

“I’m learning to go to school now.”

Young children’s developing
understandings of school.

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The children, who participated in this study

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Abstract

In most New Zealand schools, transition to school programmes are introduced based on adult perceptions aimed at avoiding negative experiences and assisting children in a successful transition to school, yet they run the risk of ‘over managing’ a child’s experience. This research considers how young children perceive the up and coming ‘rite of passage’ of ‘starting school’. Through placing an emphasis on ‘children’s voice’, it explores their expectations, feelings and understandings of school before and after starting. The study follows six children (two boys and four girls, aged from 4 years eight months to 4 years ten months at the start of the study) for approximately two school terms on their journey from an Early Childhood Centre to a primary school. A range of ‘child friendly’ methods were used to gather their understandings. Children’s ‘school comments’ were recorded by their mothers during their transition. Interviews were conducted with three teachers regarding their philosophies and practices of starting school.

The findings identified three main themes in children’s initial knowledge about school. The children sourced further knowledge by asking their parents about any concerns or queries as they arose. They also expressed a need to prepare themselves for school. The children gained further understanding of school throughout their transition but did not truly grasp

the concept of what school was about until they became ‘school kids’ themselves. The implications of these findings are discussed for transition to school practices.

Chapter One

“Traditionally, researchers have collected the views of parents, teachers and other adults, assuming that their views represent children’s own views, although this is frequently not so” (Alderson, 1995, p. 91).

Introduction and rationale

Over one’s lifespan many transitions are encountered, to name a few: changes in care, education, employment, and family situations. Transitions are not simply the change in location but a change in activity, role and expectation. Such a multitude of transitions can seem quite daunting, as they often mean discontinuity and new challenges for those involved. Through the present study, I plan to investigate such discontinuities and challenges in relation to New Zealand children’s transition to school at five years of age. In New Zealand most children start school on, or close to, their fifth birthday even though they are not required to start until they turn six. How adults perceive the discontinuities and challenges entailed by this event may determine whether they view a child’s transition to school positively or negatively; whether it is considered to be one of life’s necessary challenges through which children grow and develop; or an emotional hurdle which should be minimised and managed so as to not jeopardise the child’s future education (Margetts, 2009). There seems to be tension between what we

want for our children in Early Childhood Education (ECE), how we expect them to ‘handle’ their transition to school. And we know little about how children perceive their own transition.

Hatch (1995) explains that adults have become accustomed to intervening in children’s lives. Children are seen as ‘vehicles of change’. Assumption is that problems that plague current society can be solved in the future by the actions of today’s children. Two distinct perspectives are apparent in this assumption: that it is essential for children to grow up feeling capable of instigating change; and that adults are entitled to intervene in the growth and learning of their children for the greater public good. As I will identify later in this chapter, the tension between these perspectives is evident throughout educational policy in New Zealand.

My own experiences

Since becoming interested in the transition to school process, I have tried, without success, to remember my own transition to school. I remember being at ‘kindy’: the swing gate; the big pine tree we played under; and the notices safety-pinned to the front of my home-knitted jersey (along with my hanky, if I remember correctly). I remember being five at school: the name of the class bully; my ‘important’ role as a flower in the school production; someone wetting themselves in class (hopefully not me); my fellow classmates and the kind face of my J1 teacher, (although

not that of my new entrant). Even with the aid of my childhood photo album and the constant prodding of my family, none of my memories of starting school have been unearthed, while I can remember other poignant happenings around this age. So, either my lack of memories of starting school is due to my transition to school being ‘managed successfully’ for me or starting school was not really the ‘monster’ event in my life.

Through the years I have been a participant in many children’s transitions as they have embarked on their life as a ‘school kid’. As a teacher, I have comforted crying children whose parents have left them, and reassured bewildered parents whose children have told them to leave. However, it is possible that the majority of children transition to school without them or their families experiencing emotional turmoil. I want to find out what ‘starting school’ means to young children, as children’s voice is missing in much of the transition to school research. I am curious to discover whether children are as concerned about their transition to school as the majority of adults in the education sector are.

In 2005, the junior school team at my school created a ‘transition’ pamphlet “Transition to School – What we do at [name of focus school]”. We gained inspiration from Patricia Ziegler’s words “Children meet school transition with a mixture of delight and anxiety.” (Ziegler, 1985,

p.11). Patricia Ziegler, is a lecturer in Human Ecology at Cornell University, New York. Her quote emphasised for us, that a child may be both anxious and delighted at the prospect of starting school. It is expected that children will feel differently about different aspects of starting school. It acknowledges that feeling anxious about certain elements of starting school is expected and does not determine the overall effectiveness of their transition. As a team, we reflected on our transition to school programme and brainstormed all of the things that we did to promote delight and reduce anxiety for children as they transitioned to school. We reminisced about the transitions of a multitude of children whom we had taught from our own perspectives. We discussed children who had difficult transitions and how we had helped them manage the anxiety they were feeling. The pamphlet was created with the knowledge and understanding that came from over 70 years of combined teaching experience in the junior school. Despite years of observing and assisting children with their transition to school, it strikes me that we did not really know what starting school meant to young children. We made assumptions as to how our children felt about starting school. I suspect that this is the case for many schools that implement transition to school programmes. My objective in undertaking this study is to mitigate this situation to some extent by seeking children's voices on transition.

Hearing the voice of children

A story is retold in *Listening to Children* (“Listening to Children”, 1993) about a young girl who came home upset from her first day at school and vowed that she did not want to return. The disastrous thing that had happened was that she had not learnt to read on her first day! Her expectation of school was that you became a ‘reader’ there. She had expected that acquiring the skills of reading was going to be a fairly quick process and that she would have it ‘down pat’ by the end of day one. Another anecdotal account describes a young boy declaring “*You mean I have to do this again?*” when his mother got him out of bed for his second day of school (Laverick, 2008). There had been such a build up for his ‘first day of school’ that he and his family had not focussed on what would happen after this stupendous, yet tiring first day.

It is difficult to read such accounts without a smile. Other ‘school stories’ come to the forefront of one’s mind and the reminiscing starts. There are ‘yarns’ that have been heard third or fourth hand, and memories from personal school experiences. These stories give context and become relevant to all who have started school themselves. It is these ‘sparks’ and connections that I have attempted to gather through this study. I have tried to find out what children think school is going to be like, not based on how others around them perceive it, but from ‘the mouths of babes’.

Children's perspectives in research

Especially within the past decade researchers have placed emphasis on seeking children's viewpoint about starting school directly from the children themselves, as explained by Alderson (1995) in the opening quote to this chapter. In some cases researchers have sought children's viewpoints but have not been successful in obtaining substantive responses. The lack of substantive responses has been attributed to age inappropriate data collection. Sanagavarapu and Perry (2005) found the four Bangladeshi children in their study were unenthusiastic and reluctant to share information about starting school. They attributed this to implementing a complex interview process, and therefore, missed gaining worthwhile insights from the children. Other researchers have had success in finding out about children's transitions to school through observing children, conducting small focus group discussions with children, individual interviews with 'child-suited' questions (Niesel & Griebel, 2001) and particular data collection methods appropriate for children they were researching, such as picture drawing and book compilation (Graue, 1993). In research, children's voice has been added to the perspectives of parents and teachers to add a third dimension to the reality that is being constructed (Margetts, 2006). Children's voice can be looked at as an entity in itself without needing comparison or support from other sources.

Conducting research in a child's everyday setting might allow a child to express their view more freely. Introducing a new setting for research takes the child out of their regular microsystem and allows other factors to influence the data (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). What the child perceives to occur in their own natural setting is paramount from my perspective. In making ecological considerations it is important to ascertain children's own perceptions, rather than 'second-guess' the child's reality by asking other participants to give their view of the child's beliefs or experiences. How the transition to school process is experienced is contextual. It is reliant on the setting and the participants involved. The greatest influences are the children themselves and the interactions that they participate in. They create their own reality of their transition through their experiences, observations and imaginations (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). I will return to Bronfenbrenner's theory The Ecology of Human Development later in this chapter.

Initially, I too approached my study from an adult perspective. When I began planning this study I considered only gathering the parent's points of view on their children's transition to school. I interviewed a mother to pilot this study and obtained some interesting information on how she viewed her child's experience. It was not until I was challenged by my supervisor to extend my thinking, that I considered the children's voice.

“Everyday at school I think about how the children in my class can have greater input and voice in what we do. How did I manage to ‘miss the boat’ with this in my research? Oops!”

Journal Entry
20th April 2009

After a meeting with my supervisor

Once I was focused on the children’s voice, this study gained new meaning and purpose for me as an entity in itself, not just a means to an end. I could make a difference, rather than just gain a qualification. I often discuss with my own class about ‘making a difference’ and I was inspired to think that perhaps my own study could make a difference to transition to school programmes through seeking children’s voice.

Children and childhood - a philosophical perspective

It seems peculiar that in researching the experiences of children, children have had little input. This phenomenon needs to be viewed in relation to the role of children, not just in research, but in life itself. Different concepts of ‘childhood’ have been portrayed by scholars, researchers and theorists for many centuries (Kessen, 1979). The conceptualising of childhood through time has rendered children as a variety of characters, including being: ‘tabula rasa’ – empty slate, innately good or inherently bad; an invisible element of culture or an isolated independent being; a miniature adult or an empty vessel (Kessen, 1979; Mayall, 2002). The tacit theories that a society holds about childhood guide child rearing and how we treat children in general.

It has taken a substantive amount of time for children to be given a voice in research, even though they now have an increasing voice in their everyday lives. Childhood is considered by many to be an exciting and eventful time of growth and change; a time of caring and education where a child's well-being as a 'whole person' is paramount (Mayall, 2002). However, Alenen and Mayall (2001) explain that no matter what current theory of childhood is at the forefront, children are viewed under three lenses: as non-adults; in relation to the adult concepts of interests, understanding and goals; and as part of an adult-child relationship.

Cultural norms and current ideals influence the direction of research. In this instance, this study is not an exception. The importance of children and their voice has come to the forefront in society today. Between 1989 and 2009 the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child was ratified by 193 of 195 members, with New Zealand signing in 1993. This convention stipulates several main principles to be adhered to, including the need to respect children's views. It is suggested that this can be achieved by asking children what they think about issues that affect them and then taking what they say into account (UNICEF, 1989). Smith (2007) encourages researchers to give children support and opportunities to develop their point of view, in order to obtain a child's authentic voice. Alenen and Mayall (2001) discuss the concept of children in relation to Piagetian and Vygotskian theory, that children are not merely being

actors; acting out their lives and having a perspective about what happens, but being agents; having the power to engage and influence what occurs in their lives. Alenen and Mayall explain that if we adopt the concept of children being agents, then we also need to accept that children should be studied and involved in their studied. I am influenced by these developments to use children's first hand declarations of their general thoughts, predictions and reflections.

The purpose of my study is to find out children's perspectives on transitioning to school, by engaging with them in their own environments. I hope to use these insights to inform my own practice and the transition to school programme that I implement. I also hope to inform others, so that they can be receptive to children's voice in their transition to school programme implementation. In order to guide practice in the future I am seeking to find out: what young children know about school; how they feel about going to school; and how their knowledge of school, and their feelings towards school, develop throughout the transition to school process. I am using the theory of Ecological Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) as the basis of this study. I will discuss this theory next, followed by a description of a 'transition to school' metaphor and a review of literature relating to transition to school.

Theoretical framework

Bronfenbrenner's theory, *The Ecology of Human Development*, has been used extensively in studies of early childhood and transition to school (Pianta & Cox, 1999). It specifically theorises life span transitions between settings, through various hypotheses and as such is particularly suited to this study. Bronfenbrenner put forward many hypotheses regarding how a person's developmental potential can be increased. Many of these hypotheses are relevant to the implementation of transition to school programmes. In the following section, I will explain the basics of his theory while also making connections to its relevance to transition to school.

Understanding the ecology of human development

The *Ecology of Human Development* was introduced by Bronfenbrenner in 1979 to describe how humans develop and grow within the settings we participate. The relationship between a person and their setting is one of reciprocity where both the setting and the 'developing person', in this case a child, have an effect on each other. Bronfenbrenner used the analogy of Babushka Russian dolls to describe the dynamic interconnected systems of Ecological Development. The doll in the very centre is the *microsystem*. It includes the settings that the child participates in, for example, their home and their ECE centre. It also involves the interactions, or *proximal processes*, which occur both with

the child and in their presence. These interactions are considered to be the most potent and influential in the child's development, especially when they are reoccurring and enduring (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The next Russian doll is the *mesosystem*. It refers to the relationships between the settings. The child is not directly involved but is still affected by the interactions between the participants in these settings, for example, the connectedness of parents and teachers. The third doll is the *exosystem*. This includes additional settings that affect the child, even though they are not even present in them, for example, their parent's workplace. The fourth doll is the *macrosystem*. This refers to the consistencies of all the other dolls that form its culture, such as belief systems and bodies of knowledge that are evident in national curricular and educational policy.

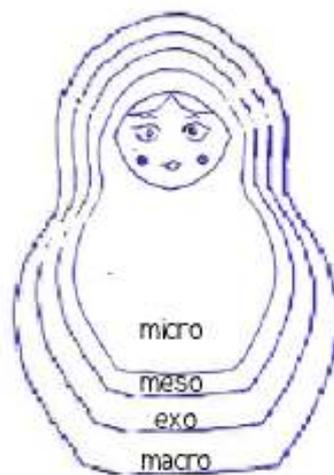


Figure 1: Pictorial representation of the systems in Bronfenbrenner's Russian doll analogy.

As the developing person becomes an adult, the complexity of this theoretical framework increases as more settings, participants and links come into play in each system (Clausen, 2001). In applying this theory to a child, it remains fairly straightforward as their *micro* and *mesosystems* are more structured and defined.

A weakness in this initial theory was that greater emphasis was placed upon the contexts rather than the development of the individuals in these contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). He sought to increase the profile of the *person* by fusing biology, psychology and behaviour with his already popular model. Bronfenbrenner reformulated and further developed the features of his previous model to create the Bioecology of Human Development with the introduction of the *Process-Person-Context-Time Model (PPCT)*. *Process* includes the concept of *proximal processes* and this was extended to not only include a child's interactions with other people but also their interactions with symbols and language (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

The *person* component includes three interplaying functions which account for the different developmental outcomes of *proximal processes*. These functions include: *dispositions* that instigate or sustain *proximal processes*; *bioecological resources* such as abilities, knowledge, and experiences; and *demand characteristics* that encourage or inhibit social

responses (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). These characteristics are both the precursor to proximal processes and also the outcome of these interactions. Of course, these functions not only shape the child in question but also characterise the other participants in their lives. These functions also account for how an event can be perceived differently by different participants, as they all bring different dispositions and resources to their perceptions.

Context, which refers to the Russian doll analogy that previously encompassed Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, was given a proportionate weighting with the other components. This reformulation of his 1979 model brought the *person* into focus and the *context* into partnership with the other components.

The concept of *time*, which was lacking from his original model, was addressed by adding a fifth system. The *chronosystem* was introduced by Bronfenbrenner and Morris in 1998 and considers how the developing person and their environment change or stay consistent over time, for example socio-economic status. Bronfenbrenner's theory, including his notion of *chronosystem* is applicable to the present research, where a short term longitudinal study is designed to collect data before and after a particular normative event, 'transition to school' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The occurrence of transition to school can be anticipated, and therefore, research can be planned around this event.

Bioecological transitions

Bioecological transitions take place throughout people's lives and occur when there is a change in the person's role, setting or both (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). These cause changes in the elements of each system. With regard to the present study, a child's transition to school shifts the context of 'school' from an *exosystem* to a *micro and mesosystem*. Before transition begins the school is part of the exosystem. Both the ECE centre and the school are part of a larger education system and links may have been created through the interactions of teachers between these two educational settings. A school's influence in a child's exosystem might be emphasised if they have a sibling who currently attends school.

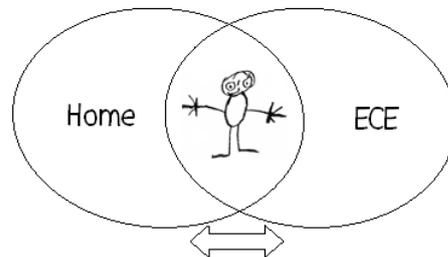


Figure 2: The simplified developing mesosystem of a four year old child before their transition to school.

Note: In this and consequential figures, a double headed arrow indicates a reciprocal relationship.

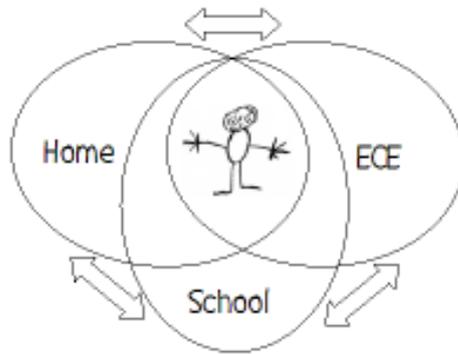


Figure 3: The simplified developing mesosystem of a four year old child during their transition to school.

As children enter their transition to school phase, adults in their settings start to form stronger links across settings, for example, parents may visit the school to discuss the new entrant programme with the teacher. The children begin to participate in their new setting when they attend their pre-entry visits but their role does not change fully until their ‘first day at school’, when they become an official ‘school girl’ or ‘school boy’. When the child starts attending school regularly the school becomes part of their *microsystem*.

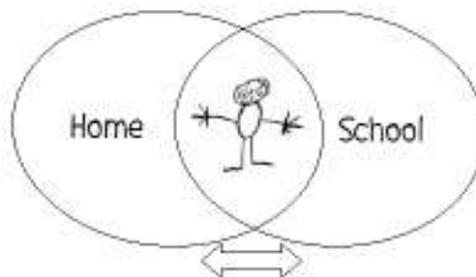


Figure 4: A simplified mesosystem of a five year old child once they have transitioned to school.

Using the 'adventure playground' metaphor to describe transitions

While Bronfenbrenner used Babushka dolls to describe his various systems of ecology, I have found the metaphor of an Adventure Playground useful to describe the transition to school. Metaphors are a linguistic tool that allow us to better understand a new or less familiar 'domain of experience' in relation to a more familiar one (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). I will incorporate the metaphor of an 'adventure playground' to conceptualise the intricacies of transition to school. Although in common language 'adventure playground' is used as a noun, I would also like to stress the 'adventure' as an adjective, in this instance, to emphasise the elements of challenge, adventure and growth in a child's educational journey. The playground represents the child's educational journey as a whole.

In modern adventure playgrounds, 'destinations' are joined together by 'links'. A 'destination' is a landing or a climbing wall and a 'link' is a bridge, flying fox or monkey bars. In my study, the 'destinations' of the Early Childhood Centre (ECC) and the school, are both part of the larger concept of the education 'adventure playground'. In Figure 5, I have chosen a monkey bar to represent the transitional link between the ECC and the school. In a junior playground, the monkey bars are generally sloped downwards to assist with the child's momentum to get from one 'destination' to the next successfully. Individual children tend to

approach the 'link' differently, some children being a little apprehensive and requiring extra encouragement and support, while others are excited by the challenge and it is not long before they are skipping rungs and adding their own flair.

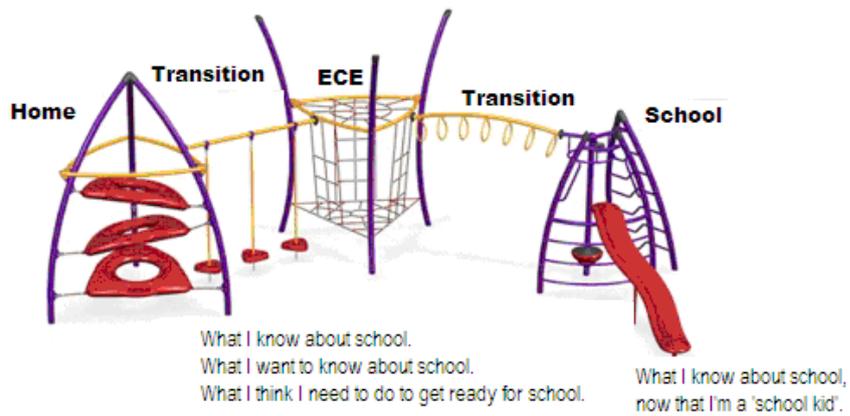


Figure 5: 'Adventure playground' transition to school metaphor

Literature review

In this section, I begin by exploring the meaning of an effective transition to school and its possible indicators. I then review the notions of ‘attaining effective transition’ from three different perspectives, the 3Ps: perception, policy and practice. I consider what makes an effective transition in national and international research, how it is sought through government policy in New Zealand, and how that policy is implemented through practice in schools.

What is an effective transition to school?

