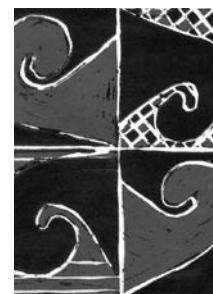


A Story of Transition to School



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ABSTRACT

This article discusses and reflects on some issues that may arise when a child with special needs and their family transition from an early childhood setting into their chosen school. In this instance, the author examines the case of “Aroha”, and considers specifics such as the writer’s ethical and professional role as an early childhood teacher, valuable strategies for a successful transition, relevant theories, the influences of relationships with significant people who support Aroha in her differing environments, and the concerns teachers and parents have relating to Aroha’s diagnosis of attention deficit disorder (ADD).

Storied Experience

Keywords

Early childhood education, ecological perspective, parent choice, scaffolding, school environment, teachers, transition to primary school.

When Aroha and her parents arrived at our setting several years ago I became their point of contact with overall responsibility for their inclusion and well-being. Our centre’s philosophy encompasses the importance of contribution from each child, family, teacher and the community. Well supported, I was able to record Aroha’s learning and development through learning stories, observations, events, paintings and drawings which were then collated into her profile book. It soon became apparent through this process that Aroha had learning and socialising difficulties. In partnership with her family and the Ministry of Education, Special Education (GSE) early intervention team, which consisted of a Kaitakawaenga (Māori cultural advisor and co-worker), a behavioural specialist, and a teacher aide, it was possible to work together to develop new strategies that supported Aroha and her family in our setting in a way that was culturally acceptable to them.

A time of re-adjustment for Aroha and her family had begun. Aroha’s parents had asked for advice regarding the school we thought would best cater for her needs. Our kindergarten provided Aroha’s parents with up to date brochures from the local schools and books from our parent corner that related to starting school. We also encouraged informal visits to each school by Aroha’s parents in order for them to feel comfortable and welcome in the school environment. Once the decision of which school Aroha would attend was made, further discussions were held with Aroha’s parents at a subsequent transition meeting.

Everyone was involved from Aroha and her extended whānau, to our kindergarten’s teachers, GSE staff and the principal and new entrant teacher of their chosen school. As transition is closely linked with inclusion, we believed that group support for Aroha was imperative. We also believed it was important for Aroha to understand that her time at kindergarten was coming to an end and by exploring the new option of school together; we could make any adjustments needed for her successful transition into school.

From a teacher’s perspective, making adjustments for each child’s transition to school means specific planning, collaborating, strategising and scaffolding of their social and learning environments (Cullen, 1998). Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory, where each child’s characteristics are seen to be influenced by their surroundings and affected by people, places and things, is crucial for teachers to understand when linking or examining continuity between their centre and the school settings. ‘Educators need to develop partnerships across the settings, which enable common learning goals to be set’ (Howie & Timperley, 2001, p. 2.).

Children have differing needs and lifestyles. Matters such as their family’s history, jobs and community affect their cultural and social environments. Aroha’s family must also deal with her doctor’s diagnosis of ADD, which means she has difficulty sustaining attention for tasks or play activities and is often forgetful or easily distracted by unrelated stimuli. This extends into all areas of Aroha’s environments and requires the added support of specialist workers to provide comprehensive developmental, medical, and behavioural assessments for Aroha, and further support and education for her family.

Our setting used teaching techniques such as scaffolding a child’s learning and planning ahead to effectively manage the signs and symptoms of ADD. We believe Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory of temporarily supporting or scaffolding a child’s learning within their zone of proximal development is a valuable concept for teachers, and we offer guidance through collaboration with a child. We did this for Aroha by ensuring our kindergarten environment was accessible, comfortable and safe; we encouraged group and turn taking activities where social skills with peers were promoted and extended, and in addition we provided various activities, games, writing and math experiences set at different age levels and abilities. Extra support was provided for Aroha by a teacher aide who also scaffolded her learning in these areas and then withdrew once each task was mastered, leading Aroha towards her goals of independence and self-management.

