
Transition portfolios

Another tool in the transition kete

Carol Hartley, Pat Rogers, Jemma Smith, and Daniel Lovatt

This article draws on ongoing research by the teaching team at Mangere Bridge Kindergarten that investigates the role of a transition portfolio for children making the transition to primary school. During the kindergarten's Centre of Innovation research project (2006–2008), focus groups of kindergarten parents often commented that they viewed their child's kindergarten portfolio as a taonga, or treasure, and were reluctant to part with it. Having seen the value of kindergarten portfolios in the new entrant room for children and teachers, the teaching team investigated the value of developing a specific transition portfolio so that the families could keep the child's kindergarten portfolio at home. Teachers attending professional development workshops on our research at Mangere Bridge Kindergarten have been interested in the theoretical frameworks of our portfolio work and the practicalities of adapting the key ideas to their own context. The findings reported in this article cover practical and pedagogical considerations for both early childhood and primary teachers to use in their own practice.

Introduction

New Zealand's 2002–2012 strategic plan for early childhood education (Ministry of Education, 2002) provided an impetus for teachers and researchers to investigate and implement effective transition strategies. While this is no longer a current government policy document, it remains useful as it focuses attention on transition goals that are still highly relevant for early childhood and primary teachers.

In particular, these goals were:

- promoting coherence and continuity of experience and education between birth and 8 years
- promoting better understanding between early childhood teachers and primary teachers about the links between *Te Whāriki* and the New Zealand Curriculum Framework
- promoting better understanding between early childhood teachers and primary teachers about the pedagogical approaches in early childhood education and schools.

The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 42) lays out clearly the alignment between the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), and the New Zealand school curriculum, using a diagram to show how each strand of

Te Whāriki aligns to the key competencies for primary school.

The Ministry of Education's *Statement of Intent 2013–2018* (Ministry of Education, 2013) foregrounds the transition between all levels of compulsory schooling and now also includes the transition between early childhood settings and primary schools, something which had been omitted in an earlier statement. It seems to us particularly relevant and significant that the transition from early childhood to primary school has been included, as in our work providing professional development for teachers throughout New Zealand, we have been made very aware that there is still much to do on the three hugely important goals in the original strategic plan. Peters (2010) commented in a review of transition literature for the Ministry of Education that "leaving children to 'sink or swim' on entry to school leaves many children at risk of failure" (p. 77). Additionally, the review acknowledged that the factors involved in the transition to school are both complex and diverse. A key finding from this review resonated with us:

[S]uccessful transitions depend on the nature of the relationships between all involved. For children, their friendships, peer relationships and the relationship with their teacher appear central. Respectful, reciprocal relationships between

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adults involved are also key factors in a successful transition. (p. 1)

Joining the Centres of Innovation programme¹ in 2006 afforded Mangere Bridge Kindergarten the unique opportunity to research practices on the transition to school and to investigate the most effective ways to support children and families in what is often reported as a challenging time in family life. Britt and Sumsion (2003) expressed surprise at the language that had developed around transitions and “border crossing”, defining it as “inherently negative, threatening and undesirable” (p. 118), when, in fact, they see crossing borders or times of change as positive opportunities. As a teaching team, we also viewed transitions as a time of possibilities and growth for us as teachers and for the children and their families and whānau in our kindergarten. During our Centre of Innovation project on transition, we found that “flexibility, commitment and a can-do attitude were important” (Hartley, Rogers, Smith, Peters, & Carr, 2012, p. 91) and we brought this view to the research.

Our project was grounded in the special nature of transition in New Zealand where children negotiate transition individually, and it emphasised the crucial aspect of building relationships for all partners in the transition to school. It was also grounded in the belief promoted by Fleer (2002) that a sociocultural approach to learning and assessment “cannot be underestimated” (p. 106). The project investigated methods and resources for building relationships among children, teachers in both settings, and the families by working through the framework of mutually interesting and mutually familiar tasks and languages (Hartley et al., 2012). The conclusions by Peters (2010), quoted above, connected strongly to the findings of our research during the years of our Centre of Innovation project. We too found that relationships take time and persistence to develop, and this key finding is one that has driven our research interests since.