Throughout transition to school literature the words ‘smooth’, ‘seamless’, ‘successful’ and ‘effective’ are used interchangeably to allude to the concept of an ideal transition. There seems to be general agreement that an effective transition is one where a child is able to continue their learning journey while changing settings without undue disruption (Margetts, 1999). In this study, I have chosen to use the term ‘effective transition’ to describe the notion of an ideal transition. For me, the terms smooth and seamless negate that learning occurs through change and that it is important for a child’s development that both the elements of continuity and challenge are evident in transitions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). I also think that to refer to a transition as successful infers that

some transitions are not successful. To label a child's transition as 'unsuccessful' or 'less than successful' seems to imply that this is a final outcome. When it is identified that a child is experiencing difficulty in their transition, it would surely prompt teachers and parents to help the child overcome the barriers and make improvements for the child's benefit (Peters, 2010). Therefore, I feel more at ease describing such a transition as 'difficult' rather than unsuccessful.

The indicators of an effective transition are different depending on which stakeholder's opinion is being sought (Dockett & Perry, 2007). When a child starts school, both their teachers and parents observe their behaviour for the signs of settling into school. These signs may include being able to: follow instructions, work independently, make friendships, show contentment and confidence (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2006), display competence, reach expected academic outcomes, show general happiness, and portray a sense of belonging and safety (Margetts, 2007).

Building on these signs, Dockett and Perry (2004a) surveyed teachers and parents of children starting school in Australia in relation to effective transitions. The participants ranked 20 indicators to decide which behaviours were the most indicative of an effective transition to school. Dockett and Perry found that teachers ranked the indicators associated

with feelings as the most important, whereas parents prioritised the indicators associated with acquiring and displaying knowledge.

In contrast, children's ideas about an effective transition differ from those of adults. In the another study, involving 300 children either about to start school or having recently started school, Dockett and Perry (2004b) found out through small group interviews that the children equated success at school with having friends and knowing and following the rules. In Hill, Comber, Loudon, Rivalland and Reid's (1998) Australian study, they found that knowing the rules of school provided children with the predictability that helped them to feel secure, while they adjusted to their new environment. Rules were referred to regularly at school and covered social, behavioural and academic etiquettes. They were explicit and assisted the children with their concept of 'doing school'. I have noticed that most children work out quickly what it is acceptable and not acceptable to do. Teachers reinforce these concepts when they praise children in reference to 'knowing the right thing to do' or refer to children's inappropriate behaviour as 'not yet knowing what to do at school'.

What is a difficult transition to school?

Many indicators of difficult transitions were evident to Ladd and Price (1987), as they observed American children in their ECC and school in

order to see if it was plausible to predict children's social adjustment at school while they were still in ECE. The children were observed in free play sessions two to three times a week for a four to six week period. The observation periods occurred on three occasions: when the children still attended ECE, when they began school and at the end of their first year at school. In their school observations they noted: crying, appearing anxious, regular visits to the sick bay, poor attendance, inattentiveness, and clinginess.

Furthermore, Kienig (2002) conducted a study in Poland, which was based on the assumption that all children experience some degree of stress when they start school and that this stress can manifest itself as changes in their behaviour. Using a classroom behaviour inventory, teachers identified the behaviours that were evident for each participating child at the beginning and at the end of the year. Children who were having difficulty transitioning to school were noted to display: eating problems, sleeping problems, toilet training regression, anger and aggression, contact avoidance, reluctance to participate, and/or academic difficulties.

As an experienced teacher, I think that some behaviour explicitly shows that children are having a difficult transition. It is not terribly difficult to tell that neither the child clinging to the car door, nor the child running

out the school gate after their mother, is particularly enjoying their transition to school. I have found that some children internalise their feelings and become worried over the changes to which they are expected to become accustomed. This worry has not become evident to me or their parents until a later date.

In research, what makes an effective transition to school?

In considering effective transitions, three major themes were evident in transition to school research. I will describe the concepts of continuity, relationships and school readiness while drawing on specific research that has been conducted in the area of transition to school.

Continuity

The United States Department of Education commissioned Love, Logue, Trudeau, and Thayer, (1992) to conduct a large scale study involving 1,169 schools to investigate continuity in transition. Their study focussed on the commonalities of successful ECE programs and sought to identify and measure levels of continuity of these in New Entrant classes. Only 21 percent of school districts reported offering a wide range of transition to school activities and all of these school districts were high poverty areas. This was attributed to the perception that generally it is children from high poverty backgrounds that have difficulty adjusting to school and

only schools in high poverty areas need to offer support through transition to school activities. The continuances that were focussed on in this research were: developing between sector communication, planning and understanding; and providing developmentally appropriate programmes in New Entrant classrooms.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy reviewed the ECE policies of 12 countries (Neuman, 2002). New Zealand was not one of the participating countries in this comparative study. One of the findings was that continuity and similarity between the ECC and the new entrant classroom are evident and important throughout education policies in OECD countries. Niesel and Griebel's (2001) longitudinal study in Germany surveyed teachers and parents, and interviewed parents and children to ascertain their perceptions of 'children's coping skills' in relation to transition to school. They surmised that the emphasis should be placed on developing a philosophy of coping with change and discontinuities, rather than developing a philosophy where continuity is contrived. They stated that coping with transitions should be a curriculum focus in all educational settings, and that children should be taught the skills for dealing with change.

On the other hand, in a study focussing on a New Zealand school and its three contributing ECCs, Peters (2000) found that even though children in her study found some discontinuities unsettling, these did not cause the children to have a lasting negative attitude towards school. Some discontinuities were seen by children in a positive light. Transition to school is fraught with discontinuities, with changes in physical, academic, and social domains (Margetts, 2006). Discontinuities in the physical environment are immediately evident: larger buildings, larger grounds, different location of toilets, less freedom with inside and outside flow, different equipment and classroom layout. The discontinuities in the academic programmes and expectations become evident through the classroom programme and its routines: increase in structured activities and formality; more instructions to follow and less discovering for oneself; higher expectations on independent work output; and longer days with predetermined times for eating and playing. There are also many changes that effect social relationships: new children and teachers, higher child to adult ratio, more children, longer time away from their family, and less family involvement (Love, Logue, Trudeau, & Thayer, 1992; Margetts, 1999).

Focussing overly on continuity can be to the detriment of challenge, excitement and development, and a balance should be sought. My initial understanding of the concept of continuity focused on retaining the

familiar and continuing with what was previously in place. The concept of continuity that is discussed in research is more complex than just retaining familiarity across settings. Continuity in transition is focussed on educators building an understanding of what has been before, in order to encourage continued progress.

In terms of the adventure playground metaphor, continuity is not levelling a climbing frame and travelling across a link to then find that the destination is a replica climbing frame. When educators understand the adventure playground as a whole, they can see the child's learning journey as a big picture. Then children can be encouraged and supported in using the skills from their last conquered piece of play equipment to explore the operations of their new destination piece.

Relationships

Research studies focussing on relationships in a child's transition experience have looked into the significance of the relationships between a child and their peers, a child and their teacher, a parent and their child's teacher, and an ECE teacher and school teacher. Margetts (1999) conducted a comparative study of four Australian schools to consider the impact of transition to school programmes on children's adjustment to school. She found that having a child that they already knew in their new class was highly significant to positive school adjustment. Children who

already had a 'playmate' in their class were identified as having better social skills, less problematic behaviour and greater academic ability.

Furthermore, teachers also have an important role in welcoming children transitioning into their school. The New Zealand 'Going to School' Research Project involved surveying 300 parents, 30 ECE teachers and 300 New Entrant teachers. It also included observations of 30 children in different ECCs one week before they started school, on their first day of school and one week after they started school. The researchers found that children developing a positive relationship with their teacher helped the children to settle quickly into school and be happy (Renwick, 1984).

Another important relationship to foster is the 'home-school' partnership, as a child's family transitions to school with them. Fabian's (2000) study explored the challenges children face when they start school and how they can be helped to meet these challenges. She interviewed 50 children and their parents from two schools in the United Kingdom. She concluded that families were better prepared to support their child in their transition if the families felt that they were working in partnership with the school. Suggestions for ways in which schools can encourage parents to be involved in their child's early years at school and ways to help them feel valued included teachers ensuring that the first contact they had with parents was informal and personal; providing information to parents that

is sufficient for the purpose and is written with parents as the target audience; and showing a genuine interest in each family, their knowledge of their child and their role in their child's education. This is also supported by researchers who have found that being responsive to a child's background enabled them to develop a greater sense of belonging at school (Love et al., 1992).

In considering the relationships between sectors, Timperley, McNaughton, Howie, and Robinson's (2003) New Zealand study found that the relationships between ECE teachers and primary school teachers were not all as they seemed. The majority considered that they had a moderate to strong relationship with their closest ECC or school and identified that they preferred to work in a collaborative and co-operative manner with the facility in the other education sector. But few participants were actually satisfied with the role that the other sector played in the transition to school process. The researchers recommended that the organisation of transition to school needed to be better structured between facilities, so that both parties had shared goals and expectations.

School readiness

The concept of 'school readiness' continues to be given weight in many circles, especially in America. The American National Governors Association recommended that all children will "start school ready to

learn.” (Graue, 1993, p.2). This implied that ‘school readiness’ was a quality or skill that was inside a child; an attribute that was constant and measurable (Graue, 1998). Graue (1998) conducted a study in three schools which focussed on the concept of ‘school readiness’. She concluded that school readiness was not a concrete concept and therefore screening children for school readiness was fraught with inconsistencies. Other researchers have also questioned the legitimacy of school readiness and stress the negative implications of policies that reinforce it (Renwick, 1984). The National Association for the Education of Young Children’s Public Policy Report (1990) expressed an alternative perspective of school readiness. It focussed on school being ready for the child, rather than the child needing to be ready for school.

Also a child’s role may change when they start school. The expectations that are connected to the role of a ‘school kid’ include how they will behave, the activities that they will be involved in and their relationships with others. *“Roles have a magiclike power to alter how a person is treated, how she acts, what she does, and thereby even what she thinks and feels”* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.6). Such a change in role, and possible consequential changes in a child’s behaviour and relationships are not able to be factored into a ‘school readiness’ measure. Therefore, I prefer to use the term ‘getting prepared’ instead of ‘school readiness’, as it infers a process to be part of rather than a standard to attain.

It is possible for children to gather information about school through a variety of sources: being included in discussions, listening to conversations, observing as a visitor, watching television and reading books about school. Dockett, Perry and Whitton (2006) analysed the context of 106 picture books about children starting school. These books were written in English and were published in Australia, New Zealand, America, Canada, the United Kingdom and Singapore. The most common themes in the picture books were children adjusting to school, children making friends and the rules of school. As described earlier, adjustment to expectations of school has been found to be of concern to adults (Dockett and Perry, 2004a), while the last two are themes have been considered as more important by children (Dockett and Perry, 2004b).

In policy, what makes an effective transition to school?

Learning, in early childhood especially, has an emphasis on children developing through discovery; Mana Aotūroa (exploration) is one of the five strands of *Te Whariki*, the current NZ curriculum document for ECE (Ministry of Education, 1996). *Te Whariki* also seeks to foster whakamana (empowerment) in children (Ministry of Education, 1996).

“It is important to make opportunities for the young child to experience new challenges...” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 26). Carr (2001), a co-author of *Te Whariki* explains that children learn through persisting with uncertain and difficult situations. She reiterates the old adage that we learn through our mistakes and that we should be encouraging children to be ‘willing and able’ to tackle change. When the New Zealand policies discuss children as learners, they are portrayed as explorers who are confident, competent and have the initiative and motivation to choose their own exciting adventures. Children are referred to as ‘contributors’ and ‘informed decision makers’ (Ministry of Education, 2007). The tension appears when policies discuss children in relation to their transition to school. In the context of transition, children are portrayed as vulnerable and in need of routine, consistency and continuity. “They need as much consistency and continuity of experience as possible in order to develop confidence and trust to explore and to establish a secure foundation...” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.46).

Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki, a strategic plan for ECE, was created by a 31 strong working party over two years, developed three main goals for ECE for the following ten years (Ministry of Education, 2002a). These goals were: increasing participation; improving quality; and promoting collaborative relationships. The proposed action to promote the goal of collaboration included: 1. developing an

understanding of the links between ECE and primary school education in teachers of both sectors, 2. educating primary school teachers on ECE pedagogy and curriculum; and 3. distributing information on effective transitions. Actions of note have included: 1. the development of cross-sector groups such as The Early Years Group, formerly run by University of Canterbury Education Plus, which brings together ECC teachers and junior school teachers to discuss transition and possible curriculum and programme linkages; 2. the implementation of programmes such as Early Childhood Primary Link via Literacy Project where ECE and New Entrant teachers have combined professional development to strengthen education practices and outcomes for the children in their community; and 3. commissioning Peter's *Literature Review: Transition from Early Childhood Education to School* (2010) and distributing 'Starting School' pamphlets to inform parents (Ministry of Education, 2009).

I found that some of language in *Pathways to the Future: Nga Huarahi Arataki*, (Ministry of Education, 2002a) inferred that children are far from being contributors and decision makers. It discusses adults needing to 'smooth the steps' for children starting school. Smoothing a staircase into a ramp does seem to really take the adventure out of that experience. Where have the fun, exploration and adventure gone? It appears that the cost of placing a strong emphasis on continuity and smooth transitions,

may be the loss of learning experiences as children develop through transitioning to a new setting.

In the Ministry's 2002 *Curriculum Stocktake Report* it highlighted that, "Smooth transitions between early childhood and school minimise the barriers to learning faced by young children. Disjunction in approaches to teaching and learning hinder a child's ongoing development and reduce gains made in early childhood education." (Ministry of Education, 2002b, p.9).

The disjunction between ECE and primary education was addressed through the alignment of the primary through to secondary curriculum *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) with the ECE curriculum *Te Whariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). These two documents are now viewed as complimentary. *Te Whariki*, the ECE curriculum is not only designed for children to learn in ECE but also to provide links for children to learn in school and other settings. "The early childhood curriculum provides a foundation for children to become confident and competent and, during the school years, to be able to build on their previous learning." (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 93).

These linkages are evident in the continuation of the ECE concept of learning dispositions, as it flows through to the primary school's key

competencies. Both the learning dispositions and key competencies are, “...combinations of ability, inclination, and sensitivity to occasion, and refer to the competencies and skills that enable children to keep learning.” (Mitchell, Wylie & Carr, 2008, p. 2).

Learning dispositions and key competencies contribute towards a child’s sense of identity and role. The connections are deliberate and provide flow from one document to the other, for example *contribution* at an ECE level develops into *participating and contributing* at a primary level. In transitioning from one curriculum to the next it “builds upon and makes connections with early childhood learning and experiences” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 41). The continuances in the documents have made it simple for many New Entrant teachers to utilise *Te Whariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) in their programme planning and assessment. As it was designed to improve learning and development for children from zero to eight years of age, it is suitable for integration into junior school programmes.

Ka Hikitia – Managing for Success: The Māori Education Strategy 2008-2012 (Ministry of Education, 2008) includes the goal of improving transitions to school for Māori children and their whānau (families) in its Foundation Years focus area. It states four main actions to be put in place to meet this goal which include resourcing, professional development,

reviewing processes and support. I found the most striking part of this strategy was its inclusive language. It discusses improving the transition from ECE to the school setting “for, and with, Māori students.” Even a simple linguistic technique brings back the vision of the children as empowered explorers.

In practice, what makes an effective transition to school?

Pianta and Kraft-Sayre state that the transition to school process is considered to be an important and influential transition which, “sets the tone and direction of a child’s school career” (as cited in Dockett & Perry, 2001, p.1). This puts pressure on those at the ‘coal face’ transitioning children into school. Transition to school programmes endeavour to make a positive start for each child’s educational journey. Through this section I will explain activities that I perceive as being ‘common-place’ in transition to school programmes in many New Zealand schools. I will discuss these practices under the three main themes that were evident in transition research: continuity, relationships and getting prepared. I have included reference to supporting literature, to give further clarity to the procedure or purpose of certain activities.

Many New Zealand schools have developed extensive ‘transition to school’ programmes to ‘ease’ children into school life in accordance with policies (Peters, 2010). The findings of Margetts’ 1999 comparative

study supported its initial hypothesis that children who start at a school that offers a high number of activities in its transition to school programme display fewer problem behaviours than children who start at a school that offers a low number of transition to school activities.

Continuity initiated in ECE

ECE centres often implement strategies to prepare their children for school. Many centres liaise with the schools to which they contribute. They inquire as to the programmes the schools use and ask advice as to what skills the teachers think are important for the children to have at entry. Many centres have compulsory mat times where literacy and numeracy skills are taught and some centres have separate preparation programmes for their four year olds which are conducted in separate rooms or at different times. Some ECCs that offer a transition to school programme are even using the curriculum for schools, *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) to design their programme. It could be debatable whether such strategies are creating interconnectedness or just introducing academic challenges and the expectations of school earlier in a child's life.

Continuity initiated in transition

Transition programmes are based on elements of continuity. Activities are balanced between providing familiar elements of their previous

education, while also assisting children to adjust to what is unfamiliar in their new setting. Such programmes endeavour to prepare a child for school so that their learning, or development, is not disrupted or adversely effected (Margetts, 1999). In New Zealand transition programmes often have an initial component of school orientation: a meeting with the principal; a tour of the school; an enrolment package including forms and brochures; visits to observe in a classroom; and meetings to explain the class programme. Following this orientation, aspects such as pre-entry visits, social events and graduated days are often tailored towards the child's needs and the needs of their family (Dockett & Perry, 2001).

Supporting a child in their transition can involve participants in the child's future setting being involved in their current setting. Many ECCs organise group visits to a school when one of their children is starting there soon. The group usually consists of an ECC teacher, the children who will be attending the school, other children from their ECC and the child's parents if they are available. They come for some class time and then stay to have their lunch and play. It also gives the ECC teacher the opportunity to catch up with their past students. Such a visit is considered an 'excursion', where expectations on the child are low and the support is high (Margetts, 1999).

In New Zealand, individual pre-entry visits usually consist of three or four weekly visits approximately a month before children start school. Parents are encouraged to stay with their child for the first visit but then gradually withdraw their supervision. Visits are graduated and get longer as the child becomes more accustomed to the school day. Visits are often structured so that different break times are included and children are supported through these. Due to break times being less structured, they have been identified as times that children may find daunting when they begin school (Peters, 1999). In some situations families are given a choice of days, where in other schools days are allocated for visitors. Pre-entry visits are designed to allow the child to become familiar with the new setting, participate in new activities, meet new friends, practise skills and be exposed to the expectations and rules of school (Margetts, 1999). Schools mostly acknowledge that individual children may need greater scaffolding for their transition to school, which may include more visits or greater support.

Continuity initiated in school

Often when children start school, several activities are provided that are similar to what is on offer at their ECC. Many classes offer familiar ECE resources, such as play dough, water troughs and developmental sessions where the expectations of the children are the same as at their ECC: to explore and discover. It is not the quest of a new entrant teacher to

provide an identical programme as an ECC but to include some familiar activities in which children will feel confident and secure in their likelihood to be successful. Klein, Kanor and Fernie (1988) explain that children have greater ease understanding tasks that include elements of predictability and continuity. Some schools survey their new entrant children, so that they are providing play equipment and activities that are familiar and enjoyable to them. This strategy has seen schools gaining the approval of their youngest children by building sandpits and purchasing role play equipment, such as play kitchens, for their new entrant classrooms.

Building Relationships

Although pre-entry visits lend themselves to building a relationship with their teacher, some further 'insider information' about the child is always handy for the teacher to have. Enrolment packages may include an 'All about me' book for the child to complete with their family to give to their teacher. Through this book a child shares their favourite things: toys, music, places to visit and this provides the teacher with ways of making connections with the child. There is also a page for parents to share any other information that they think is pertinent. This information can be used to comfort, distract and motivate. There are a myriad of strategies available to teachers with which to develop better relationships with children. One of these is schools using Christian names for staff as well

pupils. Although it has caused some debate, this is in keeping with Sergiovanni's (1996) suggestions for building relationships with students by removing patriarchal and authoritarian practise and also follows the lead of the ECE sector.

Many new entrant teachers view a child's ECE profile book as a valuable resource. Once a child starts school, they are encouraged to bring their profile book to school to share. This includes learning stories and snapshots of their time in ECE. It can take some time for children to feel comfortable enough at school to show their 'true selves' and therefore teachers often use a child's profile book to gain a greater insight into their strengths and interests. A child who has had difficulty in their ECE may not see the sharing of their profile book in a positive light. Transitioning into a new setting, may give a child the opportunity to make a break with old behavioural patterns and start afresh. It is important to discover a child's skills and interests, through methods that are suited to the child. Identifying these skills and then encouraging and supporting them to develop these further is often termed as 'building on funds of knowledge' (Peters, 2010).

School's have different systems for how many New Entrant classes they operate at any one time and the placement of New Entrant children within these. Placing friends in the same class, providing opportunities

for children in different classes to interact and teaching social skills through circle time (Roffey, 2006) can assist the children in maintaining the connections that they have.