The effective technique of planning ahead allows teachers to gently pave the way for parents and children into school. An example of planning ahead was to invite the school teacher to visit Aroha in her kindergarten environment prior to starting school. The new teacher was able to see how Aroha interacted with teachers and peers in a familiar environment. The teacher also shared Aroha's interests, learning and development by discussing the pages of Aroha's profile book with her. These highlighted her abilities, cultural values and specific goals set and achieved in her individual plan. Further teaching techniques included; holding informal discussions with Aroha about how a school day worked with longer hours, and why the bell rang for play periods and lunchtimes, encouraging friendships with children who were going to the same school, and inviting past pupils back from the school for a shared lunch.

Encouraging children to complete an activity, such as writing their name or finishing a puzzle, and sharing special items from home with their peers, enhances their confidence. A candle-lit birthday cake, made by Aroha in collaboration with her peers, was used as a symbol to celebrate her birthday and songs such as 'Happy Birthday' and 'Happy School Days' were important for everyone to realise the significance of her transition.

We continue to support parents prior to their child's transition to school by hosting parent/teacher meetings twice a year, inviting new entrant teachers from various schools in our community to informal parent evenings where we discuss expectations, transition, school philosophies, policies, the curriculum and other issues that parents wish to raise in order to gain reassurance. By providing this service, continuity between home and school environments is promoted and relationships are fostered.

From Aroha's perspective, transition means a time of intensity, challenge and courage as she says goodbye to some elements of familiarity; her setting, teachers and peers. For support, Aroha uses a set of visual display cards within both settings to maintain consistency and routine. It has been noted that a large part of Aroha's learning and developmental growth is achieved through watching others in their play; for Aroha transferring these observation skills into her new school environment is an important tool for her to learn the new rules and routines. To make the transition easier for Aroha, several visits to school were necessary so she was able to independently locate important places such as the toilets, library and office.

From Aroha's parents' standpoint, involving Aroha in community sport has helped her establish new friendships with several children in her soccer team who are the same age and are attending the same school. Aroha's parents have been able to foster these relationships by inviting these children into their home and including them in extended whānau activities. Aroha's parents believe regular routines such as breakfast to start the day, getting dressed independently and looking after personal belongings are important skills for her to have prior to starting school. These skills offer independence and can be learned at home through Aroha observing her parents.

Aroha's parents have taken the time to talk to her about school and the length of her day, concluding that an early pick up for the first few weeks will be important to alleviate any burnout or distress. Together Aroha and her parents shopped for a new school bag, lunch box and other items from a book list provided by the school.

School presents several new adjustments to Aroha's ongoing learning and development because of the differences in physical environments, teacher/child ratios, timetabling events, curriculum and philosophies of teaching and learning. School grounds offer open spaces with grass fields and large concrete court yards, all within unfenced perimeters. They are very different from the generally much smaller, well fenced kindergarten environment. Teacher: child ratios at school are approximately one teacher to twenty five children; in kindergarten they are approximately one teacher to fifteen children. This highlights the importance of adapting school activities using, for example, visual displays, in order to accommodate the busy curriculum requirements. The team supporting Aroha included older peers or adults in the playground until she became familiar with the boundaries and expectations of school.

It is important that teachers from both kindergarten and school settings are aware of the signs of stress in children who are overwhelmed by their changing circumstances or lack confidence when transitioning between settings. Some signs of stress and anxiety may be that a child regularly feels sick or nauseous, they may become withdrawn, aggressive or restless at their activities, towards teachers or with peers. However, it may be difficult for teachers to pick up on these signs of stress, as children with ADD often display these behaviours.

The practices discussed here with Aroha and her family are common in our setting. We believe in the importance of forming collaborative and reciprocal partnerships with children, parents, schools and other professionals in our community. We must first discover, appreciate and then celebrate each child's individual differences in culture, values and abilities for teachers to be successful in supporting children through their transitions to school, as no two children are ever the same. We can alleviate potential stresses for children and parents when transitioning to school by planning ahead and having policies and strategies in place to provide maximum support for families.

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