PRIMARY SCHOOL IN NEW ZEALAND : —REFLECTIONS AND ISSUES—



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Abstract

This paper discusses the transition for children in New Zealand from their early childhood centres to school on their fifth birthday. It describes the early childhood context in New Zealand and the seamless education system within which it resides. The paper identifies the issues for New Zealand children as they move from early childhood to compulsory schooling and reflects on a recent New Zealand research study where the researchers have been following a group of children from one sector to the other.

Introduction¹

While New Zealand is an international leader in our early childhood services and in some aspects of our primary school education, for example, our reading system, we have still much to learn about improving the transitions and connections for our children from their early childhood centre to the primary school and I look forward to discussing this with many of you on my visit here in Hiroshima.

I work at the Children's Issues Centre, which is a research and teaching unit within the University of Otago's School of Social Sciences. Our work involves undertaking research in any area of children's experiences, with a particular focus on children's rights and advocacy. We teach a postgraduate diploma in child advocacy and in this way we can share the findings from our research, support our students to undertake research in this area themselves, and support professionals in their understanding of the contexts they work in with families and children. My own background is as a kindergarten teacher, a lecturer in early childhood education policy and practices and a researcher in all issues to do with New Zealand early childhood education.

In this paper I discuss the connection between early childhood centres and school. I will describe the context of early childhood education in New Zealand, and the junior school of the primary school and finish with sharing some ideas about the issues and concerns we have for our children.

Early Childhood Education in the New Zealand Context

Introduction

Early childhood education and early childhood education services are defined in New Zealand (NZ) in specific ways. In NZ the term "early childhood education" refers to the non-compulsory provision of education and care for young children and infants before they begin school on, or around, their fifth birthday. We prefer to use the term early childhood rather than preschool, as we share a philosophy that the early childhood years are a time in the child's life which is not just about preparation for school or preparation for something that comes later. Early childhood education is not compulsory and parents can choose if they wish their children to attend, at what age, for how long and what kind of service they would like to use. Since 1989 all early

childhood services have received funding from the government to enable them to employ trained staff and to keep charges to parents as low as possible. Over the following years since 1989 the amount of funding has increased to centres, alongside the increased requirements for centres to meet standardised quality criteria, including the most recent requirement for fully trained staff in all centres. Fully trained in New Zealand means an early childhood training programme, that is the equivalent to a three-year early childhood teaching degree.

The types of early childhood services in NZ are :

TYPES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICE

KINDERGARTENS are managed by Kindergarten Associations, and provide early childhood education for children aged two to five years.

CHILDCARE CENTRES (now often referred to as Education and Care Centres) may be privately owned or non-profit making. They offer early childhood education on a sessional or full-day basis. They include private kindergartens, and specific philosophical programmes such as Montessori, Christian etc.

These are teacher-led services.

PLAYCENTRES are parent co-operatives offering early childhood education for children under five years.

KOHANGA REO offer an all-day Maori language immersions programme to children under five years, and are administered by Te Kohanga Reo National Trust Board.

PACIFIC ISLANDS EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRES offer programmes based on the languages and cultures of Pacific peoples.

These are parent-led services.

HOME BASED SERVICES link parents with caregivers in the community. Trained coordinators assist the caregivers in the provision of early childhood education and care.

The **CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL** offers a distance education service for children who are unable to attend an early childhood centre because of isolation, illness, or disability.

There are also multiple other types of services available to children and parents over these early childhood years, for example : playgroups where parents and children gather in both formal and informal arrangements (for example, Parents Centre, and Ante-natal support groups), Plunket groups which have a health and parenting focus on the first two years of life, and hospital and welfare centre based programmes (for example, Women's Refuge centres, Paediatric wards).

At 1 July 2004 there were 184,513 children enrolled in both licensed and non-licensed early childhood education services. This represents almost 55% of children in this age group - however, statistics like this can be misleading and enrolments of children are often double-counted, for example, a child may attend more than one service in any one week. Incontestably, there has been a growth in participation in early childhood education. However, when one looks at the geographical differences and the age and ethnic difference of attendance this participation is still very uneven. For example, participation by Maori and Pacific Islands children is lower than that of other children. Significantly, out of those who are enrolled most Pacific Islands children are enrolled in unlicensed centres or playgroups which are non-government funded, or lower per-child funding, as they do not meet the criteria for improved government funding. Therefore, the variance in both access and quality of attendance in NZ is still a major issue. Likewise, while participation is high for our four-year-olds

(98%), this drops off as the children get younger, falling to a low 8% of our under one year-olds.