Theoretical background

Transition is a time when an individual changes his or her role in a community. For the children

¹ The Ministry of Education-funded Centres of Innovation programme promoted innovative teaching and learning in early childhood education. Services designated as centres of innovation undertook action research projects to further develop their existing innovative practice and disseminate the findings of their research.

in our setting, this involves changing from being a “kindy kid” to being a school pupil, and these changes necessitate building new relationships, learning new roles, and understanding different rules and responsibilities. Fabian (2013) details successful transitions as those which “result in a child who feels strong, competent and able to handle new experiences with confidence” (p. 46). Many researchers have identified educational transitions as critical periods in children’s lives and have linked these transitions to success during the school years (Brooker, 2008; Corsaro & Molinari, 2005; Margetts, 2002; Peters, 2002; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Continuity and coherence during the early years, with a systematic and integrated approach, is recognised as crucial for children’s learning. Strategies which are individualised, promote continuity of learning, and include the transfer of relevant information are seen by Fabian (2013) as central to an effective transition experience.

Research at Mangere Bridge: Early childhood portfolios in the school classroom

Early in the Mangere Bridge Kindergarten research, we realised the importance of the kindergarten portfolios as a transition tool, as illustrated by Gaurav’s experience (for details, see Hartley et al., 2012, and Peters, Hartley, Rogers, Smith, & Carr, 2009). Gaurav, a very quiet child for whom English is an additional language, took his kindergarten portfolio to school, where it played a key role in fostering his sense of belonging in the new entrant classroom. His teacher read his portfolio with him to get a sense of his interests and his personality and the portfolio became a tool (Peters et al., 2009) for him to engage with his peers in the classroom. His teacher reported that other children wanted to read his portfolio, browse the photos, and have conversations with Gaurav. Consequently, a place in the classroom opened up for him and he made friends and could begin to build relationships and communicate in English in a non-threatening way. This led to the new entrant teacher asking the other children in her class to bring in their portfolios. For us, the kindergarten research team, this became one of the defining moments in the research. We became aware that the portfolios had a two-fold purpose. First, they were a rich resource for primary teachers as they learnt about the child’s capabilities, interests, and dispositions,

and could be used for building learning power (Claxton, 2002). The portfolios provided the means for the new entrant teacher to engage with the child about that child's learning and learning methods, using the stories and the conversations as a prompt and learning tool.

Second, and perhaps more importantly on this occasion, the portfolios were also the vehicles for children to get to know each other in an easy, engaging, and interactive way. In the kindergarten, it is common for children to spend time together laughing and talking about the stories in their portfolios, engaging with each other, with the teachers, and with any adult that happens to be nearby. It is not uncommon for children to approach visiting adults, portfolio in hand, to discuss their learning contained within the portfolio. This use of the portfolio as a tool of engagement crossed over into the new entrant classroom. However, it also created challenges for us and the new entrant teacher as it became apparent that many families regarded the portfolios as taonga (treasures). Some families were not willing to part with them, even with reassurances from the teachers that they would be treated with all the respect of a special family treasure. It is also important to note that it is not only the families who want to keep their portfolios safe, but also the children themselves. As one parent replied recently to a survey: "I like seeing the different things he does at kindy. I also like how much pride he takes in his portfolio". The primary teachers felt a heavy sense of responsibility about keeping the portfolios safe.

Additionally, in some instances the primary teachers felt overwhelmed with the amount of information in the portfolios and that reading the portfolios was "just more work". Sometimes the portfolios were not read or they were sent home again after one day to keep them safe. We began to think about how we could address this new challenge. At the time, we were investigating e-portfolios but were unsure how we could sustain this innovation with our workload. Also, we were aware of a number of issues that we felt would make e-portfolios an unsustainable solution in the near future. These included the complexities of storage, technology resources and budget constraints, and, most particularly, ease of access for children. It was obvious from the amount of time our children spent perusing, reading, laughing, and enjoying their portfolios together that an e-portfolio would not be a viable or useful option as a child's transition tool, so we put the idea aside

to return to at a later date. Consequently, in 2013 we decided to trial a separate transition portfolio to "make visible the learning journey from early childhood education to school" (Carr, Clarkin-Phillips, Resink, Anderson, & Jack, 2013, pp. 36). The kindergarten portfolio would be used to compile another smaller, more resilient, compact, and intensely complex learning record.