The way in which teachers acknowledge a child's fund of knowledge and the progress that they are making is also important. As schools have adopted the learning stories of ECE, their methods of sharing assessment are becoming more positive and focussed on key competencies rather than on isolated skills (Carr, 2001). Reporting to parents on their child's academic achievement against National Standards in literacy and numeracy after only 20 weeks at school poses a difficulty. Reporting against a standard, in which it is expected that 50% of children in New Zealand are not expected to achieve by the completion of their first year of school (Ministry of Education, 2010), would be a deficit model. I consider that such a practice is not conducive to building on a child's fund of knowledge.

Many efforts are also made to develop positive home school links. Information evenings, triadic learning conferences, open door policies and general teacher friendliness encourage parents to feel valued and part of their child's school experience (Fabian, 2000). In considering the span of a child's education, I have noticed that regular communication between home and school is at its strongest in the junior school

classrooms. A positive relationship between home and school at the new entrant level is more important than at any other level in their school life (Renwick, 1984). The majority of new entrant children in urban primary schools are dropped off and picked up by a family member every day. This allows for regular face-to-face communication between the family and the teacher. Newsletters, class blogs, individual and group emails, phone calls and log books are also used to communicate information to families. Personal and direct interaction is considered the most effective method of communicating with parents (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Providing information and advice to families before their child transitions to school can enable the development of the child to be enhanced (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Often information brochures on transition to school are available for parents at their ECC and information meetings about transition to school are often held at ECE centres and schools. Social networks and events such as ‘coffee mornings’ can be used to impart information in a less formal manner and general word of mouth is a very effective way of distributing information about a school, with varying degrees of accuracy (Griebel & Niesel, 2001).

As a primary school teacher, I am appreciative of the communication that I have with ECC teachers, as they have a wealth of knowledge and experience working with individual children and transitioning children in general. Both settings can exchange newsletters, have combined

professional development and meet to gain a joint understanding of a particular transition concept. Schools that share a site with an ECC, appear to maintain stronger relationships and connections due to proximity and commitment. On an individual level, ECC teachers can provide specific information on a child to a school and therefore eliminate the ‘floundering’ stage where teachers are trying to work out whether a child’s behaviour is established or is transition related. This information sharing is usually only done for children who are considered ‘at risk’ of having difficulty adjusting to school and is conducted through meetings, phone calls or transition reports. This information and strategy sharing can minimise the negative experiences that a child may have starting school.

Getting Prepared

Parents do many things to help their child be prepared for school: bringing their child to school in the weekend to play on the playground; practising the ‘walk to school’ with their child; taking them to purchase school items; and reading them books about starting school, for example, *I am absolutely too small for school* from Lauren Child’s (2005) Charlie and Lola series. Families and ECE teachers endeavour to assist children to develop the social and emotional skills that will help them feel more at ease in a variety of contexts, including school. Broström (2000) discusses the concept of New Entrant classes being “child ready”, not just in their

physical environment but also being ready to socially and emotionally support children.

In advice to parents regarding preparing their child for school, the Ministry of Education (n.d.) suggests that it is helpful for children to be able to write their name, know colours, alphabet letters and numbers to nine before they start school. Some schools provide their transitioning children with a 'getting ready for school' pack. These include emergent literacy and numeracy games which involve the skills suggested above. They may also include information books or DVDs about their new school. Some schools use books and DVDs that have been created by their current junior school children to ensure that their information is targeted at the right level for the transitioning children.

Other familiarisation activities are gaining popularity in New Zealand schools. Southbridge School runs an 'Under 5's Preschool Programme' where children who will be attending their school are welcome to come with their families to the New Entrant room for 45 minutes one afternoon a week and be involved in typical class activities. 'I'm nearly five' or 'Starting school soon' parties are hosted by other schools to encourage children and their families to meet each other, their future classmates and their teacher in a fun and festive way.

Conclusion

Research and policy have placed an emphasis on the need for adults to manage a child's transition to school, in order for it to be smooth, seamless and not adversely affect their future learning. Schools have developed extensive transition to school programmes to promote a successful transition to school for all children and avoid children experiencing undue discontinuity and change. In the following chapter I will explain how I conducted this study in the children's natural environments with data collection methods that were suitable to the participants, their interests and their age. The considerations that I made were in an attempt to gain children's opinions on starting school and to see if this differs from the prevalent view of the education sector.

Chapter Two Method

Introduction

This chapter outlines the considerations that I bore in mind to make decisions and take actions, in order to gather the most relevant data for my chosen issue and answer my research questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I have included: the methodological basis of this study, its design; information about the participants and settings; descriptions and justifications of the methodology and data collection methods; and how I addressed ethical issues.

Research Questions

‘What does starting school mean to young children?’ and how can I ascertain this?

- What do young children know about school?
- How do they feel about going to school?
- How does their knowledge of school, and their feelings towards school, develop throughout the transition to school process?

Methodology

I used a qualitative research base to gather data on how the children made sense of starting school (Denzin & Lincoln in Snape & Spencer, 2003).

The five main features of qualitative research, as identified by Bogdan and Bilken (2007), are that it is: naturalistic; descriptive; concerned with process; inductive; and meaningful. The strengths and limitations are identified in the following table.

Feature and definition	Strength	Limitation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Naturalistic - Context important - Focus on observing participants in their 'natural settings' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Likelihood of capturing natural behaviour high - Data personal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Demanding for researcher - Time consuming - Researcher can affect 'natural setting'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Descriptive data - Great amounts of data - Words and illustrations collected through a variety of methods - Search for meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provides rich data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Same amount of time analysing as observing - Vast amounts of data means a great deal of time - Smaller populations are more viable for sample - Data can be tainted by researcher's position and beliefs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Concern with process - Focus on how things have occurred and developed, rather than the final outcome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Especially suited to consider 'why' or 'how' certain phenomena have occurred - Proven beneficial in the field of Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Procedures in finding the 'why' and 'how' are not standardised and rely on perception
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inductive - Purpose not to work towards proving or disproving a hypothesis from the outset - Use data analysis to methodically piece together a theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sets out to understand what is occurring - Develops theories and understanding from details 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Could be argued that it is not 'scientific'; it is difficult to apply reliability and validity. - Can be difficult to replicate due to the intricacies of the relationships that exist (Freebody, 2003).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Meaning - Meaning is paramount - Strives to gain the participants perspectives "<i>...how they make sense of their lives.</i>" (Bogdan and Bilken, 2007, p.7). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continuously question what is seen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'Meaning' is often contextual and cannot always be generalized to other settings

Table 1: The features of qualitative research.

I used a qualitative ethnographic approach, which provided me as a researcher with a vehicle whereby I could seek, and in turn value, the perspectives of the participants in their natural settings (Bryman, 2004). I was able to gather qualitative data in a variety of forms and then attempt to make meaning from it. “Ethnography involves an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context.” (Tedlock, 1994, p. 455). The methods I implemented were theoretically grounded, as I have detailed in chapter one. They were also the ‘best fit’ to answer my research questions and enabled me to gather extensive information on children’s multiple realities of starting school (Burns, 2000).

Researcher’s Position

I am the leader of the Year 0 to 2 Team in a primary school. As part of this leadership position, I am responsible for the development of our ‘transition to school’ programme and for overseeing its implementation. In this position, I liaise with six local early childhood centres. By selecting the school that I work at as the focus primary school, I was able to link this study to my current practice.

Green and Bloome (1997) refer to a study such as mine as ‘ethnography *in* education’, where the researcher is actively involved in education and

the setting of their study. In such a situation it is acknowledged that the researcher is working as an 'insider' and will be familiar with the setting, the participants and the activities that she is researching (Delamont, Coffey & Atkinson, in Freebody, 2003). My role had been previously established at the ECC through regular communication and visits, as a representative from my school. Once I started this study, I adopted the role of researcher whenever I visited the ECC.

The links between a child's settings can be strengthened by other participants (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and I was familiar with all of the participating children before I started this study. I had already developed a rapport with five of the six children, as they knew me as a teacher at their older sibling's school. My further involvement with the children in this study may have influenced their transition experience, as it strengthened their connection between their ECC and school. The children had an additional 'known person' when they began school that they would not have had otherwise. As a result, children might have felt less anxious and more secure in their transition. This may have changed the dynamics of the school setting for the participants and in turn, the data that I collected (Stake, 2003). This concept is represented in Figure 6, where my involvement meant that the school setting had an effect on the children, even though they were not yet directly participating in it.

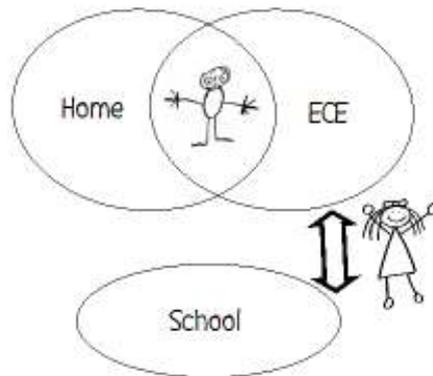


Figure 6: A simplified exosystem of a four year old child participating in this study.

I have tried to be mindful of the position that I have and the possible bias that I may hold towards my school setting (Stake, 2003). I have a vested interest in the school and its ‘transition to school’ programme. Even though I have been conscious of this influence, an element of this bias still remained. I have focussed on my role as a researcher and have prompted myself by asking “Which hat am I wearing: teacher or researcher?” while gathering and analysing the data. When Stella, one of the participating children (4 year old 10 month girl) expressed that she did not like school when “children were mean to me”, my natural teacher instinct was to unpack this further to set up a restorative chat between Stella and the wrong doers. Putting on my researcher hat, I unpacked this further with her to see how this had affected her feelings and perceptions of being at school. I am also conscious that my position as a leader in my

school may have influenced parents to participate in this study. Parents may have felt pressured or obliged to agree to be involved.

Design of this study

Time Frame

I collected data from six children between October 2009 to August 2010, for a period of one term at their ECC before each child started school and then for a period of one term at the school once they had started.

Child participant selection

Expedient selection was used, finding participants who met the following criteria (Freebody, 2003):

- 1 Transitioning from the focus ECC to the focus school;
- 2 Their fifth birthdays fell in the fourth term of 2009 or the second term of 2010; and
- 3 Classified as an 'in-zone' or 'sibling' enrolment in the focus school's enrolment scheme. Due to the focus school having an enrolment scheme, the only way to know that a child would definitely be accepted to attend in the future, was if they lived in the school zone or had a sibling who already attended the focus school.

Pseudonym	Gender	Place in family	Relationship with researcher *	Data Collection Schedule	Parent involved in data collection
Lara	Female	Youngest of three	I had previously taught her sibling.	5 sessions ECC 1 session school pre-entry visit. 6 weeks school holidays 5 sessions school	Mother
Abby	Female	Oldest of two		5 sessions ECC 1 session school pre-entry visit. 6 weeks school holidays 6 sessions school	Mother
Daniel	Male	Middle of three	I had previously taught his sibling.	5 sessions ECC 1 session school pre-entry visit. 2 sessions school 6 weeks school holidays 4 sessions school	Mother
Mackenzie	Female	Youngest of two	I had previously taught her sibling.	5 sessions ECC 1 session school pre-entry visit. 6 sessions school	Mother
Stella	Female	Middle of three	Her sibling attends the school where I teach.	5 sessions ECC 1 session school pre-entry visit. 6 sessions school	Mother
Alex	Male	Youngest of three	I currently teach his sibling.	5 sessions ECC 1 session school pre-entry visit. 4 sessions school 2 weeks school holidays 2 sessions school	Mother

Table 2: Details of Participants

*I had met all of the children in visits prior to starting this research.

Settings

Setting Selection

The focus school was selected, as previously mentioned, due to it being the school in which I work. This gave me the opportunity to work as a practitioner researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), as I considered the children's experiences throughout their transition to school. I gained permission from the school's Board of Trustees and principal (*Appendices A, B, C, D*).

The focus ECC was selected from the six main feeder ECCs, as it historically provided the focus school with the most in-zone and sibling

enrolments. In choosing just one ECC setting, I was able to use my visiting time with greater efficiency. I gained permission from the ECC head teacher and the participating teacher (Appendices E & F).

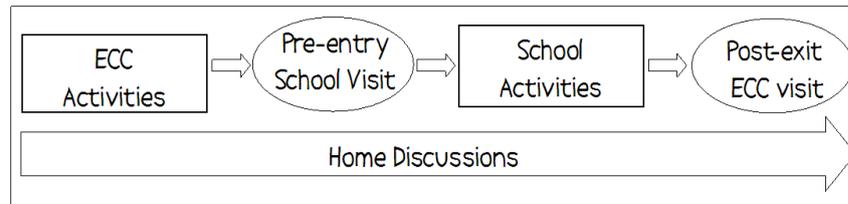


Figure 6: Chronological Data Collection in Context

I used a multisite design in which data were collected from three natural settings: the participating children’s ECC, primary school and home (Freebody, 2003). As a setting can influence children’s behaviour and responses, it was important that I collected data in settings that were regular features in their everyday lives, where the children felt safe and comfortable. Authentic settings were especially relevant, as I was seeking to ascertain the children’s own understandings and perspectives through qualitative methods (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). The focus ECC is a Kidsfirst¹ kindergarten with a roll of 45 children attending each morning and afternoon session. It is located in a lower to middle income area. It has strong community ties with generations of families attending this ECC. The children from the focus ECC make up the majority of the focus

¹ ‘Not for profit’ organisation of kindergartens in New Zealand.

school's in-zone enrolments. The focus school is a U5² full primary school with a Socio Economic Decile Band³ rating of 4.

Data Sources

Interacting with the children

I used a variety of techniques to obtain the children's views through their participation in activities specifically designed to involve and engage them (Christensen & James, 2000). Darbyshire, MacDougall and Schiller (2005) found that through using a variety of qualitative methods researchers become privy to children's insights that are difficult to obtain through using only a single method of data collection. I implemented activities based around play and interaction. My data collection activities included: picture drawing, photo taking, picture prompts, sentence completion, doll play and book compilation. The children were often more enthused by their own conversational topics, than the activity that I was offering them. I listened to them but then tried to steer the conversation back to the activity at hand. I hoped that by introducing questions as part of structured activities (Tammivaara and Enright in Smith, Taylor and Gollop, 2000); I would make effective use of the time I had with the children. As discussed in chapter one, I used child friendly strategies, as described below, to avoid losing the children's interest due to them not

² Roll of school. U5 being 301-500 children.

³ Statistical system ranked 1 to 10, where a decile 10 school's community has higher incomes and more qualifications.

being motivated by a ‘standard interview’ (Sanagavarapu and Perry, 2005). Although I designed my methods to be interesting, I found that I was often competing against all of the other interesting and motivating activities that were on offer at the ECC. Much of the data I acquired was from the children’s verbal interactions while they participated in the activities that I had organised. I acquired less data from questioning the children directly or from joining them in their play.

Recording of children’s comments by parents

Parents were asked to record verbatim any relevant ‘school discussions’ or comments by their child in a paper notebook for a period of up to two terms; one term before their child started school and one term after. All of the parents I approached agreed for their children to participate in this study.

Semi-structured interviews with teachers

I interviewed one ECC teacher and two New Entrant school teachers individually using semi-structured interviews based on the broad themes of: teacher’s perceptions of children’s behaviours when starting school and their transition to school programmes. I used direct questions, as well as scenarios focussing on transition to school in general (Appendix G). My focus for these interviews was not on the specific transitions of the participating children, as I did not want to lessen the value of the child’s own perspectives by comparing

them to that of an adult. I was also aware that my position in the focus school could affect the responses of the teachers. When I interviewed staff from my school, I offered them the opportunity to be interviewed by a research assistant rather than by myself but they did not take up this offer. I also reassured them that their answers would not have repercussions in their employment and I reiterated that I valued their perspectives and honesty.

My research journal

My research journal was invaluable to me and had a multitude of purposes: to plan, to observe, to reflect and to discuss. My planning included my initial ideas, possible activities and the structures for my visits. My observations included both planned and ‘on the spot’ observations. After I left the ECC I would sit in my car and write anything prevalent, adding more detail or depth to what I had seen and what I had already written. I wrote down things that I thought were relevant, to provide context to voice recordings and to focus my mind on the task at hand. I also wrote recounts of events after I had left the setting, as they struck me as being noteworthy. My reflections were of observations, conversations, meetings, frustrations and breakthroughs and the different roles that I was maintaining. I then used these Journal entries as a basis for my discussions with my supervisors.

Entering the setting

Before I started this study, I was familiar to all the ECC children and they were probably more inclined to behave naturally around me (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). Having sought permissions from the Head Teacher and parents, I then set about my regular ECC visits. Even so, before I collected any data I began a process of further familiarisation with both the ECC setting and the children. I visited the ECC on a weekly basis, involving myself in the children's play. During these visits I sought to spend most of my time with the participating children and the children with whom they played, while being mindful not to force my involvement in their play or 'overstate' my presence in their activities.

A touch of yellow paint on my top, a smattering of wet sand on my skirt and four artistic gifts in my hand. What a great morning at kindy. ☺

Journal Entry
14th October 2009
First familiarisation visit

Consent forms

To seek consent from the children I created a form that would appeal to them. I included a photo on the form of two dolls wearing school uniforms to which I added the symbols of a thinking bubble and a heart. I used the photo and symbols as visual support, to verbally explain that I wanted to

know what they thought and how they felt about starting school. Each child agreed that they would like to be part of this and completed their consent form with my assistance. I explained my project to the child using the consent form. I talked about: why I was interested in finding out about children starting school, how often I would be visiting; the activities we would be doing; and the equipment that I would use.

Techniques, Tools and Procedures

The activities detailed below were implemented in the order in which they follow.

Activities while the children attended ECC

Drawing

Literature suggests that Art has been found to be a nonthreatening and meaningful tool in research, where children can express their ideas in a way that is familiar to them. Art activities can either be used to facilitate discussion or eliminate the need for discussion with children (Coad & Houston, in Coad, Plumridge & Metcalfe, 2009). In asking the children to draw a picture of themselves at school, I was interested in seeing how they would depict themselves: what activity they would be doing, what/who they would include other than themselves and how they would verbalise what they had drawn.

I asked each child to draw two pictures: one of their own choice of setting and then one of them at school. I used prompts, such as *“Tell me about your picture.”*, *“What is happening in your pictures?”*, *“How do you feel in this picture?”* to get them talking about their drawing. Daniel, Abby and Lara willingly participated in this activity and happily drew themselves at school. Stella and Mackenzie wanted to draw pictures of their own choosing but did not want to draw a picture of themselves at school. Alex did not want to come to the art table with me at all. I decided to approach the activity differently and gave each family a set of colouring pencils and paper. Stella, Mackenzie and Alex willingly completed a drawing activity with their families at home on a set template with sentence prompts underneath (Appendix H).

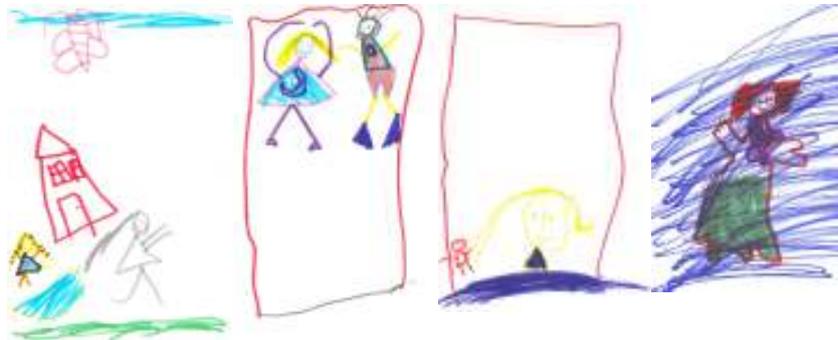


Figure 7: Stella and Mackenzie's drawings on their topics of choice. 'Me and my friend playing and we saw a butterfly.' and 'Cinderella and the prince dancing at the ball' by Stella. 'Me at swimming at the end of the pool' and 'Ariel is swimming in the water' by Mackenzie.

Emotion picture prompts

Picture prompts can increase the likelihood that children will become involved in an activity. As their name suggests, they can prompt children's thinking on a subject and the child may feel less pressure in holding up a picture card than verbalising their response (Heward, Courson & Narayan, in Godfrey, GrishamBrown & Schuster, 2003). 'Emotional literacy' teaching is becoming more prevalent in education (Sherwood, 2008). Children are being taught explicitly about their feelings and the feelings of others and are encouraged to learn positive ways to express their feelings. I decided to ask the children directly about their feelings in this activity. I was mindful that the cards could limit children's responses, as they may feel that an original idea would not be accepted, so I asked the children for their suggestions of additional feelings but none of the children ever made any other suggestions.

The use of Te Reo Māori for greetings, simple instructions, classroom objects and feelings is common place in New Zealand classrooms. From Statistics New Zealand data (2006) approximately 75% of the population identify with being New Zealand European and 15% identify with being Māori, New Zealand's indigenous peoples. New Zealand's official languages are Te Reo Māori, New Zealand Sign Language and English.