Worthy of mention in the NZ context is that the majority of children with special needs/disabilities are enrolled in regular early childhood services, not segregated settings (Mitchell, 2002).

By far the largest contributors to the growth in the number of licensed centres and enrolments have been education and care services (child care) and home-based networks. In the years between 1990-2002 education and care services have increased by 145%, and home-based networks by 433%. Playgroups and unlicensed play centres have had the greatest increase in this group.

At July 2001, there were 3450 licensed early childhood education services. 800 of these were privately owned education and care centres, and 758 were community owned education and care centres. This has been a significant change for New Zealand with private providers beginning to dominate the non-kindergarten sector of early childhood education (ECE) in NZ.

Where the Students Are :

Type of service	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Licensed ECE Services:										
Kindergartens	47208	46960	46756	46307	45993	45869	45439	45169	45109	45287
Playcentres	19108	17596	17058	16787	16261	15808	14786	14879	15200	15440
Education and Care centres	53769	57582	61597	65205	68132	71231	73192	76246	78967	81096
Te Kohanga Reo	14015	13279	13104	11689	11859	11138	9594	10389	10319	10418
Homebased Services	6114	6558	7615	8300	8498	8937	8546	8591	9587	9922
Correspondence School	901	993	1024	1044	1097	984	947	913	991	922
Subtotal	141115	142968	147154	149332	151840	153967	152504	156187	160173	163085

From : Ministry of Education, numbers based on 1 July 2004

Distribution of Licensed Early Childhood Regular Enrolments at 1 July 2004

Education and Care Centres - 50%	(1996 40%)
Kindergartens - 28%	(1996 33%)
Playcentres - 9%	(1996 12%)
Te Kohanga Reo - 6%	(1996 9%)
Homebased Childcare - 6%	(1996 5%)
Correspondence School- 0.5%	(1996 1%)

*43% of one year olds participated in early childhood services ;

*66% of two-years old participated in early childhood services ;

*95% of three-year olds participated in early childhood services ;

*98% of four year olds participated in early childhood services ;

*19% of all early childhood enrolments were Maori children :
 30% of Maori early childhood enrolments were in kohanga reo
 22% of enrolments in kindergarten
 32% of enrolments in childcare centre
 3.7% of enrolments in homebased care

*6.4% of all early childhood enrolments were Pacific Island children:
 19% of Pacific Islands early childhood enrolments were in Pacific Islands language groups
 27% of enrolments in kindergarten
 44% of enrolments in childcare centre
 1.7% of enrolments in homebased care

What is also interesting to observe is how many hours children in New Zealand attend early childhood centres. The reason that this is worthy of comment is because we now have the research to show that children who attend for more than 10 hours per week, demonstrate improved performance later in their schooling success (Smith, Grima, Gaffney, Powell, Masse, & Barnett, 2000).

Interestingly, when we have research, which is indicating that the earlier and the longer a child attends an early childhood centre the better the outcome, we find that in New Zealand we have quite low average enrolled hours.

Type of Service	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Kindergarten	10.7	10.7	11.2	11.5	11.8	12.0	12.5
Playcentre	4.4	4.3	4.4	4.2	4.3	4.3	4.4
Education and Care	15.9	16.4	16.6	17.7	18.3	18.6	19.5
Homebased Networks	15.7	16.1	16.9	18.6	18.1	19.7	21.3
Licensed Te Kohanga Reo*	28.5	28.5	28.5	28.5	28.5	28.5	28.5

From : Ministry of Education, 2005, numbers based on 1 July 2004

The reason that this is worthy of comment is because we now have the research to show that children who attend for more than 10 hours per week, demonstrate improved performance later in their schooling success. We have an important longitudinal study in New Zealand which has been looking at the long-term contribution of quality early childhood experience on a group of about 500 Wellington region children. The study is known as the Competent Children Project (Wylie, 2004). The children have been followed since they were close to 5 years old, that is just about to start school and were still attending an early childhood service.