Our transition portfolios: what do they look like?

Practicalities

We realised we would need to first consider the practical aspects of the transition portfolio. We chose an A4 size as it was a good fit with the storage facility at school, and we limited the pages to about 20 as we wanted it to be read easily and not be too unwieldy. We settled on a plastic clear file (even though, as an Enviroschool, we prefer paper rather than plastic) because it would be more robust and stand up to spending as long as was required in the classroom. The time the portfolios remained in the classroom was highly variable: we have had some portfolios that have spent more than 12 months in the new entrant classroom, some that moved with the child into the Year 1 classroom, and others that went home quite quickly.

Although the majority of our children go on to one of two schools, and we have a close relationship with those two schools, we have a non-negotiable inclusive philosophy at the kindergarten which means that the transition portfolio must be provided for all children whatever primary school they move on to. In fact, an unexpected outcome of the transition portfolio is that it has proved extremely useful for children who go to schools other than our main two schools. The transition portfolio is a valuable point of contact for teachers and families, and for children to build relationships in a classroom where they have no previous relationships. It "examines the children's strengths rather than their weaknesses" (Fleer, 2002, p. 110), and is a detailed and positive assessment of the child's lived experiences and learning during their time in the kindergarten environment. Thus it could be a useful tool for early childhood centres whose children move to primary schools in a geographically wide catchment area.

The transition portfolio has also been adjusted for another type of transition—that

of children moving to another early childhood centre, something which is often necessitated by a parent's changing work circumstances or change of residence.

Documenting learning

We discussed the transition portfolio criteria at length and over time honed the selection and form of the child's learning experiences to be included. The paramount criteria were that the transition portfolio would be a shortened version so that the primary teachers would have time to read it, and that it would include information useful for teachers when beginning to build a relationship with the child. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) emphasises that learning is about participation and reciprocal relationships between people, places, and things (p. 43) or, in Māori, ngā hononga. This construct as it applies to transitions to school is discussed in Peters and Paki (2013, pp. 205–207).

Once we had begun to develop the transition portfolios and the children were taking them into their new entrant classrooms, we arranged to meet with the junior school teachers at the two schools to get their feedback and suggestions for further changes. In one of these focus groups, a teacher commented:

When I was looking through his portfolio I felt that I really did know him ... like that had such in-depth comments and such personal things that he had done and accomplished at kindy that I felt like from reading it that I knew and got a better understanding of what Louie was really like, that it actually made us feel that we had more of a connection with him.

The transition portfolio reflects the sociocultural nature of learning in the kindergarten by illustrating learning in context both *individually* and, of special importance, in *group* situations, and enabling the children to have an input. The children value these experiences equally and are completely absorbed when looking at stories that include their friends at kindergarten and also the stories that include family members, contributed by the teachers or family at home.

When the time comes to select the stories, usually a few weeks before the child makes the transition to school, we deliberately programme time during the day to work with the child, read the stories, engage with the child, and elicit information about their favourites, their remembered experiences, and what the child

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felt was important learning for them at that time. Each transition portfolio thus contains a selection of learning stories chosen by children and teachers together—stories that illustrate competency and a sense of the child as a valuable contributor and learner in the early childhood centre and in their family life.

For example, Aween, when choosing a story for inclusion in her transition portfolio, commented on a story about learning how to write her name from her kindergarten portfolio: “I wrote it in big letters, from now on I write it in little letters. If I do big ones too much I will forget how to do little ones”. She also remembered in the same discussion learning to jump out of the tree: “I jumped down. I learn at kindy. I was scared I was going to fall out of the tree. I did it too much. I learned. I’m not scared now”.

The stories Aween had chosen to include clearly showed progress over time in early writing—she had learnt how to write in lower-case letters and had a positive attitude to trial and error. Each of Aween’s comments was typed and added to the transition portfolio for the new teacher to gain an insight into why the story was chosen, sometimes with additional explanation from the teacher at kindergarten.