The children were shown a set of eight Māori / English emotion picture prompt cards that I had developed from a Te Ara Reo Māori course dictionary (Te Wananga o Aotearoa, n.d.). The emotions were: happy, sad, tired, cold, hot, fed up, angry, and good. I showed the emotion picture prompts one by one until the children had seen the whole set. I read the word on each of the cards in English and Te Reo Māori, changing the expression of my voice to fit the specified emotion. For example, I held up the card with the angry face and used an angry voice to say "*Kei te pukuriri ahau. I am angry!*" I then prompted the children to use facial expressions to show that emotion by saying "*Show me your angry face.*" I asked the children if they knew of any other feelings that they could tell me or show on their faces. I then said a sentence prompt which they completed by identifying a related emotion picture prompt. "*At kindy I feel...*", "*When I think about starting school I feel...*", "*When I am a school kid, I will feel...*" I prompted the child to then elaborate on their answer using "*What would make you feel... at school?*" and "*Why will you feel...?*"

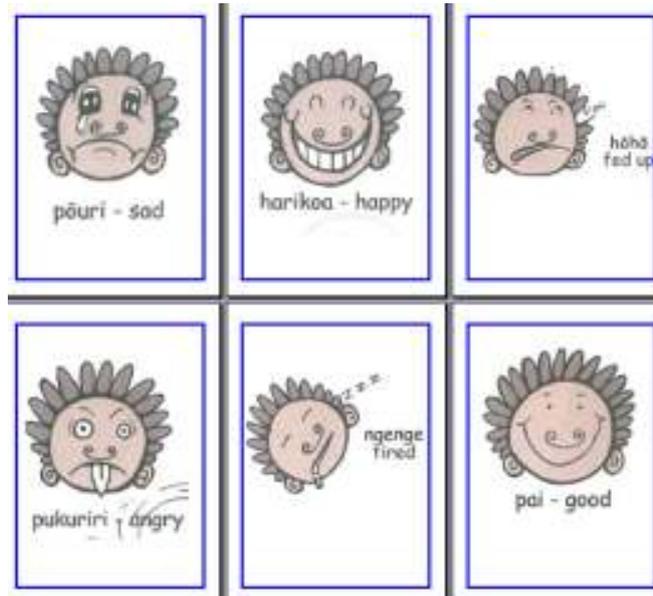


Figure 8: A selection of the emotion picture prompts.

'School kid' doll play

Using dolls to represent people has been used successfully in research to stimulate children's conversation. It is also thought that a doll's novelty value can put children at ease with the researcher (Ledger, 1998). I assumed that the children would be more at ease asking a doll questions about school, than asking me or a hypothetical school child. This also made the activity fun and enjoyable, so that the children might participate enthusiastically in the discussion.

On my fourth day of activity visits, I took two dolls to the ECC: one boy and one girl wearing school uniforms of the focus school. I asked the child if they would like to play with them and then I constructed an opportunity for

interacting with the children, asking them questions, such as “*What would you like to tell him/her about school?*”, “*What would you like to ask him/her about school?*” The children played them but treated them as babies and did not engage with the idea that they were school children as I had intended. Therefore I decided to leave the ‘school kid’ dolls at the ECC in the family corner for a month before I instigated any more interaction involving them. I used the same questions as before but I conducted the activity as a circle time session, rather than asking the children individually. Circle time is a technique used to promote social and emotional literacy, where children have the opportunity to listen to, and build upon, each other’s responses. It is based on the principals of choice, empathy, respect and reflection (Roffey, 2006).



Photo 1: ‘School kid’ dolls from the focus school.

Photo taking

Photography allows children to take control and feel autonomous in their contributions to research. Responses given through photography are often more diverse than those obtained through interviews (Darbyshire, MacDougall & Schiller, 2005). From my experience as primary school teacher, I know that children in Year One and Two often discuss their 'kindy teachers', 'kindy pets', 'kindy friends', 'kindy toys' and 'kindy trips'. I have also overheard new entrant children exclaiming that they are going back to their ECC, generally after their refusal to participate in a school activity. I was interested to find out what the children's favourite things were at their ECC and whether these things were available at the focus school.

To begin, I took a Tuffcam digital camera to the ECC and asked the children to take photos of their favourite things at their centre. Afterwards we looked through their photos together on the camera and I asked questions such as "*Why is that [object/activity] your favourite?*", "*Do you think they have [object] at school? Why/ why not?*", "*Do you think you will do [activity] at school? Why/ why not?*" The novelty of the camera seemed to override my purpose for the activity. They were more interested in taking the pictures than talking about them. Then I gave the children the digital camera to take home for the weekend and then bring it back to their ECC on Monday. I encouraged them to take as many photos as they wished. I then visited them at their ECC on Tuesday and I asked the children to take photos of their five

favourite things at ECC. Each child spent 3 informal days using the camera before I engaged them in my activity. I walked around with them as they took the photos and I asked them the same questions as before. This process was at least four days per child. As a lot of the other children at the ECC were interested in using a Tuffcam themselves, I left a Tuffcam at the ECC for an additional three months for any of the children to use.



Photo 2: Tuff cam

Pre-entry visit discussion

Each child came to their New Entrant class on three pre-entry visits and I met with them on at least one of these, before they had started school. I was curious to find out what they had learnt from their visit and what information they thought was important to share with me. I had an informal conversation with them individually while they were visiting about what they had been doing at school and what they had found out.

Activities when the children started school

These activities were completed in the following order. Due to the children starting school on different dates, the activities were staggered. I often withdrew the children from their classroom to complete these activities, as staying in the classroom tended to distract other children from their programme.

Initial meetings at the school

I purposely sought out the participating children at break times to talk to and reconnect with them in this different setting within a week of them starting school. My intention was to reassure the children that even though our roles might have changed, I was still interested in their perceptions of school and in asking them about it.

Tour

I asked each child to give me an individual tour of their classroom to show me their favourite things, within a month of them starting school. I also prompted them to show me other things outside their classroom that they liked at school. These tours lasted for approximately 2 to 20 minutes.

Sentence completion

The children at the school are involved in a circle time lesson at least once a week. A common element of circle time is a sentence completion activity

called 'pass the sentence'. Incorporating this activity into my data collection meant that the focus children all got the chance to voice their opinion on the topic, while also listening to others' contributions. On one occasion I took the circle time session instead of their classroom teacher. In this session, the sentences we used for 'pass the sentence' were: "*I think that school is... because...* ", "*My teacher is.... because...*", "*My favourite thing about school is...*", "*I don't like ... at school.*"

Book compilation

Creating a book with photos and text gives the participants a more active role in the data collection process, as the children make choices about what they will include (Dockett & Perry, 2007). I have used this as a learning activity in my class in the past, where Year One and Two children have made a book about school for children who will be starting school soon. I was interested to find out what the new entrant children would want to include in their book. The children had some technical support from their buddies to create their book but the buddies did not contribute to any of the content. All of the New Entrant, Year One and Year Two children at the focus school had older buddies. This *tuakana-teina* system was developed so that the older child could develop their own skills while they supported the younger child with their reading and writing.

Text

I explained to each child that it would be helpful for the children who were still at their ECC to have a book that told them all about school. I started by asking them “*What do the children at kindy need to know about school the most?*” and “*What will your friends at kindy want to know about school?*” I acted as a scribe for them, as they told me what they wanted in their book. I also prompted them for more detail to further explain what they said.

Photos

Older buddies followed a set procedure to get a photo for each page of their buddies book about school: 1. read the text for one page out loud to their buddy; 2. ask the younger buddy where they would like to go to have this photo taken; 3. ask their buddy what would like to be doing for this photo; 4. take the photo. Repeat for subsequent pages. I had initially planned for the children to take the photos for their book themselves but after Lara shared her disappointment with me “*If I take the photos, I won’t be in my book.*” I changed the procedure.

Giving the books to the ECC

I had planned to send the books to the ECC after the children had finished them but Lara asked if I could take them “like the big school girls” so that they could take their books personally. I had taken three senior school children to the ECC as part of their ‘Education Is Everywhere’ elective. Lara

had voiced that she was keen to do this herself when she was older. I organised the excursions to the ECC with three children at a time. We also printed a copy of each of their books so that they could take it home to their family.

Revisiting emotion picture prompt activity

I revisited the emotion picture prompt activity to introduce reflection using groups of three children. I prompted their discussion by saying “*At kindy you thought you would feel... when you started school. How do you feel now?*”

Making a card

Making cards is a popular activity at school and I often find myself with more cards than I have wall space around my desk. I thought that the children would see this as an enjoyable activity and also a caring gesture on their part. The children made a card for their teachers at their ECC. I prompted them with possible content for their card. “*At school I am good at....*”, “*I have to work hard at....*”, “*I miss...*”

Improving my data collection methods

As suggested by Sanagavarapu and Perry (2005), I adapted my data collection activities to become more interesting and novel for the children. I introduced several incentives to hopefully increase their motivation to be involved in the activities I was offering. These incentives included: a

TuffCam, a digital camera designed for children for the children to use at home and at their ECC; an EasiSpeak voice recorder, that looks like a microphone for the children to use; a set of colouring pencils each for them to draw a picture about school which they could keep afterwards; and a pair of ‘school kid’ dolls that I left at the ECC, so that the children saw them as their own and were more comfortable with them. Fortunately, the children were more enthused about participating in my activities when I adapted my data collection activities.



Photo 3: Easispeak voice recorder.

Ethical considerations

Ethical permission for this study was granted by the University of Canterbury, College of Education Ethics Committee.

Trustworthiness

In the design of this study, I have considered Lincoln and Guba's (2002) guidelines for addressing trustworthiness: *credibility* – I have used the data I

collect to portray a true picture; *confirmability* – I have included relevant vignettes of field notes and transcripts to show that my findings are based on data; *transferability and dependability* – I have provided enough detail to allow others to decide whether the findings can be applied to another setting or to allow the study to be replicated. In saying this, I acknowledge that ethnographic studies can be difficult to replicate due to the intricacies of the researcher's position (Freebody, 2003); and *triangulation* – I have gathered data through a variety of methods: observations; activities; and semi-structured interviews, gathered data from multiple sources: the children; their ECC teacher; and their school teacher, and used different people to collect the data: myself; and the parents, in order to obtain information that is rich and complex.

Integrity

In the design of this study, I have considered and implemented Snook's (2003) guidelines for addressing ethical issues: as already mentioned I obtained permission to gain access to participants from the principal of the school, supervisor of the ECC and Board of Trustees; the information page and the letter of consent were read and signed by the participants (Appendices B, D, F, H & J) and included: *voluntary participation* – they were given the option to participate; *right to withdraw* – they were notified that they were able to withdraw at any time before publication without repercussions; *informed consent* (adult participants) they were made aware

of the procedures and what was expected of them. Forms were posted to adult participants; *informed consent* (child participants) as Curtin and Murtagh (2007) point out, children have the right to express their view and should have a ‘say’ in matters which affect them and therefore I also created an information and consent form for the children (Appendix K). I explained this study, and the form, to the children individually; and *transparency* – I treated participants with honesty and truthfulness especially in relation to the purpose of this study.

Confidentiality was assured by pseudonyms being used for the children and adults. Also the names of the kindergarten and school were not used. Total *Anonymity* was not possible for participants, as my identity as the writer of this research and my position in the school is stated. Dates on some data excerpts have been withheld, as these would identify children’s date of birth and further jeopardise their anonymity. I know that some parents were not worried about anonymity and told other parents that they were involved in this study. I have only included photos in which the subjects are not identifiable. I will securely store the data for five years and then destroy it (Davidson & Tolich, 1999); and strategies to build *rappport and reduce anxiety* were implemented to prevent psychological harm throughout the data gathering process (Snook, 2003).

Approach to Data Analysis

During data collection

In qualitative research, analysis of the data begins at the data collection phase and continues when data collection is complete (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). When transcribing the audio files of the data collection activities, I made comparisons to previous transcriptions and considered their similarities and differences. I noted some key concepts that were emerging. Although I found this informal analysis interesting and engaging, when reading the data after finishing data collection I felt that I would have gained further insight from revisiting certain issues with children.

Just coding a couple of transcripts – Alex’s tuffcam transcript. In hindsight I would love to have investigated this concept further utilised his honesty. I could have found out more about rules and perceived rules. Bother ☹!!

Journal entry
15th June 2010

Post data collection

I followed Bogdan and Biklen’s (2007) guidelines for an effective data analysis procedure. I immersed myself in my data. I repeatedly listened to the audio files while reading the transcripts, read the home notebooks, looked through the artwork that the children had gifted me on my visits and put the photos from the ECC as a rolling screensaver on my laptop. This was a very

self gratifying exercise, as familiarising with the data allowed me to rekindle my ethnographic experiences. I not only relived the data collection stage of this study but also my own experiences of early schooling. I dragged out my childhood photo album and reminisced about my own kindergarten and J1 experiences. As already noted I could not remember my transition specifically.

I then re-examined my research questions and critically read through my transcripts and other data. I decided that the data that I had collected were relevant and pertinent to my questions. I reaffirmed the themes that had become evident throughout the data collection phase and pondered on where I should go next. I felt lost for a while and became a little overwhelmed with the task ahead of me. Evidently I was not following Bogdan and Biklen's (2007) guidelines as I had thought. I had nine pages of transcribed interviews with teachers, 23 pages of dictated text from the children for their books, 31 pages of transcription from voice recordings, 39 pages of recorded children's comments by Mothers, in addition to my own research Journal. I felt a little swamped.

So many pieces of paper! Too many pieces of paper!... transcripts, notebooks, bits of children's work, booklets, photos... argggghh!

Journal entry
24th August 2010

Around this time I came across Lecompte and Priessle's (1993) jigsaw analogy. Their suggestion was to get a feeling for my data, consider what sense it was giving me overall and then imagine how the pieces would fit together. I had unsuccessfully been trying to force my data together. Their analogy rang true; it is so much easier to complete a jigsaw when you have a picture of the completed jigsaw to guide you. This was encouraging. It was my mission to discover the big picture and then fit the pieces of the jigsaw together. My data analysis was not going to become the Rubik's cube of my childhood; it would not be the random rainbow patterned cube that was thrown to the back of my wardrobe in defeat. I felt reassured that I needed to make sense of the data, not 'beat it'.

First of all, I looked at each child individually to gain a sense of their experience of starting school and of being a participant in this study. I then got out my multicoloured highlighter and searched my data for possible themes and patterns. Four main themes became evident in the data. I then considered the data from each collection method discretely. I noted down 'vignettes' as I went, to provide evidence of the themes that emerged and identified the commonalities and differences between the responses from the participants. Some vignettes were pertinent to several themes. I chose the theme that it most strongly displayed. I then asked a fellow graduate student to 'peer review' my coding in a sample of my transcripts, as a trustworthiness measure.

Conclusion

Through using the methods outlined in this chapter, I was able to gather a wealth of data related to my research questions to transcribe and analyse. The array of data collection methods that I used were well grounded in qualitative theory and I have obtained many insights from the participants about their transition to school, while adhering to the ethical guidelines that I have stipulated. Having collected the data with all the rigor, detail and ethical care that I could master, I will describe my understandings of the children and the themes that were evident in the data in the next chapter.

Chapter Three Findings

Introduction

In this chapter I will present the findings of this study. I will start by introducing you to the six children who participated in this study. I will then identify the six themes that have become apparent in the data: four from the children and two from the teachers.

Meeting the children

Two boys and four girls participated in this study. All children were identified as New Zealand European and lived in an area which is considered to be a middle to lower socioeconomic suburb in a New Zealand city. When I started working with the children the youngest was 4 years 8 months and the oldest was 4 years 10 months. All of the children attended the focus ECC and transitioned to the focus school either on their fifth birthday or, if their birthday was in the school holidays, as soon as school resumed.

Lara – “Can I be a kindy helper...?”

Lara was keen to talk to me whenever I visited her ECE and enthusiastically involved me in her play. She willingly participated in all of the activities I offered and often encouraged other children to join in too. She seemed keen to please me and asked me on several different occasions if I liked her. She

would often include things about me in her conversations and seek my approval for her kind gestures.

Lara and I were making each other 'food' at the play dough table and then cooking our culinary delights in the oven in the family corner.

Nicole What will you do when you're at school?

Lara Read... and come to your room to give you hugs.

Nicole It will be great to see you at school.

Lara I'll be happy everyday when I see you at school.

Journal entry
29th October 2009

Lara appeared to prefer the company of adults and older children while at her ECC. This may be related to her being the youngest child in her family and being used to spending time with her older siblings and their friends. She spent a lot of time with the three senior school children when they came to her ECC each Thursday as helpers.

Lara had been sitting at the 'creating table'. This is a table with a variety of craft materials and tools that the children use to make their 'creations'. She was sitting with one of the girls who was a 'kindy helper'. They had made each other a glitter flower picture. Lara ran over to me.

Lara Can I be a 'kindy helper' with you when I am a school girl?

Nicole I am sure you could. Would you like to come back to kindy to help out?

Lara Yes. Soon.

Nicole Oh no. You have to wait till you're a Year Seven.

Lara Okay, I'll wait till I'm 7.

Nicole Oh... a Year Seven is a... ten or eleven year old. Big, like [name of kindy helper]. You will be a great big kindy helper when you are ten or eleven.

Lara (calls out to the kindy helper) Yeah, I can be one!

Journal Entry
3rd December 2009

Lara liked to spend time with me at school and often asked me to join her and her friends in their pretend play. One of the games was an imaginative game that she called 'kitty cats'. She would 'check in' with me when I was on duty and ask when I was going to visit her class again to see her. She was confident and used her initiative to make changes for herself and others. She prompted me to add things to this study and was the instigator of the ECC visit to take their 'book about school' to their teachers. Lara was motivated, assertive, liked organising and definitely promoted action.

Lara, Daniel, Abby and I were sitting on the wooden decking outside their classroom. We were making cards to send to their kindy.

Nicole What do you miss at kindy Lara?

Lara Pippa (ECC teacher participating in this study)

Abby Pippa and [name of another ECC teacher].

Nicole What else was there at kindy, that you wish we had at school?

Daniel The sandpit.

Nicole But we have a sandpit here.

Daniel Not with water!

Nicole You're right.

Daniel Or the Bob the Builder blocks.

Lara Or the music with Pippa.

Nicole When you held hands in a circle on the music mat?

Lara And did dancing... we did the Jibidee.

Nicole I saw you doing that. It looked like fun.

Lara So when are you going to get it for me, again?

Journal entry
25th March 2010

Daniel – “I am Daniel and I am being good all day at school.”

As a toddler, Daniel watched the ‘goings on’ of my classroom from behind the safety of his mother’s leg, to which he remained firmly attached. His brother was in my class for over a year, yet he always seemed fairly shy around me and seldom replied to my hellos. I noticed that whenever he was visiting school, even when he was outside and close to the colourful playground, he would stay by his Mother’s side. He was always attentive and closely observed others from his secure standpoint.

At his ECC, Daniel would often answer my questions by shrugging his shoulders or by saying “*I don’t know*”. He tended to avoid eye contact with me and would use a little squeaky voice when I instigated discussions about school. I interpreted these nuances as him feeling uncomfortable with my questions but unfortunately I did not clarify this understanding further by asking other people if he also responded this way in other situations.

We were sitting at a table under the awning at the ECC. The children were helping each other to complete puzzles.

Friend I play T-ball at school. I have to hit the ball.

Nicole Oh cool. What games do you think you’re going to play when you get to school Daniel?

Daniel I don’t know.

Nicole Do you know what games children play at school?

Daniel I keep on forgetting.

Nicole You keep on forgetting. Oh no. What does [name of brother] play at school?

Daniel My friend [name of brother], he plays rugby.
Nicole Is that another [name of brother]?
Daniel No
Nicole Is that [name of brother] your brother?
Daniel Yes

Voice Recording
11th November 2009

A group of children and I were sitting in a circle outside on a blue vinyl mat. The mat had been placed on the bark in a space between the jungle gym and the big tree. We had the set of emotion picture prompts spread out in front of us.

Nicole How do you feel when you are at kindy?
Daniel Happy
Nicole Why do you feel happy at kindy?
Daniel I just do. (looked puzzled)
Nicole What makes you feel happy at kindy?
Daniel (shrugs his shoulders)

Voice recording
3rd October 2009

When Daniel started school, his ‘shrugs’ decreased and he began to answer my questions about school more readily and with detail.

Daniel made his ‘book about school’ with me today. He told me SO MUCH about school – with confidence – with detail – without nervousness – without a squeaky voice!! Go Daniel! I was so wrapt ☺!!

Journal entry
22nd April 2010

Daniel’s Mother mentioned that his transition did not seem as ‘hassle free’ as that of his elder brother. She noted his apprehension about going to school and his worry about being separated from her.

But I will just miss you at school Mum!!! How many sleeps till the weekend?