The researchers hope to follow the children until they leave compulsory schooling at around the age of 18 years old. Currently, the children are 14 years old, but the latest results are drawn from their data at 12 years old. The results have taken into consideration family resources, experiences at home and school and other factors such as maternal qualification levels. The children were assessed on key competencies of : communication, curiosity, perseverance, social skills with adults and peers, and also task related competencies of literary, mathematics and logical problem solving.

What has this study shown us?

Key Findings

- Early childhood education quality was still

contributing to the children's competency in mathematics and literacy at age 12.

- Family income levels when the children were nearly age 5 had more bearing than current family incomes on their competency at age 12.
- Particular quality aspects of ECE that continued to show associations with the children's achievement scores focused on staff-child interaction, along with 'print-saturated' environment.
- The patterns of achievement suggest that early childhood education contribute to children's performance at age 12 through ways of working and thinking, rather than the simple provision of knowledge at a certain level.
- Children who had received consistent messages about the value of school from their parents' voluntary work at their school had higher average scores at age 12. (Wylie, 2004, pp. 17-18)

From an earlier report when the children were 8 years-old the authors had the following comments to make :

At age 8, ECE experience was most strongly related to Mathematics and the PAT Reading Comprehension scores. It made modest contributions to Communication, Social Skills with Peers, and Curiosity, and moderate contributions to Perseverance, Social Skills with Adults, and Logical Problem-Solving. The particular aspects of ECE which were linked to children's competency levels were some quality factors, the age at which a child started ECE, and linked to this, the total amount of their early childhood education experience, as well as the socio-economic mix of the ECE centre they last attended At age 5, we found that quality scores were related to the prior training of the staff, salary level, the child : staff ratio, and group size. (Wylie, Thompson, Lythe,

2001)

This study demonstrates that the connection between early childhood education and school is not just at the moment that the child enters or begins school, but rather the experiences and the quality of the early childhood experience continues to be demonstrated in the children's achievements over their later school years.

Going to School

In New Zealand a child begins school on or near their 5th birthday. While the law sets the beginning age at 6 years-old it is custom and practice that children begin on their 5th birthday. This means that when a child leaves their early childhood centre it is very unlikely that any other child will be going to school on the same day with them, or that they will know many children in their class. It also means that primary teachers need to be flexible in their teaching as they are having new children starting in their classes continually over the year.

Brief outline of the New Zealand Education System

Primary schools are the first level of compulsory schooling. They cater for children from the age of five years (Year 1) to the end of their 8th year (12-13 years old) of schooling.

Children in their 7th and 8th years of schooling (Forms 1 and 2) may either be in a separate intermediate school or part of a full primary, secondary or composite/area school.

Secondary schools usually provide for students from Year 9 (Form 3) until the end of Year 13 (Form 7) (17-18 year olds).

Area or composite schools, which are usually based in rural areas, combine primary, intermediate and secondary schooling at one location.

Special Schooling : Students with physical or other disabilities may enrol either at regular

schools or at a special school. The Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Schemes (ORRS) were introduced in 1997 to assist individuals with very high or high special education needs. The schemes fund extra teaching, specialist programming, therapy and education support for up to 7000 children. These students are not summarised separately in the following tables but are included in the regular class totals.

Homeschooling is possible for those who prefer it, on the condition that a standard of education similar to that available in a registered school is provided. At 1 July 2000 there were 5,877 students involved in homeschooling.

The Correspondence School provides education for students who cannot attend a school because they live in remote or inaccessible areas, because they are overseas, or because of illness or other special reasons.

Taken directly from www.minedu.govt.nz

The five-year-old

Beginning school has often involved some visits to the school with the child's parent, or teacher from the early childhood centre, before the child formally begins. These visits introduce the child to their teacher and the structure and layout of the school. Many children are buddied up (paired as a new friend) with an older child to look after them, and this may or may not continue when the child begins. The visits usually include at least one lunchtime break so the child can begin to see the playground and the break times in action.

School hours in New Zealand are Monday to Friday 9am to 3pm with a one-hour lunch break in the middle of the day. This can be a long day for children who are used to sessional early childhood programmes but a considerably shorter day for children who have been in full day child care centres. Many parents also use after school programmes, which are play based as well as

homework inclusive, to match their employment hours. Currently New Zealand has only limited regulations that cover after school provisions - which is in sharp contrast to every other area of education and care in New Zealand.