The teachers each take responsibility in turn for the next child who is making the transition to school, and consult with each other about the compilation of the stories and their input into the transition portfolio. Once the child has chosen the stories, the teacher who interviewed the child works on an introduction page reviewing the selection of learning stories to document progress over time. The teacher then adds an example of the child’s “writing page” from their kindergarten portfolio that also shows progress over time, and writes a page linking learning at kindergarten with the key competencies in the New Zealand school curriculum.

The portfolio stories can be printed directly from the stories filed on the teachers’ computers, but we found it time consuming having to work out who had typed each story, so we now photocopy the pages from the kindergarten portfolio; there is very little difference in quality and it saves considerable time for the teacher working on the transition portfolio. It also enables the inclusion of artefacts such as children’s art work, and handwritten notes, often from parents. These are added after a learning story goes into the portfolio.

Response from new entrant teachers and parents

When the transition portfolios had been in use for nearly 6 months, we interviewed the teachers from the new entrant classes at both schools, in two focus groups, to gather their feedback and to investigate any changes the teachers thought would enhance the value of the portfolios. The feedback was extremely positive, as shown by these examples of their comments:

They are colourful, they are compact.

They have all the key things and they are great.

I like them ... I think they are great ... it gives you an overview of the child ... it is quite a different view of the child so this is good seeing what they can do independently ... it gives you a bit of background into their personality.

The transition portfolios serve several purposes. One teacher reported:

If they are having a shy or a lost moment I can think back to something in the book and bring it up with him to have something to talk about in a low key way, just to start a conversation.

The teachers also found the last page, which contain the links to key competencies of the school curriculum, useful for creating a connection to the work in the new entrant room and for describing the continuity between *Te Whāriki* and the New Zealand school curriculum. One commented, “I really was impressed with ... at the back where you have the summary of the key competencies”, and another, “What I liked about it was the key competencies just linked straight into what we use at school”.

Parents also saw benefits. One parent came into kindergarten to tell us how the first days at school had gone for her child and reported that her child had been at a loss for the first few days. She was just delighted to hear the new entrant teacher had read a story from her child’s portfolio about her interest in building block towers. As a consequence, the teacher had gone to a nearby classroom and borrowed more blocks for the child to use to help her follow her interest in the new surroundings. This strategy also helped her form attachments with her new classmates. The teacher created a sense of belonging for this child, and added resources that she knew the child felt comfortable with and was capable of using.

Family/whānau input

Recently we have added a page for parent input which we send home as we begin compiling the transition portfolio, asking the parent/whānau to write their comments about the child's time at kindergarten and their expectations for their child and family during transition to school. One of the first examples of this feedback came from Alex's mum. She was overwhelmed when we asked for her input for the portfolio and responded:

Alex's learning at kindy has been wonderful and varied. He has learnt language, culture, science, not to mention all the lovely social skills he has learnt. We love hearing about all the fantastic things he has seen and learnt at the farm also—a favourite of his. It's hard to put into a few words how much Alex has learnt and grown at kindy.

One of the primary teachers reported to us that "the feedback from the parents—I thought that was excellent".

Conclusion

In creating the transition portfolio, we are mindful of the need to hear each of the voices in this process. We aim to be flexible in the composition of the portfolio, ensuring that the portfolio reflects the child as a capable and competent learner, highlighting the interests of each child from multiple perspectives and in multiple contexts. Consequently we seek input from the child, the teaching team, and the family/whānau. Fabian (2013) emphasises that "transitions are an individual process and need to be personalised if each child is going to settle into school easily and gain resilience for future transitions" (p. 52).

As the children leave kindergarten on their last day, they take with them a kete full of the documentation and resources that have supported them in belonging in the kindergarten environment. The transition portfolio has become another effective and individualised tool in the transition kete, something they can carry into the new entrant class room and use to build relationships with the new teacher and their fellow school pupils.

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Mangere Bridge Kindergarten teacher researchers **Carol Hartley, Pat Rogers, and Jemma Smith** have an ongoing interest in improving transition strategies for children and families. In 2012 they co-authored *Crossing the Border* (NZCER Press) with Margaret Carr and Sally Peters. In 2013 **Daniel Lovatt** joined the team, bringing a research interest in working theories. Currently the team are part of a TLRI project researching how to support children who learn in more than one language.

Email: mangerebridge@aka.org.nz