Daniel’s notebook entry
March 2010

For the first two weeks of school, he would ask his Mother each morning if she could pick him up early from school.

“Mum, can you pick me up at 2 o’clock today?”

“Don’t forget to pick me up at 2 o’clock today Mum not 3.”

“Shall I get [name of school receptionist] at the office to ring you to remind you to pick me up at 2 today?”

Daniel’s notebook entry
(no date given)

Despite these comments pulling on her heart strings, his Mother was confident that he was fine once he was at school. I noted that in the classroom, Daniel was a focussed child who liked to do the right thing. He was a popular member of his class who was caring towards others. As a keen sportsperson, Daniel enjoyed playing sport with his older brother and his brother’s friends on the field at break times.

Abby – “You don’t hurt at school, eh ‘Cole?”

The first time that I met Abby, she was playing outside on the swings at her ECC. The ECC teacher Pippa was watching Abby and called me over. Abby was about to swing on the swing bar. Pippa told me that Abby had been attempting to flip herself over using the swing bar for a long time and her perseverance had recently paid off.

“Ready Pippa?” Abby checked that Pippa was ready to take her photo, and then she held on to the wooden bar with her hands. Pippa was taking a photo of Abby to use in her learning story. She nodded and counted down for Abby, “Three, two, one, go!” and she flipped herself over. It didn’t look easy for her but she had such a look of determination on her face that the line from the Ready to Read book “Keep trying... you can do it.” [Buxton, 2001, p2] sprung to my mind.

Journal entry
16th October 2009

On several of my visits to the ECC, Abby asked me to watch her flip herself on the swing bar again, to which I happily obliged. It was great to see her face beam with the feelings of success and accomplishment. Not only on the swing bar but in many other situations, Abby showed that she was in charge of her own learning and she was able to organise others to suit her purpose. At ECC, Abby was happy to hang out with me, if I did not ask her too many questions. If she tired of my questions about school, she would simply announce “*I’m going now*” or “*I’ve finished now.*” and true to her word, she was off.

We were using the emotion picture prompts on the blue vinyl mat.

Nicole How do you feel about starting school Daniel?
Daniel Happy, happy. (put this with Daniel)
Abby Okay. My turn now? Ummm I am being ummmm...
Nicole How do you feel about starting school Abby?
Abby (yells) Sick! (pointing to the sick mauiui card)
Nicole What makes you feel sick about starting school?
Abby Nooooooooo not sick! Good! (points to the good ‘pai’ card) I’m just going now. (runs inside)

Voice recording
3rd October 2009

Abby's organisation was not confined to that of people, she also created her own words if she was unsure of the correct terminology for something and was happy to experiment with how she answered my questions.

Abby and I sat at the creating table. She had drawn a picture of herself at school and was putting glue and glitter over it.

Nicole So, what's happening in your picture, Abby?

Abby It's a school girl.

Nicole What's the school girl doing?

Abby It's me and I'm doing big stuff.

Nicole What kind of big stuff are you doing?

Abby Lyfees

Nicole What are you doing here? (pointing to the picture)

Abby Gruppies, perkies and bims. (pointing to the things on her picture)

Nicole What's a perky?

Abby I don't know.

Voice Recording
29th October 2009

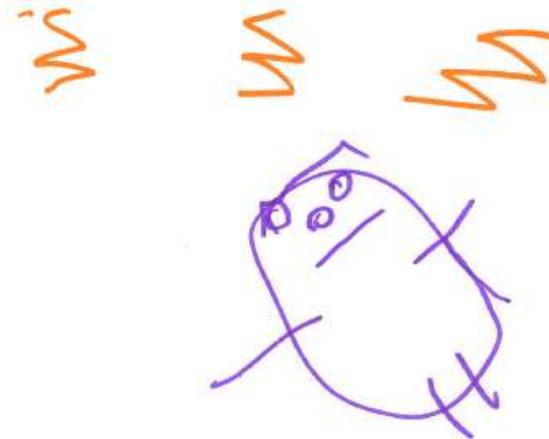


Figure 9: Abby's drawing of a big girl at school.

Abby and another child were on the swings beside each other. I was taking turns giving them a push.

Nicole When are you going to start school Abby?

Abby On a Thursday.

Nicole And how old will you be when you start school?

Abby Five... Just tricks... I need to go inside now.

Journal Entry
26th November 2009

When Abby turned five she became an expert on the dos and don'ts of school. She liked to tell other children the right thing to do so that they would not get into trouble or get hurt. She was not bossy or overbearing but liked to help others. Even though Abby made sure that she always stuck to the rules, she was also forgiving of other children's discrepancies even when they were against her. She struck me as being a very kind thoughtful child who was cautious and rule-abiding.

Today Abby ran up to me in the playground,

Abby Hey 'Cole, where's [child's name]?

Nicole He's in the thinking room.

Abby Why?

Nicole Because he hurt you and [other child's name] remember. Are you okay?

Abby Yeah. I better go there. He can say sorry to me... and play with me. (And off she ran.)

Journal entry
12th March 2010

A group of children ran up to me as I was walking passed the adventure playground.

Friend [Name of child] is hiding inside.

Abby Cole, Cole, [name of child] is hiding under Mandy's (New Entrant Teacher's) desk in our class.

Nicole Did you tell him that he needs to be outside?

Abby We said you're not allowed under Mandy's desk but he didn't listen. He's not making good choices!

Journal entry
23rd March 2010

In the playground Abby walked up to me. Her arm was around her friend's shoulders. Her friend was crying.

Abby [name of child] pushed [name of friend] for no reason.

Nicole Oh no, are you hurt?

Friend (shakes head)

Nicole Let's find [name of child] so we can have a chat.

Abby You don't hurt at school, eh 'Cole?'

Journal entry
3rd March 2010

Mackenzie – "I like writing about princesses who get dead and then the prince kisses them".

Mackenzie was three when I first met her. Her older sister was in my class. Each morning Mackenzie would play with the equipment from the maths trolley, while her sister did spelling with one or both of her parents. Mackenzie was a confident child and enjoyed telling me and the others around her about her latest endeavours and accomplishments in great detail.

From the time that I started this study Mackenzie was keen to share her expertise with me. She was very sure about what she knew about school and I was called 'silly' if I tried to suggest the possibility that things could be otherwise.

The 'school kid' dolls had been in the family corner of the ECC for several months. In the family corner there is a variety of dolls, a bed, table and chairs and a variety of play kitchen equipment.

Friend *What do you do when it's [school] finished?*
Doll(Nicole) *When school is finished I get picked up and*
then we go home to have some afternoon tea.
Mackenzie *No! You have afternoon tea at school Silly*
Billy!

Voice recording
4th May 2010

Mackenzie also liked to bring other children to me and instruct them “*Tell Nicole about...*” to make sure that I was not missing out on the ‘kindy gossip’.

Mackenzie brought [name of younger boy] to me. “Show Nicole how your new hoody works.” She instructed him. Once he had shown me that the hood zipped up to make a mask, she prompted him “Tell Nicole where you got it.” To which he gave a one word answer and then he turned and they walked away together. I was somewhat waiting for her to ‘dismiss’ him. It was quite comical ☺

Journal Entry
4th May 2010

Despite all the information she told me about school during my visits ECC, her Mum and Dad said that she rarely talked about school at home. She was more interested in talking about princesses and getting married.

Mackenzie’s confidence remained high throughout her transition to school. During group conversations, she would often interrupt to tell the others how they should respond to my questions. Sometimes the other children went along with her suggestions but usually they ignored her interruptions and shared their own ideas. She was not deterred if they did not comply.

Mackenzie's delight in sharing her knowledge, and showing her skills, continued when she started school.

We were in my office and I was scribing for Mackenzie on my laptop, as she told me the things she wanted to put in her 'book about school'. She was telling me about phonics and then she started to list everything that she could see in the room, telling me what letter each item started with. "Book, b. Nicole, n. Pen, p. Mat, m..." She was undeterred when I attempted to distract her and get her back on track with the book. She just kept on going. ☺ She only put a stop to her impressive feat when the bell rang to mark the beginning of break time. ☺

Journal entry
3rd August 2010

Stella – "Are Emily and John friends at school?"

Whenever I arrived at the ECC, Stella would run up to me and give me a big hug. Then it was a common occurrence for her to ask me a barrage of questions about her sister and then run off to play with her friends.

*Stella Did you see [name of sister] at school?
Nicole Yes, I saw her at Jump Jam.
Stella Who was she standing with?
Nicole I'm not sure... probably [name of child] and [name of child].
Stella or probably [name of teacher].*

Journal entry
4th May 2010

Stella would participate in the activities I offered as long as one of her two 'best friends' would come as well. She liked to have them with her as support. If her friends were offering something else, I was just out of luck!

Her friendships were very important to her. She often talked about her friends and said to her Mother that she was worried about how starting school would affect her friendships. She was not only concerned for herself; she was also concerned for the well being of her friends. One day before she started school, Stella asked her Mother,

When I go to school, who will [name of friend] play with at kindy?

Stella's notebook entry
15th April 2010

Wow I had totally pigeonholed Stella as a super 'confident child'. Of course, children (or people in general) aren't confident 100% of the time but I had got the general sense from Stella that she was very assertive. I've noticed that when her friends are absent, or they have had a 'falling out' she appears very shy and lacking in confidence. Perhaps she gains her confidence from feeling secure when she is with her friends and family. I find the polarity of her behaviour/self assuredness intriguing.

Journal entry
20th May 2010

Stella often sought to make connections with other children. She was a definite 'favourite' with the older children once she started school.

Coming back from kindy with the kindy helpers today, they told me that Stella had invited them all to her fifth birthday but told them that they had to be patient because it was not till next year.
☺

Journal entry
4th December 2009

Stella was the second of her friends to start school. Eventually, the three of them were in the same class and this provided security for the girls but also caused some drama, as already mentioned this was a theme for her. Stella

showed anxiety about her friendships and the difficulties she encountered. Her Mother noted that Stella mentioned several times about being left out at school and being upset with her friends.

[Name of child] and [name of other child] would not play with me today.

Stella's notebook entry
28th June 2010

I had nobody to play with today, so I went and found [name of sister].

Stella's notebook entry
6th July 2010

[Name of child] would not let [name of other child] play with me today.

Stella's notebook entry
5th August 2010

Stella showed how creative and imaginative she was when she played with the 'school kid' dolls. She named them Emily and John and introduced them to other children. Her concepts of relationships were also evident when she played with the dolls. Sometimes the dolls were friends and sometimes they were brother and sister. Once Stella started school, she liked to come to my office to see if Emily and John were okay at school and play with them.

Alex – "I've got millions of friends at school too!"

Even though Alex's brother was in my class for over a year, I did not see Alex often before I began this study. When he came to school with his Mother and older brothers, he was keen to stay playing outside and run around with the other children. When Alex did come into the classroom, he

was friendly but did not offer information freely. He would answer my questions when I persisted. This pattern carried on when I started this study. Alex was more interested in playing in the sandpit than talking to me. He was always polite; he would acknowledge me by saying hello and giving me a smile but his work in the sandpit was of greater importance than interacting with me. I had to work hard to engage him and I found that it was easier if I managed to catch him in between tasks. Connecting with Alex meant that I needed to join in with his sand and water play 'boots and all'. It seemed to delight him that I ended up getting as sandy as he did. Alex is an active and sporty child who shows a great sense of adventure.

Alex was taking photos of his five favourite things at kindy. He had taken a photo of a painting that another child had completed and left on the painting easel. For his next shot he asked his friend to jump on the large canvas bean bag.

Alex *Now jumping on the bean bag. (running towards a place the children call 'imagination land', a sunken area where the bean bags were).*

Alex and friend *Arrrr (yelling as they run)*
(Friend starts jumping on the beanbag and Alex takes his photo)

ECC teacher *We don't jump on the bean bag remember.*

Nicole *Oh no! You're not allowed to jump on the bean bag at kindy.*

Alex *It's still my favourite though. (smiling)*

Journal entry
20th May 2010



Photo 3: Alex's first photo of his favourite things at ECC.⁴



Photo 4: An action shot of Alex's friend jumping on the beanbag.

At home, Alex told his Mother that he was concerned that he would not be ready for school. He wanted to 'know his letters' for school. I will discuss

⁴ No children are identifiable in the photos in this study.

this point in more detail within this chapter. Once Alex started school he was happy to complete activities with me, but then as it happened, I only interrupted his class time and not any of his 'out of class' playing time. Alex told his Mum that his favourite parts of his school day were playtime and lunchtime.

Mum *How was your day?*
Alex *OK, good.*
Mum *What was good?*
Alex *Playtime.*
Mum *What part of the day was your favourite?*
Alex *Lunchtime*
Mum *Why?*
Alex *I didn't have to do any writing!*

Alex's notebook entry
14th June 2010

Other than his worry about the academic requirements, Alex seemed fairly confident about coming to school. He knew a lot of children who were already at his school including: his two older brothers, their friends and other friends of the family. He maintained an interest in his friends who were still at the ECC once he had transitioned and looked forward to them starting school.

Alex *I saw [name of friend].*
Nicole *Where did you see [name of friend]?*
Alex *On the kindy trip and we see [list names of children].*
[name of friend] is going to have a visit tomorrow
and I'll get to see her.

Voice recording
15th July 2010

Now that I have provided you with a sense of the participating children: who they are and how I saw them, I will now share with you the themes that eventuated from the data.

Themes

The next section outlines the main themes that became evident through this study. I would like to explain these themes by using the metaphor of a child playing on an adventure playground. In this study, I found commonalities between what the children discussed before they got onto the monkey bars and while they were on the monkey bars (transitioning to school but not having started yet). These themes were: what I know about school; what I want to know about school; and what I think I need to do to get ready for school. Once the children had dismounted from monkey bars onto their new destination, the main theme was: what I know about school, now that I'm a 'school kid'.

“When I go to school, I will never ever, ever go back to kindy.” What I know about school.

The children were more enthused to tell me about their current activity or other interesting events that had been happening in their lives, rather than talk about school. They were engrossed in what they were doing on their current part of the 'playground'; it was fun and engaging and they weren't too concerned about the other parts of the 'adventure playground'. Future

destinations were in the distance, while they were revelling in the present. They shared some gems with me about what they knew about school. This information was mainly prompted at the beginning of this study but became more fluid as the children ascertained my interest in their ideas about school. I have grouped the children's knowledge of school into three main categories: concepts, facts, and terminology.

The concepts

The children discussed complex concepts about school. The three main concepts were attendance, learning and uniforms. It is likely that the children acquired their understanding of these concepts through being a member of a family where school is a setting in their *exosystem*. It is a setting in their sibling's *microsystem* and therefore they are affected by this even when they are not directly participating in it. The children discussed the concept of school attendance: when they would start; which days they would go to school; how long they would spend there each day; how long they would spend there in total; the finality of it; and how long and tiring it would be.

When I was using the emotion picture prompts with a group of children, they showed that they understood that they would be transitioning to school and that this meant they would not be attending their ECC anymore.

Daniel When I go to school, I will never ever, ever go back to kindy.
Abby and then I can't... and then I will miss school... I mean will miss kindergarten school."
Daniel When I turn five and that's it.

Voice recording
3rd October 2009

I sat with Mackenzie as she made a card for her Dad at the creating table.

Mackenzie When I go to school, I'll go to another class and then I'll come to your class and I'll play on the playground and do writing and play inside and go to the library. I'll go to school and then I'll have two sleep ins.

Nicole How many days will you go to school before you get two sleep ins?

Mackenzie I don't know. (She starts counting on her fingers.) I'll go to school on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Satur... No (laughing) not Saturday! Saturday is my sleep in day!

Journal entry
10th March 2010

Lara was using the emotion picture prompts to answer my questions about how she felt about her ECC and starting school. She had indicated that she was happy at her ECC and also felt happy about starting school.

Nicole How will you feel when you are at school Lara?

Lara When I go to school I'm going to be tired. (picks up the tired 'nge nge' card)

Nicole Why are you going to be tired at school?

Friend I'll be sleepy

Lara No, because at school it's long... when it's a school day it's long."

Voice Recording
3rd October 2009

I joined Alex with a group of children. I had sat down with him and a group of children who were making a variety of things out of half spherical plastic cups. I spotted a girl whom I had not met before and we introduced ourselves.

Nicole How old are you?

Friend I don't know.

Alex She's four. You have to be four to go to this morning kindy. Three for in the afternoon and four for the morning. Then five for school... five, six, seven, eight.

Nicole What about when you are nine?

Alex (Shrugs his shoulders.)

Nicole What about when you are 15?

Alex You go to high school.

Nicole And when you finish high school?

Alex You play netball.

Nicole What about for a job?

Alex Netball.

Journal entry
18th February 2010

The children discussed the uniforms that they would be wearing to school. It is likely that this would be the first time that they had to wear a uniform and it was quite a novelty for them. As mentioned earlier, they liked to inform me of their uniform purchases but they also talked amongst themselves about the finer details of their uniforms. As Daniel and his friend were getting hats out of the box to wear outside, they told each other about their school uniforms.

Daniel When I start school I have to wear a school hat on me.

Friend I have to wear a hat, my sister's old one, I have to put it in my bag.

Daniel I have to put on my new uniform.

*Friend I have to put on my sister's uniform.
(both children burst into laughter)*

Voice recording
17th November 2009

The children discussed the expectations they had of the learning that would take place once they got to school.

I talked with a group of children about the 'school kid' dolls that have been 'living' in the family corner for a while now.

Nicole What the kids do at school?

Stella Play

Mackenzie Play

Nicole What else do they do?

Stella Learn

Mackenzie Learn

Nicole What might they learn about?

Stella Maths

Friends Maths

Nicole What else?

Alex They learn reading books.

Voice Recording
4th May 2010

Lara told her Mother:

After Christmas I will go to school and learn to read and write.

Notebook entry
22nd December 2009

When Lara was drawing a picture of herself at school, she said:

Our teacher will teach us... She will teach me to read.

Journal entry
29th October 2009



Figure 10: Lara's drawing of herself at school.

Lara was talking to me while she and her friends were playing in their 'house', a metal climbing frame which was outside on the bark.

Lara I'm going to see you at school.
Nicole What will you be doing when you see me?
Lara reading... or writing...
Nicole What will you be doing when you write?
Lara I will learn to write lots of things.
Nicole Like what?
Lara Like numbers... and letters.

Journal entry
5th November 2009

At home, Alex asked his Mother:

Alex How long till I'm five?
Mum Three months
Alex Good. I want to start school.
Dad Why?
Alex So I can be with my friends and... (looking at Mum with a big grin) I can learn.

Notebook entry
2nd March 2010

Sometimes the children's concepts were directly linked to what they had been told by their siblings or parents, those who had already swung along the monkey bars and played on this part of the 'playground adventure' before. Stella told her Mother,

When I go to school, I'll learn all about Africa.

Notebook entry
10th April 2010

This was because her sister's current inquiry was about 'making a difference for the children in Africa'.

I was privy to the development of the children's concepts about school as they started their pre-entry visits. During their visits they were just that, 'visitors'. Their visits were another rung on the monkey bars. Visits provide children with the opportunity to observe the interactions occurring in their 'destination', follow what others are doing and even experiment a little but as an 'outsider'.

I sat with Lara at a barbeque table outside her classroom while she was on her school visit.

Nicole What are the rules at school?

Lara Playing inside and sitting on the mat time and Mum taked me here...she read us another story.

Nicole What other rules have you had today at school?

Lara There is a thinking spot.

Nicole There's a thinking spot. What is the thinking spot about?

Lara I don't know because I haven't been in there.

Voice recording
8th December 2009

Through my conversation with Lara it became evident that for the children to truly understand a concept they needed to have a personal interaction with it, or observe the interaction repeatedly. The children learnt more about school through their school visits and attending school. Through their new experiences they strengthened or re-evaluated the concepts that they had held earlier. Lara's knowledge of the thinking spot developed once she had started school. After approximately one month at school, she explained the concept of the thinking spot to me:

Nicole *Have you been on the thinking spot yet?*
Lara *No!! (laughing)*
Nicole *Do you know what the thinking spot is for?*
Lara *You need to sit in the naughty spot to think what you
was doing wrong.*

Voice Recording
9th March 2010

At times there were discrepancies in individual children's concepts. The children had differing opinions on what would happen at school. They expected that their ideas about school would be the same for their friends at ECC but this was not always so. They had developed their own realities. The more certain the child was about what they believed, the more their opinion seemed to be valued.

Mackenzie and two of her friends were sitting at a table underneath the outside awning. They were creating 'works of art' by cutting up sticky paper and putting it on pieces of card.

Friend *I'm going to my brother's school. He is going to protect me if I have any problems at school.*

Mackenzie *[Name of sister] won't protect me. I'll tell the principal or my teacher if I have any problems with the big kids.*

Friend *My brother is going to protect me and play with me.*

Mackenzie *No, he isn't (laughing). You play with your friends at school.*

Friend *Oooh! He said he would play with me. (looking worried)*

Friend 2 *I'm going to play with my brothers.*

Mackenzie *Nooo! (Still laughing)*

Friend 2 *Oh!*

Journal entry
12th February 2010

I was playing with Lara and her friend in the family corner. We were dressing the 'school kid' dolls.