Despite shared understanding about the importance of smooth transitions and continuity between environments for children for their well-being and development, the differences between the school contexts and the early childhood contexts in New Zealand are pronounced. For example :

Group Size and Teaching Ratios :

Early Childhood Centre : Depending on the centre the children may be in an education and care centre with no more the 25 children, and up to 5 staff. Most staff are trained. In a kindergarten the children will be in a group size of 30-45 with two or three trained and registered teachers.

Primary School Class : New Zealand new entrant rooms (the beginning class) has one teacher and, recommended to have no more than 23 children.

Layout and Contexts :

Early Childhood Centre : Most NZ centres are in purpose built buildings, or in restructured homes, where the playrooms are large and set out with activities and equipment for the children to use in their play. All centres have outdoor environments which are designed for children to be able to have freedom and safety in their outside play and this environment is available to the children at all times (weather allowing). Many centres also have verandas or covered in sandpits to allow children to play outside even when the weather is unpleasant. We describe our environments as 'free play' and all centres differ in the amount of planned or structured activities that they expect the children to participate in, for example, music sessions, mat times (circle times).

Primary School Class : Most NZ junior school classes are in purpose built buildings with small size classrooms which have tables and chairs for the

children to work at. The children spend their day on various tasks and activities either independently at their tables, on the mat in front of the teacher, or in shared groups with other children. The activities or tasks usually take about 20 minutes to 30 minutes and then the class will move onto the next activity. The children are usually grouped with other children at the same level of learning, for example, reading the same books, for instruction. The day is broken up with a 10 minute morning tea break where the children must play in the playground, and a one hour lunch break. The playgrounds are built to cater for the combined ages of the children 5-13 years so the experience outside can be quite overwhelming for a new child. Sports activities are held after school time.

Curriculum

Early Childhood Centre : All New Zealand early childhood centres use a shared curriculum called *Te Whāriki*. This curriculum sets out the principles and goals which early childhood educators should use when planning for the children and their communities. It does not prescribe activities or arrangements but offers philosophical guidance to support children to "grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society" (p. 9). This bicultural and inclusive document enables all NZ centres to craft the curriculum to suit their pedagogical ways of working while at the same time, keeping with our shared aspirations for NZ children and early childhood education.

Primary School Class : The compulsory school sector is obliged by law to teach to the New Zealand Curriculum Framework. The Framework establishes and identifies the principles for all learning and teaching programmes in New Zealand schools. It identifies seven essential learning areas. These are broad, recognisable categories of knowledge and understanding. It also defines eight groups of essential skills. All students need to develop these skills to enable them to reach their full potential and take a full part in society. Students will develop the

essential skills through a range of learning experiences across the whole curriculum. In addition the Framework sets out the policies and procedures for assessment in all New Zealand schools. The national curriculum statements provide clear learning outcomes against which students' progress can be measured. In its language, conceptualisation and implementation it differs totally from Te Whāriki. While recently trained teachers have some knowledge of Te Whāriki, many primary teachers do not know, or care to know, about it.

The Principles New Zealand Curriculum Framework	The Essential Learning Areas New Zealand Curriculum Framework
<i>The New Zealand Curriculum establishes direction for learning and assessment in New Zealand schools</i>	☞ Language and Languages
<i>The New Zealand Curriculum fosters achievement and success for all students. At each level it clearly defines the achievement objectives against which students' progress can be measured</i>	☞ Mathematics
<i>The New Zealand Curriculum provides for flexibility, enabling schools and teachers to design programmes which are appropriate to the learning needs of their students</i>	☞ Science
<i>The New Zealand Curriculum ensures that learning progresses coherently throughout schooling</i>	☞ Technology
<i>The New Zealand Curriculum provides all students with equal educational opportunities</i>	☞ Social Sciences
<i>The New Zealand Curriculum recognises the significance of the Treaty of Waitangi</i>	☞ The Arts
<i>The New Zealand Curriculum reflects the multicultural nature of New Zealand society</i>	☞ Health and Physical Well-Being
<i>The New Zealand Curriculum relates learning to the wider world</i>	

From: www.minedu.govt.nz

What do these differences mean for children?