Lara I've already got my school uniform.
Nicole What are you going to wear to school?
Lara Clothes
Friend School clothes
Lara A top, a school top with a wee patch on it [school emblem], not a normal top.
Friend A school dress
Lara Shorts
Friend No! No! Not shorts. A school dress!

Voice recording
4th December 2009

The facts

I call 'the facts' the small bits of information that the children were definite about and knew to be 'true'. Sharing these facts weren't isolated to the children that I was studying. I found that the children at the ECC wanted to share 'the facts' about their school transition.

Abby's Mother jotted down in her notebook that once Abby knew which school she was attending, she liked to announce this to the people she met. She was proud that she was going to be starting school and saw it as a step towards being a 'big girl'.

At the shopping mall / supermarket – Abby informed the checkout lady that she was "Going to [name of school] School."

Abby's notebook entry
1st December 2009

Went to the doctors, Abby told her that she would be "going to big school soon."

Abby's notebook entry
6th December 2009

Ongoing - Is always telling Nanna, Poppa and Aunty that she is going to [name of school] soon.

Abby's notebook entry
(no date given)

I started to encounter the 'run-by'. This consisted of a child running passed me while yelling out their latest update about school.

As I walked up the kindy driveway, a little boy climbed up and popped his head over the kindy fence. Then he yelled to me "I got my school uniform yesterday." Before I even had the chance to respond, he gave me a cheeky grin, popped down from the fence and he ran off towards the kindy building... hilarious!!

Journal entry
17th November 2009

Despite their initial keenness to share this information with me, they were often reluctant to answer any further questions on their 'run-by' topic. The most common 'run-by' shoutings were: "*I'm going to your school.*" or "*I'm not going to your school.*", "*My teacher is [name]*", "*I'm going to be in Room[number]*", "*I'm going to [mode of transport] to get to school.*" This phenomenon also occurred at school when the children came to pick up their siblings. They told me of various signposts that meant they were on their way to starting school. As the next part of their 'adventure playground' loomed closer, they became more interested in their next destination and wanted to talk about it more. These signposts included the measure of time until they started school or started their school visits, whether that was months, weeks, days or sleeps.

I was rushing between two buildings at school, not long before the 3 o'clock bell was going to go. There was a group of Mums talking by the adventure playground and three children were taking turns on the flying fox. As I got closer Stella started yelling my name, jumped off the flying fox platform and ran towards me.

"Nicole, Nicole, it's five sleeps till I start school." (holding up her hand to show me her five outstretched fingers)

Journal entry
Date withheld

The terminology

During this study the children mentioned that when they went to school they would *learn; write; do maths; read; and play games* but when I prompted them with further questions, they weren't sure of what these activities would actually entail. They knew that you did them at school but they weren't clear on how or why.

Nicole Are you worried about anything about school?

Lara No! Happy!

Nicole Are you excited about anything about school?

Lara Yep! Reading!

Nicole Ohhh really.

Lara Heaps of things.

Nicole Heaps of things.

Lara And playing mouse... maths

Nicole Playing maths? What are you going to do when you are playing maths?

Lara Ah... What... How do we play maths? (whispers to her friend)

Voice Recording
17th November 2009

It appeared that ‘maths’ was a term that Lara had heard, perhaps from her older siblings who attended school, but she was not sure what it was. This was also evident when she mentioned playing games at school.

Nicole *When you think about starting school, how do you feel?*

Lara *Happy*

Nicole *Why do you feel happy about starting school?*

Lara *because!*

Nicole *because why?*

Lara *I get to see you.*

Nicole *Oh, tricky. What else do you feel happy about when you think of starting school?*

Lara *Reading... so I can read.*

Nicole *That will be great.*

Lara *And playing games*

Nicole *What kind of games do you think you'll play at school?*

Lara *Any games*

Nicole *Which ones?*

Lara *Oh any.*

Voice Recording
11th November 2009

“How many sleeps till I start school?” What I want to know about school.

The children tended not to ask me questions about school. Perhaps I had not built a relationship of trust with them or they did not see this as my role. They asked their parents questions about school though. From the conversations that their Mothers recorded in their notebooks, it seemed that the children increased their knowledge of starting school by asking their parents key questions. The children asked two types of questions: ones with static answers, answers that did not change, and non-static answers, answers that did change.

Questions with non-static answers

The questions that the children repeated most often were ones with non-static answers. These were questions in which the answers changed, such as questions concerning time. They repeated these questions to get updates from their parents.

Alex Mum, when do I start school?

Mum When you turn five.

Alex When's that?

Mum Can you remember?... [date of birthday]

Alex's notebook entry

17th February 2010

Alex How many days till my school visit?

Mum 2 weeks

Alex How many sleeps?

Mum 14

Alex's notebook entry

3rd May 2010

Mackenzie asked her Mother,

Mum, how long before I'm going to be five?

[reply]

Then I can start school!

Mackenzie's notebook entry

7th April 2010

After Abby's first school visit,

Often asks in the morning whether she is going to kindy or to [name of school] "Am I going to [name of school] today?"

Abby's notebook entry

"ongoing" – no date given

How long till I start school Mum? In [month].

When are my school visits? Soon.

But, I want them now!

Lara's notebook entry

18th November 2009

Questions with static answers

The children also asked questions that had static answers; answers that did not change. Even though the answers were static, the children often asked their parents these questions many times. When they repeated the question they would use a different sentence structure. It seemed that the children were repeating these questions to clarify the information that they had already been told about their ‘destination’ or to attempt to get more detail as their time on the ‘monkey bars’ decreased and their ‘destination’ came closer. Perhaps they also asked these questions to reassure themselves that the answer still remained the same even though time had passed.

Alex *Is Nicole going to be my teacher when I start school?*
Mum *No. She’s [name of sibling]’s teacher.*
Alex *Whose class am I going to be in?*
Mum *You’re going to be with [name of teacher]?*
Alex *The teacher from [name of sibling]’s old class?*
Mum *Yep*
Alex *She’s nice.*

Alex’s notebook entry
February 2010

Lara asked her Mother:

Whose class will I be in? Will I be with my friends?

Lara’s notebook entry
8th December 2009

When Lara asked for clarification about whose class she would be in, she changed the format of her question:

I’m going to be in [name of teacher]’s class, eh Mum?

Lara’s notebook entry
16 January 2010

Daniel also used a similar sentence structure when he repeated his question,

“[Name of teacher]’s my teacher, eh Mum?”

Daniel’s notebook entry
1st December 2009

Mackenzie had a different way to clarify what her Mother had already told her,

“Mum, am I REALLY going to be in the corner class and then in Nicole’s class?”

Mackenzie’s notebook entry
4th May 2010

“I’m learning to go to school now.” What I think I need to do to get ready for school.

From my conversations with the children, and from the notes that their Mothers wrote, it became apparent that the children had a sense of needing to get prepared for school. Their next ‘destination’ was different from their previous landing and they would need to make sure that they were ready for the new challenges that this one had to offer. The children seemed to have three main things on their checklist to be prepared to start school: having the right gear; being five; and gaining skills and knowledge.

Having the right gear

The children commented on needing the right gear in order to be able to start school. The children told me when they got their school uniform, school bag

and school lunch box as if they were very important milestones towards starting school. Alex told me,

Mum got me my school clothes. I'm going to be starting school soon!

Journal entry
13th May 2010

On the morning of Mackenzie's first school visit she asked her Mother:

"Will Nicole be there [at school] when I go there? I want to show her my Dora bag I got for school."

Mackenzie's notebook entry
5th March 2010

Even though, the children identified having their uniform a step towards starting school, they knew that wearing their uniform did not make them a 'school kid' yet.

On the morning of her first school visit Mackenzie decided that she wanted to trick me. She asked her Mother:

Can I wear the school uniform dress today? Then Nicole won't know that I'm not a school girl yet.

Mackenzie's notebook entry
6th May 2010

Alex placed great value on his uniform.

Alex Can I try on my t-shirt?

Mum What t-shirt?

Alex My school one.

Mum Sure. (helps Alex to put it on)

Alex I'm going to look in the mirror. (looks in the mirror then comes back) I look like a school boy.

Mum Yes you do.
(Alex folds up his shirt with utmost reverence and respect and hands it back!)

Alex's notebook entry
26th April 2010

Alex Mum, [child from kindy] had her school visit today.
Mum Wow, she must start school soon.
Alex Yes. When do I have mine?
Mum You have your first one in three weeks. Daddy will take you.
Alex Cool. How long do I stay?
Mum Just till first break. A couple of hours.
Alex Does Dad stay?
Mum Only if you want him to.
Alex Do I wear my uniform?
Mum Only if you want to.
Alex I will... not I won't.
Mum Why not?
Alex I want it to be nice for when I start for real.

Alex's notebook entry
7th May 2010

Lara dressed up in her school uniform when her friend came over to play.

She showed her Mother,

"This is what I will look like when I am a big girl going to school."

Lara's notebook entry
5th December 2009

Being Five

In New Zealand most children start school on their fifth birthday, even though it is not mandatory for them to start until they turn six. The children were all certain that they needed to be five to start school and that they would

all start school on their fifth birthday. This tradition is ingrained as part of our culture in New Zealand.

As I was putting the 'school boy' and 'school girl' doll to the family corner, a group of children gathered around and we started to play with them together.

Nicole *How old do you think these children were when they started school?*

Group *FIVE! (laughing)*

Nicole *How old are all of you going to be when you start school?*

Group *FIVE! (laughing)*

Nicole *Sometimes do children start school when they aren't five?*

Group *NO! (laughing)*

Nicole *Why not?*

Mackenzie *Everyone starts school when they are five, silly.*

Voice Recorder

4th May 2010

The notion that children might not start school when they were five seemed ludicrous to the children. Mackenzie wanted to just make sure that her Mother was truly aware of when she would be starting school and so she reminded her.

Do you know it's my birthday in two months and I'll be starting school then?

Mackenzie's notebook entry

10th March 2010

The strong relationship between being five and going to school was also evident when Daniel was trying on his school uniform. He said to his Mother,

You look like you're five when you have your uniform on.

Daniel's notebook entry
20th November 2009

The concept of starting school when you turn five is strong within the New Zealand culture but it is not true for every child. Lara found this difficult, as her birthday was in the six week Christmas break.

When is it my birthday so I can go to school?

Lara's notebook entry
5th Jan 2010

I'm five! I'm five! Can I go to school NOW??

Mackenzie's notebook entry
Date withheld

Gaining Skills and Knowledge

The children discussed needing to know how to do certain things, in order to be able to go to school. It was evident that this preparation concerned some children and they thought that they might not be ready for school in time for their fifth birthday.

The children joined me on the 'book mat', which is a corner of bookshelves, puzzles, a book easel, comfy chairs and a computer. We sat in a circle and talked to the school dolls and asked them questions about school.

Stella Why do you go to school?
Mackenzie To learn. That's why we have to learn. To go to school.
Friend To go to school to learn to get better and better.
Mackenzie I'm learning to go to school now.

Voice Recording
4th May 2010

In the same session on the 'book mat', writing was identified as a skill that would be needed in order to attend school.

Stella My sister can read and she can write.
Friend I don't know what... I don't know how to write letters. Do you know how to write letters?
Doll (Nicole) I know how to write letters because my teacher taught me. You can learn letters when you go to school too. Can you write your name?
Friend Yes [and spells her name aloud].
Doll (Nicole) Writing your name is writing letters. Writing your name is good for when you start school, isn't it? To write your name already.
Stella I can [spells her name aloud].
Alex So can I [spells his name aloud].
Friend 2 I can [spells her name aloud].
Mackenzie I can spell all my family's names [spells her own and her family members' names aloud].

Voice recording
4th May 2010

Alex in particular felt that he needed to know the alphabet to be able to go to school. The following excerpts show how he communicates this concept, how he works towards achieving his goal and how this concept is reinforced by his Mother.

Alex had his alphabet placemat on the dining table. His Mother sat with him saying the letters of the alphabet on the placemat in alphabetical order and he copied her.

Alex *I need my letters for school don't I?*
Mum *You certainly do. Shall we practise some more?*
Alex *No, later!*
(He hops down from the seat and exits smartly.)

Alex's notebook entry
17th February 2010

Alex *How long 'till my birthday?*
Mum *A wee way off yet. Why do you want to know?*
Alex *I want to go to school.*
Mum *That's cool. Today is [date] and your birthday is [date]...*
(Alex's Mother works out how long it is until he starts school by counting through the months).
Alex *Okay. I need to know my ABCs, don't I?*
Mum *Yes you do, their names and their sounds.*
Alex *Like b...b... b for ball?*
Mum *That's right. Well done.*
Alex *And I will eat my lunch out of my new green lunch box!*

Alex's notebook entry
23rd February 2010

Alex *Mum, Can we do my letters?*
Mum *Sure, you tell me the ones you know.*
Alex *(pointing to the letters) o, w, e, n, a, b, p, q, x, z, m.*
Mum *That's great! Do you know c...k...s...t...g...d?*
(waiting for Alex to point each time)
Alex *Will I be allowed to go to school now?*
Mum *Yes, I am sure you will... when you are 5.*
Alex *'Cause I know my letters, eh Mum?*
Mum *You are learning lots!*

Alex's notebook entry
14th March 2010

Alex *S for superman, spider, sun...*
Mum *S for Santa, summer and silly.*
Alex *I'm learning my letters so I can go to school!*
Mum *You are doing really well.*

Alex's notebook entry
12th May 2010

Alex's brothers were older than him and had been playing on the 'school destination' of their 'playground adventure' for a couple of years now. They had shared some of their experiences with him and he had observed them complete their homework in the evenings. His concern about being prepared for school may have stemmed from these observations and whatever 'pearls of wisdom' they had shared with him about school.

"Because I'm a school girl now!" What I know about school, now that I'm a 'school kid'

Once the children started school they had a new identity and with this role came new experiences and knowledge. They had propelled themselves along the rungs of the monkey bars and had landed at their next destination, ready to explore and discover. Without having played there for long, they became experts at being 'school kids'.

New role

With the children's new role came new expectations. For some of the children this increased their confidence and courage to do things that they felt

they could not do previously. When we went back to visit the ECC, Lara showed that her new role had given her increased courage.

Pippa rushed inside to grab a camera. Stella had joined the queue to climb the tree and jump off onto the big crash pad. After she jumped she ran to [name of teacher] for a hug (and lots of praise ☺). Pippa explained to me why this was such a BIG DEAL. This was the first time that Stella had ever tried to jump from the tree. Stella then repeated the jump another two or three times with clapping and encouragement from everyone around. On the way back to school in the car, the other children were praising her from her new accomplishment and she was 'beaming'. I asked her why she hadn't done it when she went to kindy. She told me that she had been "too scared". Then I asked her how she felt when she when she jumped today. She said that she was happy and excited. I was then compelled to ask why she was not scared today. Her matter of fact reply was "Because I'm a school girl now!"

Journal entry
12th August 2010

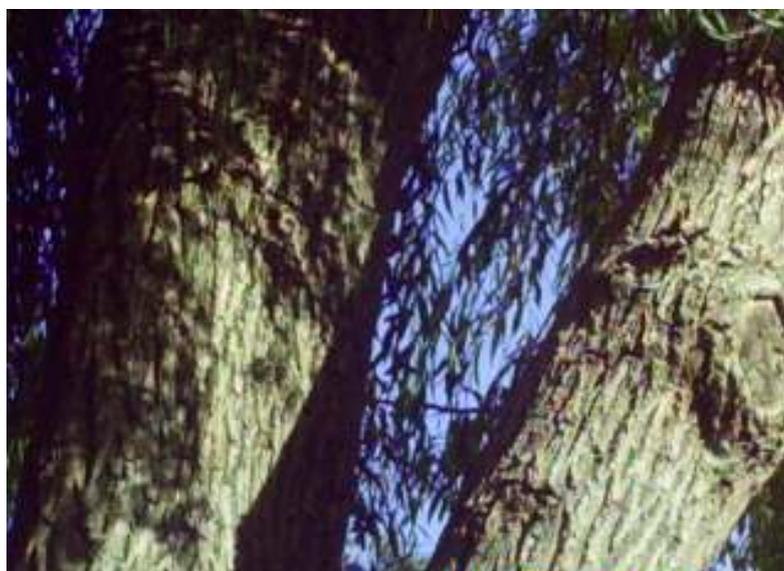


Photo 5: The tree at the ECC which Stella jumped from, now that she is a 'school girl'.

A change in role meant that Stella had changed her expectations of herself, how she would feel and how this would affect her actions. She had not magically acquired tree climbing skills on her fifth birthday but her self confidence had increased, simply by her reaching a perceived milestone.

Lara put in her book about the perks that she had now that she was a ‘school girl’.

My Mum lets me stay up quite late now. She lets me stay up till 7 past 7.

Lara’s book about school
22nd April 2010

Mackenzie explained the importance of becoming big when she started school.

When I was at kindy I was 4 and I was not big. I was small. I am getting too big now because I am five and I go to school. Next I will be six.

Mackenzie’s book about school
3rd July 2010

Daniel explained about being a ‘school kid’,

We are [name of school]. You have to be good. My teacher is [name of teacher]. She is a good teacher.

Daniel’s book about school
22nd April 2010

As new expectations are placed on children at school, they may feel pressured and discouraged if they are not meeting ‘the grade’. They may feel frustrated if they don’t acquire new skills as quickly as they thought they

would. Through his Mother's notes it was evident that Alex did not like doing his homework and was feeling discouraged. During his first weeks at school he would get upset at home when he was asked to read his book from school.

Mum *Have you got a book to read Alex?*
Alex *Yes, I don't want to read it. It's too hard.*
Mum *You are doing really well. Jane told me she is really proud of your reading and writing. I think you can do it.*
Alex *I can't*
Mum *Let's look at your book. We can look at the pictures first. Then you can try.*
Alex ☹
Mum *What's this word?*
Alex *Big*
Mum *This one?*
Alex *Little*
Mum *What's this?*
Alex *A cat.*
Mum *Let's try then...*
Alex *This is a little cat...*

**The story got read very well but was interspersed with lots of cries of "It's too hard! I can't remember it!"*

Alex's notebook entry
21st June 2010

His own expectations were high and he was feeling frustrated; he was not going to be learning to read fluently as soon as he started school and he was going to need to work harder than he had anticipated. Even though Alex had prepared himself for school by learning his 'ABCs', learning to read was not a quick process and he was finding it difficult to persevere. Fortunately, he gained confidence in his ability to read his book from school for homework.

We read his word book together.
Mum Well done, Hi 5!
Alex (big smiles) That's easy!

Alex's notebook entry
20th July 2010

New Experiences and Knowledge

Once the children started school they were able to describe the events of their day with detail and clarity. The terminology, the meaning of which had previously eluded them, was now understood by the children. School was no longer a 'destination' far off in the distance. The children were now engaging in the activities on this new piece of 'playground equipment'. They were able to explain what was important to them at school by using their own words, and at times also incorporating 'school language'.

At his ECC Daniel had told me that he would play games at school but he was not sure which kind of games he would play. Once he had started school, he was able to describe his break time games with detail,

I play cricket with my friends. We usually play in the cricket nets. I don't usually get to bat because I don't want to. You get the cricket bat, wickets and the ball from the PE shed. It's fun.

Daniel's book about school
22nd April 2010

Daniel also gave an explanation of handwriting,

I do handwriting. I write letters and I am practising my 'a's because I can't do a's yet. A's are so hard and you have to do a circle and a down.

Daniel's book about school
22nd April 2010



Photo 6: Daniel focussing on the letter 'a' in his handwriting book. A photo from his 'book about school'.

Mackenzie explained phonics and printing,

In phonics we copy the letters and we have to write the letters down. We have to robot the letters. My favourite letter is 'a'. Even Annabel, apple and ant start with 'a'. In printing we do only one letter. Yesterday we did the letter h. Tall stick and a tunnel like an n has. I practised it.

Mackenzie's book about school
3rd July 2010

Before starting school Lara had described writing as '*writing numbers and letters*'. Now her explanation was,

I learn writing. Writing some letters, drawing some pictures, writing some words. I write stories about fairies and playing with my friends.

Lara's book about school
20th April 2010

Before Abby started school she created her own words to disguise her lack of knowledge about school. Now, with the combination of a photo and text, she was able to give a specific detail about what her class did for maths.

At maths time, you do some counting.

Abby's book about school
22nd April 2010



Photo 7: Abby counting at Maths Time. A photo from her 'book about school'.

Abby also told me about what she did in break times at school,

I was in the sandpit doing some castles and I was just doing some and I was going to school and I was doing some playing with [name] and [name] and I am going to them birthdays. I just play with everyone.

Journal entry
18th February 2010

Stella explained about reading,

I read at school. I read Snow White. I read with Jane. I look at the pictures. I start with the letter books. My sister teaches me. She is better at reading than me because she is six and my Mum is better than [name of sister] because she is a grown up.

Stella's book about school
5th August 2010

Alex explained about the class' letter of the week,

Jane is my teacher. She helps us learn. Jane needs to trick us but we don't get tricked because 'u' is u (sound of u) for umbrella. That's easy because I copy [name of child] and everyone else, so I know it. We learn to write letters. My favourite letter is 'a' because it has an 'a' and it's my name.

Alex's book about school
29th July 2010

It was also evident that the children's knowledge grew in sync with their interactions. Just as the children's understanding of school increased with their pre-entry visits, this understanding continued to develop the longer they attended school. Initially, Daniel found it difficult to describe what the principal did because there had been few interactions between the two of them. He wanted to include him in his book about school though, so he must have identified the importance of the principal's role in the school.

Daniel [Name of principal] is good... [name of receptionist] works in the office.

Nicole What does [name of principal] do that is good?

Daniel (furrowed brow) Oh, I don't know... and it's not because I've forgotten.

Journal entry
22nd April 2010

Nicole *What's that on your sweatshirt?*
Daniel *An award.*
Nicole *Who gave you that?*
Daniel *[Name of principal]*
Nicole *Why did he give you a sticker?*
Daniel *Because the principal gives out pencils and gives
you a sticker.*
Nicole *Why does he do that?*
Daniel *Because I can read all my words.*

Journal entry
11th May 2010

With further, and more varied, interactions with the principal Daniel's concept of the principal will continue to develop.

Increasing the benefits for the children

There is often not a direct individual benefit for children to be involved in research (Gollop in Smith, Taylor and Gollop, 2000). Throughout this study I targeted aspects of my data collection, to increase the benefit for the children. The children began to use their initiative and started to identify possible areas of benefit themselves. I had planned to post the children's books to their ECC but Lara asked if they could take them themselves. So we planned a visit to the ECC as a group. Also when the children identified what they missed the most from their ECC, they asked when these activities would be put in place at school. I was able to organise for this to occur. Daniel shared with me that he missed using the large "Bob the Builder" wooden building blocks from his ECC. I was able to source a set of these from a teacher and these were made available for the children to use in Discovery Time. Lara said that she missed

the music sessions she had at ECC. Through purchasing the music resources her ECC used, the New Entrant teachers were able to incorporate these songs into their singing sessions.



Photo 8: The 'Bob the builder' blocks that Daniel took a photo of as one of his favourite things at his ECC and also said that he missed once he started school.

What do teachers think is important when starting school?

I was able to gain a great deal of information from the children about their views of school and how these views developed over time. I was also curious to know whether the teachers, at both the ECC and school, had similar thoughts to the children. I interviewed one teacher from the focus ECC, Pippa and two new entrant teachers from the focus school, Mandy and Jane. The two main commonalities that were evident in the interviews with the teachers were the importance of relationships and encouraging confidence. These were also endorsed by the children's comments throughout this study.

Relationships

All of the teachers expressed their views on the importance of relationships. The relationships that the children built with other children helped them feel secure and a valued part of their current 'destination'. This was also the case for the relationships they built with adults. The ECE teacher explained,

We value relationships, which gives them a sense of belonging and self worth.

Pippa's interview
4th June 2010

The focus on a supportive and friendly environment that had been established in their ECE was backed up by the children's comments when we talked about their ECC once they had started school. At school, I instigated a conversation about their ECC.

*Nicole What do you miss about kindy?
Mackenzie I miss my teachers. I miss my friend [name of child].
Which is even my boyfriend! (laughing)*

Voice recording
15th July 2010

*Alex I miss my teachers. I miss my friends. I miss the pets
and that yellow bird.*

*Mackenzie We still remember it's name because we made it up.
Stella And do you know what? I made up the fishies
names, [names of the fish].*

Voice recording
15th July 2010

All of the children were keen to keep in touch with their ECC teachers. They enjoyed making cards for them and were very enthusiastic about going back

to their ECC. Several of their Mothers took their own child back to ECC for a visit, so that the ECC teachers could see them in their school uniform.

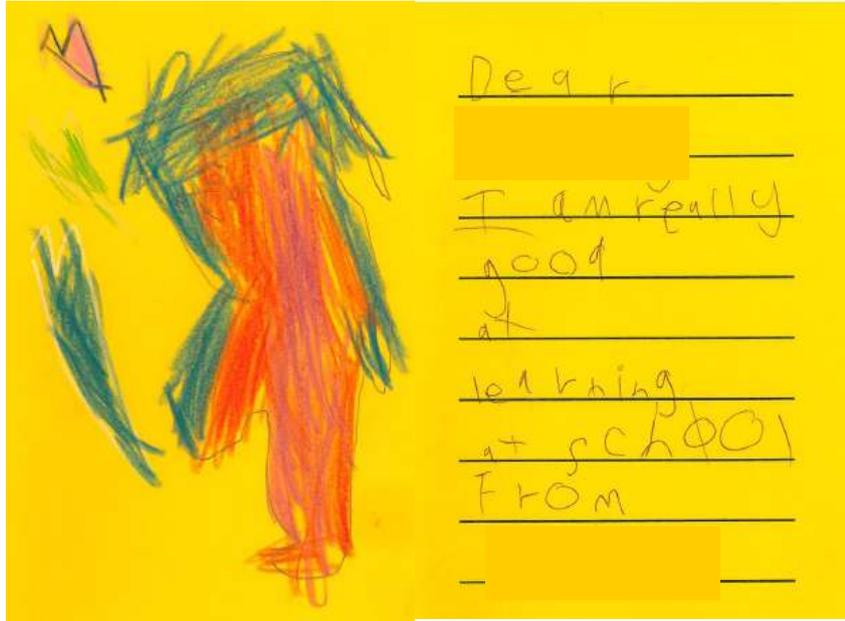


Figure 10: Lara's card that she made for Pippa her ECC teacher, once she had started school.

The value that was placed on relationship building was also evident at school. When asked what the most important parts of their transition to school programme were, the teachers replied,

The child's relationship with other children. The child's relationship with me.

Mandy's interview
10th June 2010

For me, I want to see them happy. I want to see them comfortable, I want to develop a relationship with them but at their rate not mine.

Jane's interview
27th May 2010

The children also focussed on relationships. When the children took photos of their five favourite things at their ECC with the Tuffcam, every child included at least one photo of a friend. All five of the photos that Abby took were of her ECC friends. Each child also mentioned playing with their friends at school when they wrote their 'book about school'. Mackenzie wrote about her friends at school and ECC showing that the friendships she made at her ECC were robust,

I play on the playground with my friends when it's playtime. I love the silver slide. I even like my scooter to play on and I go on the scooter track. [Names of two friends] are in my class. [Name of friend] is going to be in my class in August. She is still at kindy now.

Mackenzie's book about school
3rd July 2010

When talking about their teacher, the children mentioned that their teacher helped them learn, knew a lot of things, told them a lot of things and helped them with specific tasks. The emphasis that the teachers placed on relationships was evident in the children's comments about their teacher.

*Nicole What are you good at, at school?
Stella I am good at reading
Alex I am good at making stuff
Mackenzie Mandy is making me good at writing.
Stella Jane is a good teacher.
Alex She's good at telling me stuff.
Stella If I'm sad, she makes me happy.
Mackenzie Jane is going to be my teacher next.*

Journal entry
6th July 2010

Stella spoke fondly of her teacher, as she explained that her teacher gave her emotional support. This aligns with Pippa's view, that when children transition to school it's important for the children to know...

That their new teacher 'understands' about their worries.

Pippa's interview

4th June 2010

The link between the ECC and the school is another important relationship. Both 'destinations' are responsible for maintaining the 'monkey bar' link between them. Both the ECC and the school are important parts of the child's 'adventure playground' and need to value each other. The children were entering a school that had made a concerted effort to improve their transition to school programme. In addition to the standard orientation and school visits, the school had introduced: "getting ready for school bags"; a 'starting school soon party'; an information book about the school written by students; an information booklet completed by the child for their teacher; sharing of ECE portfolios; group visits between the school and ECC; school helpers at the ECC; and discovery time at school. They had also increased the communication with the ECC through: newsletters; visits; emails; and phone calls. Pippa gave feedback on these initiatives,

We value the existing connections we have with you.

It's nice to tell people sometimes what our children CAN do, not what they CAN'T.

The school children that come each week are giving our children a sense of familiarity with the school uniform and they also say 'hi' to the children if they see them at school.

Pippa's interview
4th June 2010

The ECC was also planning to set up a 'Transition to school' board with photos of the important things at school and photos of the children who are transitioning. In regards to transition to school, all of the teachers made very similar comments and there appeared to be no discord in the opinions that were put forward. The teachers from both sectors voiced their support of each other and the work that they did.

Encouraging confidence

It is not likely that a child will embrace their transition to school as an adventure if they are feeling apprehensive and daunted by the experience. To play on monkey bars it requires momentum and motivation to get to the other end, tentative movements along the monkey bars make for a difficult journey. Apprehension may lead to children hanging on in 'limbo' and needing extra assistance to get on the move again. The teachers explained their views on the importance of encouraging confidence in the children. Pippa explained that the values of the centre meant that they were not simply preparing their children for school but empowering their children for many situations.

Personally, our passion to encourage and empower our children to all be socially competent, have the confidence to take risks, to be leaders and to have a 'will' to want to learn, happens on a daily basis.

Pippa's interview
4th June 2010

The New Entrant teachers explained that they avoided putting pressure on the children when they started school,

Well, we'll just take whatever time it takes. I want them to feel happy, comfortable and confident and get used to their environment.

Jane's interview
27th May 2010

If a child feels insecure, I would try to win their trust. The child needs to be confident, independent and have friends.

Mandy's interview
10th June 2010

I encourage them to do the right thing... with lots of praise and lots of positives... we all want to think that we are doing a good job... including five year olds.

Jane's interview
27th May 2010

Pre-entry visits were identified as a way to build the children's confidence and encourage familiarity in a gradual and nonthreatening way. Pippa emphasised the importance of these visits from an ECE point of view,

From what we have heard from parents, it appears that the transition to school visits assist the children to become familiar with teacher's faces, the look of the school and where their classroom is. Knowing where the toilets are and general routines empowers them.

Pippa's interview
4th June 2010

The school teachers also expressed the worth of the pre-entry visits,

I think that it's great, that it's great that they come and have their visits. It's not the 'unknown' then.

Jane's interview
27th May 2010

The starting school soon parties I love. They're awesome. Knowing people is huge. I want them to feel comfortable.

Jane's interview
27th May 2010

The starting school party and the school visits allay the fear of the unknown.

Mandy's interview
10th June 2010

Some of the children found the visits daunting. Stella had become confident in the familiar setting of her ECC with the support of her friends but was more tentative about venturing into the school setting for visits,

@ school visit

"I'm shy"

"Everyone was crowding around me today".

Stella's notebook entry
20th May 2010

Other children looked forward to their school visits and enjoyed reporting back on what they had done during their time at school. After Abby's first visit she told me,

It's fun and there are friends.

Journal entry
26th November 2009

At the 'Going to School Party' Abby became a wee bit grumpy when she realised she was only staying for half a day. She is pretty excited about starting 'big' school.

Abby's notebook entry
8th December 2009

Jane's final comment in her interview was reiterated by the other two teachers,

I want to see them come to school with excitement and an enthusiasm to learn.

Jane's interview
27th May 2010

Conclusion

This chapter has included the six main themes from this study into children's perceptions of starting school. It has followed the children as they have 'swung along the monkey bars' on their transition from their ECC to school. It has shown how the children's concepts of school have developed as they have become 'school kids', as they shared this information with me and their families. My findings also reported on what teachers from both ECE and school thought to be important in the transition process and how these themes were reflected in the children's comments. In the following chapter I will discuss my findings in relation to my initial research questions, the implications that my findings have on future research and transition to school programmes.

Chapter Four Discussion

Introduction

The research questions I began with are: what do young children know about school; how do they feel about going to school and how does their knowledge of school, and their feelings towards school, develop throughout the process of transition to school? Firstly, I will discuss the findings in relation to the research questions and then in light of the three themes of an effective transition: continuity and progression, relationships and preparation. Finally I consider implications for transition to school programmes, future research and the limitations of this study.

Findings in relation to my research questions

What do children know about starting school?

In this study, I found that the children: knew several ‘facts’ about school; had an understanding about different ‘concepts’ related to school life; and were familiar with some school ‘terminology’ but not necessarily what these terms meant. For instance, children used words, such as learning, writing, doing maths and reading but they were not yet able to describe the terms further as they had not experienced them yet. The children discussed the concepts of school with which they were familiar: time at school, such as length of the school day, days you went to school and how old you were when you started school; school uniform, leaving kindergarten; learning; their future teacher;

friends; and playing. School is a setting which is not part of a four year old's *microsystem*, but children are developing an understanding of what going to school will mean for them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These developing understandings were evident throughout the findings, for example, that Lara anticipated that she would get tired at school because the school day was going to be longer than her ECC day. It would be problematic to attribute an understanding to one information source, as I identified many possible sources of school information earlier.

Despite the children having many emerging understandings of school, school was not their favourite topic of conversation. The children were most interested in talking about what they were doing at the time of our conversation, whether that be making a tunnel in the sandcastle or painting a picture of a princess on the painting easel. Other 'hot topics' included: themselves; their family; friends; and recent events involving any combinations of the aforementioned. It comes back to the 'adventure playground' metaphor. The children were so absorbed in what they were doing, that there was no urgency to find out about their next destination.

All the children who participated in this study gained further knowledge and understanding about school through their *microsystem* interactions during visits and school entry, as discussed below.

Asking questions to increase their knowledge

Knowing the intricacies of school did not appear to affect how the children coped with starting school. While at their ECC the children did not seem worried about their lack of knowledge about school, they simply put to their parents the questions or concerns that they had. They also sought further information and clarification from their parents. They did not ask me any questions about school, although they knew of my interest and connection to school. They asked their parents about their teacher, classroom, friends and how long it would be until they started school or started their visits.

Through the comments that were recorded in the notebooks, it appeared to be a long 'lead up' to turning five. The frequency with which the children asked how long it was until they turned five and started school, seemed be reminiscent of a long journey in the car in which "Are we there yet?" is asked repeatedly. In New Zealand, with the majority of children start school on their fifth birthday, therefore turning five and starting school are strongly linked. As a child, one's own birthday is often the most important date in the year. Connecting a birthday with another important event increases children's anticipation even further.

How do children feel about starting school?

The topic of friendships evoked the most feelings in the children's discussions. The children expressed their happiness and excitement of who

would be in their class and their apprehension and worry of leaving their friends behind at their ECC. All of the children indicated to me that they felt happy about starting school. They were happy to share the things that they were looking forward to. Despite trying to initiate conversations about feelings with the children, their feelings did not feature strongly in my findings. None of the children expressed intense emotions about starting school or shared any feelings other than happiness in our activities. It seems likely that this occurred due to one of three reasons: the children thought that 'being happy' was the most acceptable feeling and they wanted to please me with the correct answer (Hatch in Carr, 2000); they were yet to develop the emotional literacy in which they could identify and describe their feelings (Sherwood, 2008); or they all genuinely felt happy about starting school. Their genuine happiness may have been due to the elements in the focus' schools 'transition to school programme' that have been developed to reduce anxiety and increase delight (Ziegler, 1985) about starting school.

None of the children showed that they were having trouble with separating from their parents at school; there was no crying or clinging when their parents left them. Even though Daniel told his Mother that he did not want to leave her and go to school, he only expressed these feelings at home. At school he appeared happy and confident. He did not show any signs of a difficult transition, for example, excessive use of the sickbay or eating

problems (Kienig, 2002). Stella showed anxiety over her friendships but having her sister at school gave her support and reduced her anxiety.

How does their knowledge of school, and their feelings towards school, develop through out the transition to school process?

The children gained further information about school from each of their pre-entry visits, yet the most noted development in the children's knowledge occurred when the children had 'officially' started school. Once the children started school, they were keen to share with me everything that they did. The shoulder shrug and 'I don't know' statements that I had encountered frequently before the children started school dissipated; the school experts were now in residence. Hill, Comber, Loudon, Rivalland and Reid (1998) have referred to this as knowing how to 'do school'. To 'do school' means that children focus on their role as a 'school kid': what they are supposed to do; what they are not supposed to do; and the culture of school, before they can focus on the content of learning. The children were able to share extensively about how to 'do school'. They discussed being good and doing the right thing. They were also able to discuss the procedures of their school life with detail.

When the children started school, there was a definite re-evaluation of roles. Without anything being stated, the level of conformity increased; the children joined in with my activities without question or decline and no one ran off

half way through a conversation with me. I was no longer coming into the children's setting, a setting that was highly child directed. They felt that they were coming into my setting, a setting where the choice that is given to children is generally directed by the teacher; a setting where I held a position of authority. Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains that as the role of the child changes, they also find that the other participants in their new setting also have different roles. In a positive adult/child relationship, the adult is guiding and nurturing. This is true for parents, ECE teachers and school teachers but school teachers often provide an environment that is more restrictive and includes more reprimands. At school, the children participated in my activities and did what I asked of them without questions. When the children were giving suggestions for another child's certificate at school Mackenzie said that the child was good at school because they "listened to the teacher and did what the teacher told them."

The findings of this study also show that play was an important part of the children's school day. The children discussed playing at break-times and playing with a variety of equipment in the classroom. Other research has noted the importance of play in young children's lives. Garza, Briley and Reifel (in Klein, Kanor & Fernie, 1988) noted that each child they interviewed mentioned play spontaneously when asked what they did at school. In this study, it was evident that friendships were inextricably linked with the reoccurring topic of play. Neuman (2002) stated that a contributing

factor to a successful transition to school was transitioning with a child from their ECC. The participating children maintained their friendships from their ECC during their transition to school and mentioned their friends often.

As the children's roles changed, so did mine. Previously when I visited the ECC, I talked to the teachers and then joined the children in their play. When the purpose of my visits changed, I needed to place expectations on the participating children so that they would join in with the activities that I offered. As a teacher with twelve years experience, I am used to children occasionally refusing to join in with an activity that I offer. These refusals have generally stemmed from the child being unsure of what I am asking of them, their feelings of inadequacy or, on the odd occasion, defiance. I had never really encountered the polite 'No, thanks' response before.

In their ECC the children were encouraged to make their own decisions and discoveries regarding play. The teachers offered activities and motivated the children to further develop their play and learning but there were few compulsory events, other than 'mat time'. I had to remind myself that the children's rejections weren't personal; that it was likely that the children were simply confident and happy in directing their own learning. I also considered that the children might have thought that there was a 'right' answer to my questions and felt pressured by them (Hatch in Carr, 2000).

The findings of this study in light of effective transitions

The three components of an effective transition to school were described in the literature review of this study: providing continuity and progression, building and maintaining relationships and preparing children for school. The six children in this study had an effective transition to school. They were not all as uniformly 'smooth' as each other but they were all successful in the immediate. In making such bold statement I acknowledge that all effects of transition are not immediate, but my statement rings true at this present time. The children have all settled into school well without drama or trauma. The children's teachers have said that they have all adjusted well to their role as a 'school kid'.

"Can I go on the big slide next?" - Providing continuity and progression

Being faced with a fireman's pole for the first time, as the only way onto the next part of the adventure playground may evoke discouragement and a sense of defeat. Yet being faced with a big tunnel slide, when the regular slide has already been mastered is more likely to evoke motivation and excitement.

The teachers in this study all expressed similar values and hopes for the children that they work with. The teachers saw the value in maintaining the link between their settings and have sought to improve their practice by liaising with each other. To date, the relationship between the ECC and

school has been of an informal nature and there is room to organise formalised planning for continuity between the two settings to improve children's transition to school (Neuman, 2002).

The children were able to describe events which were based upon routine, repetition and predictability with greater detail and conviction. It makes sense then that in particular the children were able to give vivid descriptions of what they did in their reading, writing and phonics programmes; programmes that include different content each day but follow the same procedure. Klein, Kanor and Fernie (1988) explain that children understand and remember tasks in relation to their predictability and continuity. In light of an adventure playground, it would be hard to explain the process of using a bouncy swing if you had not actually been on it yourself. The more a child uses a piece of play equipment, the better they would understand the intricacies of it and be able to explain its workings in more detail.

'What if they're not ready to go on the monkey bars?' - Preparing children for school

A child is unlikely to master the monkey bars unaided on their first attempt. Usually, they would be supported with a lift up, perhaps some verbal direction and maybe even a lift down. It is hoped that each time the child attempts the monkey bars, the amount of support can be reduced until they have developed the skills and confidence to do it unaided.

Parents in this study answered their children's many questions about school, even when they were repetitive. The parents did not flood their children with information but answered the questions until the children were satisfied and assured by the response.