While the obvious answer is that the transition for children from the early childhood centres to school can be a difficult process, many children may find the change and the structure enjoyable. They see

themselves as 'learners' and not just 'playing' anymore, and this is often supported by the adults in their environment who have been trying to soften the transition for them. However, a different curriculum, a different pedagogy, and a different staffing ratio also means that teachers may perceive the children very differently. This may be in both a positive and negative way. I wish to share with you a small case study from a research project I am part of. This project has been underway for three years and has been following a group of 27 children from their early childhood centre to their first year at school². One of the case study children I have been working with, whom I have called, Sarah, was spoken and thought of very differently by her early childhood teachers and then her primary teacher. The impact of these different ways of seeing Sarah transformed Sarah from seeing herself as a capable child with much potential, to a child who had potential but was not achieving as was expected by the primary teacher³.

Over the time Sarah had been attending the early childhood centre the teachers could see that she had developed in confidence and, by the time she was about to start school, she was not only able to speak out competently but she enjoyed telling long stories and speaking to the whole group of children at morning tea times, usually about events or shared experiences with her parents. The early childhood staff were very positive in their discussion of Sarah's anticipated school move. They had felt that she would fit into the school setting in the same way that she had fitted into the early childhood centre. With her 'imagination', her 'creativity' and her long attention span when involved in activities, alongside her attention to rules and doing things right, they felt that she would do well at school.

However, the Primary teachers had a different perspective on Sarah. Her teachers shared the views of the early childhood teacher and Sarah's mother in her strengths and qualities. They saw her as child who was particularly skilled in oral and imaginative language. They felt, that in comparison to other children her age, she was able to provide more than a superficial or surface response in class, and was able to make links, explore ideas in depth, and draw

on her rich knowledge in her work in the class. As at the early childhood centre they described her social skills as inclusive of all children - girls and boys - and that she could relate easily and well to her peers in the classroom, as well as work comfortably and happily independently. Sarah's teacher felt that Sarah had the qualities that "ultimately are going to make her [a] very good learner and thinker". However, Sarah's ability to be focused on a task and put 'walls up' as her mother had identified, or to be 'self contained' and 'just get on with it' as emphasised by the EC teachers, was presented in a very different discourse at school. Sarah was described as unfocused and easily distracted, when it came to the formal learning tasks of the classroom.

The positions offered to Sarah at the early childhood centre and the school differed markedly. While the teachers in both settings described Sarah in very rich, positive and supportive ways the 'images' they held of Sarah differed - as did the very different discursive practices of each educational setting. While Sarah was arguably not such a 'different child' from one setting to the other, the positions of being a 'day-care child' and a 'school child' were conceptualised very differently in each environment.

Conclusion

While there are continued calls in New Zealand for smoother transitions and more coherence and links between the early childhood centres and the primary school, any ability to do this is severely hampered by the different curriculum, assessment and pedagogical models which each service employs. While we now have several training programmes for teachers to train to work with children from 0-8 years of age, the very few who take this up as an option will have to work very hard to turn around the differences which are entrenched in the different services. On a positive note the New Zealand Ministry of Education is currently undergoing a review of both the early childhood and school curricula, so this may be a great opportunity to address these issues and bring about closer links which do not undermine the early childhood

perspective to teaching and learning.

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Endnotes

- 1 I wish to thank Professor Nanakida and Professor Nakahara for my invitation to Japan and their support in my time in Japan.
- 2 This larger study is entitled *Dispositions in Social Context*, and is a New Zealand Royal Society Marsden Funded project. The team leaders are Professor Anne Smith, from Children's Issues Centre, and Associate Professor Margaret Carr, University of Waikato. The other team members are Wendy Lee and Carolyn Jones (Waikato), and Kate Marshall and Judith Duncan (CIC).
- 3 For full results see Duncan, J. (2004). "She's always been, what I would think, a perfect day-care child" : Constructing the subjectivities of a New Zealand child. Paper presented to the 12th *Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Education Conference on Research, Theory and Practice: "Troubling Identities"*, May 24th - 28th, 2004, Oslo University College, Oslo, Norway.