The focus school's transition programme is comprehensive and therefore the children and their families experienced elements of both orientation and transition. Information, activities and visits were provided by the school to all families. The teachers valued both visits to school by individual children with their parents and by small groups of children with their ECC teacher. The visits helped familiarise children with their new setting, even though Stella found them 'scarier' than the others. Mostly the children looked forward to attending their school visits and were often reluctant to leave when they finished. They liked to tell others the details of their school as they found them out: who their teacher would be; their room number; what they would be wearing; and who would be in their class.

The focus school has adapted their transition to school programme for children on occasion, when deemed necessary by the ECC teachers, other educational agencies, the parents or the New Entrant teacher. All of the children in this study participated in the standard transition programme. Perhaps Stella's pre-entry visit times could have been altered to avoid the

‘busy’ start of the day and postpone her initial feelings of being crowded and overwhelmed until she was more comfortable in her new classroom.

Despite being involved in a comprehensive transition to school programme, the children in this study did not show signs of being disinterested or stifled. They displayed both excitement and apprehension about various parts of their transitions, or as phrased by Ziegler (1985) ‘delight and anxiety’.

*‘Who would want to play on the adventure playground alone?’ –
Building and maintaining relationships*

Having free rein of the adventure playground may be fun for a while but its novelty soon wears off.

Friendships were a topic that the children mentioned right throughout their transition. Each of the children knew at least one child in their new class. Transitioning to school with another child from their ECC can assist children to feel secure during the transition process (Peters, 2002). The possibility that their friendships might change, or not knowing who their school friends may be, caused some apprehension about starting school for the children. The children asked for reassurance from their parents about the continuance of their friendships. Teachers stated they felt that if the children were happy and making friends that things were going well.

Throughout this study the children spoke fondly of their ECC and school teachers. These feelings were reciprocated, as the teachers all placed an emphasis on the importance of their relationships with the children. They understood that how a child perceives their relationship with their teacher can affect their learning (Renwick, 1984). The teachers were interested in finding out about the children and were eager to gain a rapport with them. They did not want to force or hurry relationships but provided positive catalysts for these to develop.

What children say and how they behave, can give a different message. Adults in this study not only listened but also observed. Even though Daniel was telling his Mother that he did not want to be at school while he was at home, his behaviour at school showed that he was happy to be there. The relationship between his teacher and Mother was important, as they had regular discussions after school to share their perceptions of Daniel's adjustment to school.

Implications for transition to school programmes

The implications for transition to school programmes that can be derived from the findings of this study are:

- Transition to school programmes should be flexible and visits should be tailored to the individual child.

- Transition to school programmes should be developed with a balanced focus on the components of an effective transition: continuity and progress, relationships and preparation.
- Teachers should be mindful of individual difference and acknowledge each child's fund of knowledge.
- Both ECE teachers and school teachers should remind parents to answer their child's questions about school in a positive and patient manner.
- Teachers should communicate with parents regarding their child's transition to school adjustment.
- Teachers should further develop cross sector relationships to gain further understanding and skills in order to better meet the needs of their transitioning children.

Limitations of this study and implications for further study

Data collection

The discussions that I overheard between groups of children were the most insightful. These discussions generally involved the children sharing or deciphering the 'concepts' that they had developed about school. Margaret Carr (2000) refers to these as 'being nearly five' discussions. Being able to be onsite, perhaps as an action researcher, or gaining permission to attach a video recorder in key discussion areas in the ECC, would be alternative to the

‘staged’ activities that I provided. This continuous footage may capture more unprompted discussions about school, where the researcher is not always the catalyst for the conversation (Nuthall, 2007).

The notebook entries that each Mother made varied greatly in length, detail and frequency. I found that I was able to make meaning of Alex’s comments about school with great ease than the other children because his mother had written in the format of a transcription and often made introductory comments for each discussion. It would have been advantageous to provide a model for parents to follow for their notebook entries, rather than just a general description. A model would have allowed them to feel more certain of their entries and would have provided me with more specific data, with the children’s comments being put into greater context. Regular and specific contact with the Mothers, may also have given me a greater depth of data.

Observing children in their home would have added a different dimension to this study and would have given me a more holistic picture of the child. These observations may have allowed me to have more in depth conversations with the Mother’s about what they had written in the notebooks.

Familiarity

Most of the children in this study had older siblings who attended the focus school. Due to this, the school setting was already somewhat familiar to these children. A study focussing on the transition of the eldest child in their respective family would provide an interesting comparison.

Transition to School Programme

The focus school in this study had an established transition to school which was structured and intensive. A study including a focus school that is less formal and comprehensive could potentially produce very different findings.

Additional research question

“What do parents do to prepare their child for school and how do children respond to this?” As it was not the focus of this study, I am unsure of what the participants’ families did to prepare their children for school, other than what the Mothers wrote in the children’s notebooks. For instance, Alex’s Mother teaching him to identify the alphabet letters on his alphabet placemat and all the Mothers answering a myriad of questions from their child about starting school.

Research skills

A truly difficult lesson to learn was that of 'listening'. I missed many an opportunity to gain a deeper insight into what the children thought because I was so focussed on what I was looking for. When listening to the voice recordings I often thought that "I could have just kicked myself" for not hearing at the time, what I picked up later on. I needed to spend more time listening to the children and becoming truly engaged in what they were saying (Jordan, 1998). This is a skill that I need to continue to develop.

Conclusion

As I advocate the importance of children's voice, I will practice what I preach and leave the summation of this study to the words of Stella as she tells a story about the Emily the 'school doll' starting school.

'Emily Starts School' by Stella

She felt a little bit afraid because she was scared of all the big boys. Maybe she thought the big boys were mean and might be a little bit too rough. She played on the playground. She played on the slide and the monkey bars. First she fell off the monkey bars but she kept trying and her friends helped her try. They got her to swing her arms and swing her legs and now she can do it. Now Emily is five and she can play on the monkey bars with her friends at school.



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APPENDICES

- Appendix A: Letter to Board of Trustees
- Appendix B: Declaration of consent to participate for Board of Trustees
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Appendix A: Letter to Board of Trustees

Date/Month/Year

Dear [Chairperson of the Board of Trustees]

This letter is to formalise our earlier discussion at your board meeting about my research. I am enrolled in the thesis programme in the Masters of Education at the University of Canterbury. The focus for my research is ***‘What does ‘starting school’ mean to young children?’*** I am enthused about gaining an insight as to what children think about starting school and how they feel during this transition.

I wish to gain permission to:

- approach the staff member responsible for your transition to school programme to participate in my study by means of a semi-structured interview;
- obtain documents relevant to your transition to school policies and programmes; and
- continue to work with a group of children from a contributing Early Childhood Centre, through conducting scheduled activities with them once a week for a period of up to one term in 2009 and again in 2010 for a period of up to one term.

Please note that participation in this study is voluntary. The participants have the right to decline to answer any questions and to withdraw from the study at any time prior to publication without repercussions. Particular care will be made to ensure confidentiality of all data gathered for this study in all publications of the findings. The information I gather may also be used in conference presentations. Even though a pseudonym will be used for the school, anonymity is not assured as my identity as the writer of this research and my position in the school will be stated. I will securely store all data for five years following the study and will then destroy it. All participants will receive a report on the findings of this study.

I would appreciate it if you would **return the consent form** to me by Date/Date/Month. If you have any questions about this research, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor Baljit Kaur, phone: 03 3642272, baljit.kaur@canterbury.ac.nz.

Thank you in advance for your contribution.

Yours sincerely

Nicole Cunningham
Freeville School
Sandy Ave
Christchurch
Ph 3889666
colesc@xtra.co.nz

This project has received ethical approval from the University of Canterbury, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee.

Complaints may be addressed to: Jenny Smith, Deputy Chair, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee,
University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, CHRISTCHURCH Telephone: 3458274

Appendix B: Declaration of Consent to Participate for Board of Trustees

***Is school all it's cracked up to be?
Young children's developing expectations of school.***

**Declaration of Consent to Participate for the
Chairperson of the Board of Trustees**

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project.
- I agree to allow Nicole to conduct her research at [name of school/centre] for a period of up to one term in 2009 and again in 2010 for a period of up to one term.
- I understand that the teacher's and children's participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time prior to publication of the findings without repercussions.
- I give permission to Nicole to access [name of school/centre] documents and policies pertaining to her research.
- I understand that any information or opinions the teacher and children provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and that any published or reported results will not identify me or my institution.
- I understand that all data from this research will be stored securely by the researcher for five years following the study and will then be destroyed.
- I understand that I will receive a report on the findings of this study and have provided my email details below for this purpose.

By ticking the selected boxes above and signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

*Please return this completed consent form provided by **Day/Date/Month**.*

Thank you for your contribution to this study.

Nicole Cunningham

This project has received ethical approval from the University of Canterbury, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee.

Complaints may be addressed to: Jenny Smith, Deputy Chair, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee,
University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, CHRISTCHURCH Telephone: 3458274

Appendix C: Information Letter for Principal/Supervisor

Is school all it's cracked up to be?

Young children's developing expectations of school.

Information Letter for the Principal/Supervisor

Date/Month/Year

Dear [Name of Principal/Supervisor]

This letter is to formalise our earlier discussion about my research. I am enrolled in the thesis programme in the Masters of Education at the University of Canterbury. The focus for my research is ***'What does 'starting school' mean to young children?'*** I am enthused about gaining an insight as to what children think about starting school and how they feel during this transition.

I wish to gain permission to:

- approach the staff member responsible for your transition to school programme to participate in my study by means of a semi-structured interview;
- obtain documents relevant to your transition to school policies and programmes; and
- continue to work with a group of children from a contributing Early Childhood Centre, through conducting scheduled activities with them once a week for a period of up to one term in 2009 and again in 2010 for a period of up to one term.

Please note that participation in this study is voluntary. The participants have the right to decline to answer any questions and to withdraw from the study at any time prior to publication without repercussions. Particular care will be made to ensure confidentiality of all data gathered for this study in all publications of the findings. Even though a pseudonym will be used for the school, anonymity is not assured as my identity as the writer of this research and my position in the school will be stated. I will securely store all data for five years following the study and will then destroy it. All participants will receive a report on the findings of this study.

I would appreciate it if you would **return the consent form** to me by Date/Date/Month. If you have any questions about this research, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor Baljit Kaur, phone: 03 3642272, baljit.kaur@canterbury.ac.nz.

Thank you in advance for your contribution.

Yours sincerely

Nicole Cunningham
Freeville School
Sandy Ave
Christchurch
Ph 3889666
colesc@xtra.co.nz

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University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, CHRISTCHURCH Telephone: 3458274

Appendix D: Declaration of Consent to Participate for Principal/Supervisor

Declaration of Consent to Participate for the Principal/Supervisor

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project.
- I agree to allow Nicole to conduct her research at [name of school/centre] for a period of up to one term in 2009 and again in 2010 for a period of up to one term.
- I understand that the teacher's and children's participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time prior to publication of the findings without repercussions.
- I give permission to Nicole to access our [school/centre] documents and policies pertaining to her research.
- I understand that any information or opinions the teacher and children provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and that any published or reported results will not identify the participants or my [school/centre].
- I understand that my anonymity is not assured, despite the fact that the [school/centre] or the participants will not be identified.
- I understand that all data from this research will be stored securely by the researcher for five years following the study and will then be destroyed.
- I understand that I will receive a report on the findings of this study and have provided my email details below for this purpose.

By ticking the selected boxes above and signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Please return this completed consent form provided by Day/Date/Month.

Thank you for your contribution to this study.

Nicole Cunningham

This project has received ethical approval from the University of Canterbury, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee.

Complaints may be addressed to: Jenny Smith, Deputy Chair, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee,
University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, CHRISTCHURCH Telephone: 3458274

Appendix E: Information Letter for Teachers

***Is school all it's cracked up to be?
Young children's developing expectations of school.***

Information Letter for Teachers

Date/Month/Year

Dear [Name of Teacher]

This letter is to formalise our earlier discussion about my research. I am enrolled in the thesis programme in the Masters of Education at the University of Canterbury. The focus for my research is ***'What does 'starting school' mean to four year olds?'*** I am enthused about gaining an insight as to what children think about starting school and how they feel during this transition.

You are invited to participate in this research, as you are a Teacher at [Name of School/Centre]. If you grant me permission, my plan is to gain an insight into the children's perceptions of starting school through

- conducting a semi-structured interview with you about your transition to school programme and children's perceptions of school, taking approximately one hour but no longer than two hours.
- Visit your [centre/classroom] for an hour each week for a period of up to one term in 2009 and again in 2010, to gather data through playing games and conducting activities with a group of children.

Information for your participation:

- the information you provide to me will be treated as confidential and no findings that could identify you will be published;
- anonymity is not assured, as my identity as the writer of this research and my position in the school will be stated. Although you will not be identified, as pseudonyms will be used, a process of elimination may lead to the school being known by some readers.
- you can choose to be interviewed by me or an assistant;
- you can request a copy of the interview transcript in order to check its accuracy;

- I will securely store the data for five years, during which this can be used by me for any conference papers, Journal articles or subsequent reports. After that the data will be destroyed.
- participation in this study is voluntary. You will have the right to decline to answer any questions and to withdraw from the study at any time prior to publication without repercussions.
- you will receive a report on the findings of this study.

I would appreciate it if you would **return the consent form** to me by Date/Date/Month.

If you have any questions about this research, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor Baljit Kaur, phone: 03 3642272, baljit.kaur@canterbury.ac.nz.

Thank you in advance for your contribution.

Yours sincerely

Nicole Cunningham
Freeville School
Sandy Ave
Christchurch
Ph 3889666
colesc@xtra.co.nz

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University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, CHRISTCHURCH, Telephone: 3458274

Appendix F: Declaration of Consent to Participate for Teachers

Is school all it's cracked up to be?

***Young children's developing expectations of school.
Declaration of Consent to Participate for Teachers***

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project.
- I agree to be interviewed for this research.
- I consent to my interview being recorded.
- I agree to allow Nicole to implement research activities with the participating children in my [class/centre] on a weekly basis for a period of up to one term during 2009 and again in 2010.
- I agree to allow Nicole record the research activities that she conducts in my [class/centre].
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time prior to publication of the findings without repercussions.
- I understand that any information or opinions I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and that any published or reported results will not identify me or my institution.
- I understand that my anonymity is not assured, despite the fact I will not be identified.
- I understand that all data from this research will be stored securely by the researcher for five years following the study and will then be destroyed.
- I understand that I will receive a report on the findings of this study and have provided my email details below for this purpose.

By ticking the selected boxes above and signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Please return this completed consent form provided by Day/Date/Month.

Thank you for your contribution to this study.

Nicole Cunningham

This project has received ethical approval from the University of Canterbury, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee.

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University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, CHRISTCHURCH Telephone: 3458274

Appendix G: Exemplar Questions for Interviews with Teachers

Exemplar Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews

Themes: teacher's perceptions of children's behaviours when starting school and their transition to school programmes.

ECC TEACHER

What do you think is important for children to know about school before they start?

Tell me about a situation where you supported a child through the transition to school process.

What are the most important parts of your transition to school programme?

How could your transition to school programme be improved?

SCHOOL TEACHER

What would it look like if a child was settling into school well?

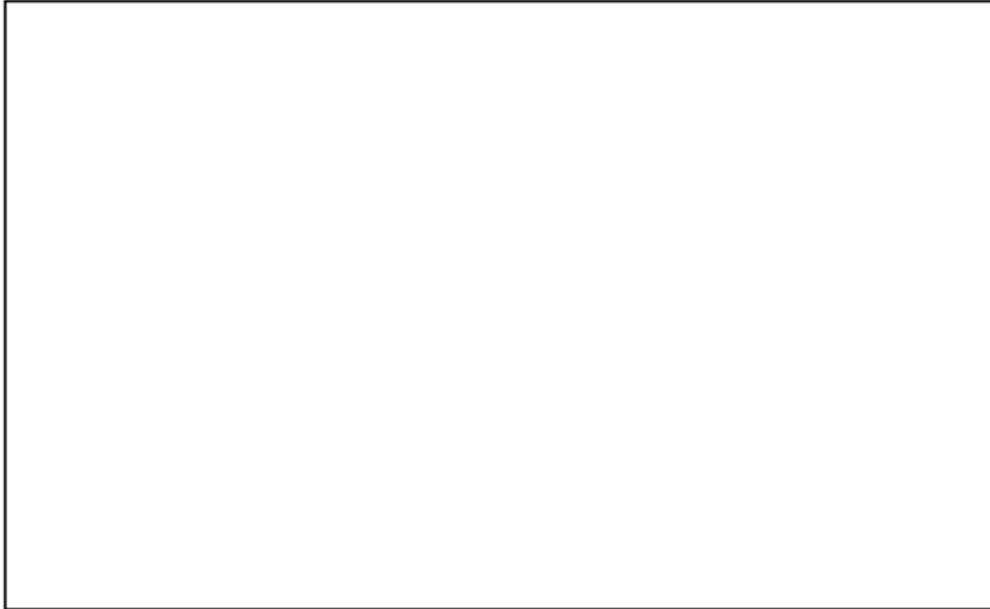
What would it look like if a child was having difficulty settling into school?

Two or three scenarios based on children's different actions at school, for example, refusing to participate or being upset. What do you think is happening? How would you respond?

What are the most important parts of your transition to school programme?

How could your transition to school programme be improved?

Appendix H: Form for Children to Draw Themselves at School



“This is me at school,”
said (name of child). I am

I feel

Appendix I: Letter to Parents

Date/Month/Year

Dear [Name of Parent]

This letter is to formalise our earlier discussion about my research. I am enrolled in the thesis programme in the Masters of Education at the University of Canterbury. The focus for my research is ***‘What does ‘starting school’ mean to young children?’*** I am enthused about gaining an insight as to what children think about starting school and how they feel during this transition.

You are invited to participate in this research, as you are a parent of a child who will be starting [Name of school]. If you grant me permission, I plan to gain an insight into what your child thinks about starting school through:

- Visiting your child’s Early Childhood Centre or school for an hour each week for a period up to one term per setting in [2009/2010] to gather data through playing games and conducting activities with a group of children which will include your child.
- Use a cassette note taker, digital voice recorder or paper notebook to repeat the comments that my child makes about school for a period of up to two terms in [2009/2010].

Information for your participation:

- the information you provide to me will be treated as confidential and no findings that could identify you will be published;
- anonymity is not assured, as my identity as the writer of this research and my position in the school will be stated. Although you will not be identified, as pseudonyms will be used, a process of elimination may lead to the school being known by some readers.
- you can request a copy of the comments you record in order to check its accuracy; and
- I will securely store the data for five years, during which this can be used by the researcher for any conference papers, Journal articles or subsequent reports. After that the data will be destroyed.
- participation in this study is voluntary. You will have the right to decline to answer any questions and to withdraw from the study at any time prior to publication without repercussions.
- you will receive a report on the findings of this study.

I would appreciate it if you would **return the consent form** in the envelope provided by Date/Date/Month.

If you have any questions about this research, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor Baljit Kaur, phone: 03 3642272, baljit.kaur@canterbury.ac.nz.

Thank you in advance for your contribution.

Yours sincerely

Nicole Cunningham
Freeville School
Sandy Ave
Christchurch
Ph 3889666
colesc@xtra.co.nz

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University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, CHRISTCHURCH Telephone: 3458274

Appendix J: Declaration of Consent to Participate for Parents

*Is school all it's cracked up to be?
Young children's developing expectations of school.*

Declaration of Consent to Participate for Parents

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that my child and I may withdraw at any time prior to publication of the findings without repercussions.
- I agree to allow Nicole to implement research activities with my child in their Early Childhood Centre and School on a weekly basis for a period of up to one term each during [2009/2010].
- I agree to allow Nicole to record the research activities that she conducts with my child.
- I am willing to use cassette note taker, digital voice recorder or paper notebook to repeat the comments that my child makes about school for a period of up to two terms in [2009/2010].
- I understand that any information or opinions that my child or I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and that any published or reported results will not identify me or my child.
- I understand that my anonymity is not assured, despite the fact that neither my child nor I will be identified.
- I understand that all data from this research will be stored securely by the researcher for five years following the study and will then be destroyed.
- I understand that I will receive a report on the findings of this study and have provided my email details below for this purpose.

By ticking the selected boxes above and signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Please return this completed consent form provided by Day/Date/Month.

Thank you for your contribution to this study.

Nicole Cunningham

This project has received ethical approval from the University of Canterbury, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee.

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University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, CHRISTCHURCH Telephone: 3458274

Nicole's project about starting school



Nicole wants to find out
about what I think and feel
about starting school.

If I want to, we will:

- ☆ play games
- ☆ draw
- ☆ play with puppets
- ☆ take photos and
- ☆ do other fun activities

If I don't want to do these activities any
more with Nicole, I can tell my (family),
(teacher) or Nicole.

I want to join in with this project.



I don't want to join in with this project.



My name is _____

