

Supporting young gifted children through transitioning from early childhood education to school

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The importance of the early years has long been recognised. Positive experiences in the early years help to build children's learning and development across the lifespan. This article argues that strong collaborative partnerships between school and early childhood educational settings enhance transition experiences for all children, and specifically for gifted children. To ensure gifted children have positive and smooth transitions to school, teachers need to ensure there is sufficient flexibility within transition processes. Teachers also need to have a good understanding of the characteristics of gifted children in order to anticipate and dismantle potential limitations for the children within the transition. Transition to school process needs to cater for individual children and be sufficiently aware of current understandings of giftedness in order to support gifted children. This article considers the characteristics of the gifted child and how transition processes may affect them; and offers recommendations for practice to assist teachers to support the smoother transition of gifted children from early childhood education into primary schooling.

Introduction

Transitions effect everybody from a young child through to an adult. The first three years of life are vital to children's learning and development and like many new experiences, transition processes are a part of this stage. Collaborative relationships and strong communication between early childhood and school settings, which includes whānau/family, children and supporting teachers as well as other supporting agencies, can build a positive platform to create a smooth transition (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Margrain, 2007; Peters, 2010). A range of strategies will be provided to demonstrate how whānau/family and educators can support children in meaningful ways.

Transition into school: Individualised and unique

Transitions occur many times during a child's life, but the transition to school is interesting in that it is both wholly unique and universal. While this process happens to many children worldwide, no two transitions are alike. It has long been recognised that transitions are a significant part of children's lives and can vary in positive or negative experiences. All children experience transition from early childhood to school differently (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Research has found that if this particular transition does not succeed in a positive manner, then future transitions can be jeopardised, disrupting children's school experiences, academic and social aspects and lifetime experiences (Cameron & Margrain, 2015; Margetts, 2002; Peters, 2010).

The transition to school has been identified as an experience which holds the greatest impact on the life of the child, and has generated much interest from international organisations. For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development dedicated an entire edition of its *Starting Strong* publication (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017) to research topics on transitions from early childhood care to primary schooling. According to this study, the transition from early childhood into school in Aotearoa New Zealand is characterised by a unique autonomy that allows the transition procedures to be personalised according to the desires

of the community (frequently determined within the kāhui ako/communities of learning¹ groups). There is much room for early childhood settings and schools to share ideas about what learning matters within each space and so determine how this shared knowledge can build bridges for the child to move from one educational setting to the next.

For many children the transition from an early childhood setting to school can be an exciting and fun time but also quite an anxious time as children move from a secure setting into the unknown (Dockett & Perry, 2010; Peters, 2010). Understanding what transition signifies to children requires educators to consider what this process means to teachers themselves. We would suggest that transitions to school are guided by the respect and care teachers hold for the children transitioning, underpinned by their desire to see the children feel safe and succeed in their next educational setting. The emotional entanglements of the educator with children coexist with their professional motivations to aid children in their transition processes to school. These motivations are enhanced by the principles of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) which encourage teachers to ensure that children are empowered, and their whānau/family and community are appropriately included during transition. Children's kotahitanga which refers to their holistic development, is central to all considerations. Furthermore, the transition is supported by a similar vision within *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), where children are described as self-confident, resilient and connected members of communities.

Of particular importance when considering the wide variance of individual needs, the steps for transition must be discussed in consultation with the child and guided by the teacher's and whānau/family knowledge of the child built from their relationships (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2013). While early childhood and primary settings have the room to tailor transitions for children, in reality this experience may be limited by procedural and structural tensions such as standardised procedures, time-constraints, and a lack of communication between the early childhood and primary setting to name a few. When considering the development of gifted children, the anxiety around transitions can be unnecessarily exacerbated by these limitations. In order to enhance the transition process to support gifted children, it is necessary to understand not only the individual child you are dealing with, but the characteristics of gifted children in order to prepare for what could emerge.

The characteristics of gifted children and the experience of transition

While the concept of giftedness has shifted over time and cultural contexts, much of the discourse has focussed upon the cognitive criteria for giftedness, however the social and emotional aspects are considered additional rather than central (Oppong, Shore, & Muis, 2018). Within Aotearoa New Zealand, we are fortunate to have seminal works which resist this tendency, focussing upon the holistic representation of the gifted individual (Bevan-Brown, 2011; Webber, 2011). The issues surrounding emotional and social development and wellbeing of gifted children have been discussed in other publications (Delaune, 2016; Delaune & Tapper, 2015) and will form the basis of the following characteristics of gifted children.

The theories of Kazimierz Dabrowski, as adapted by Daniels and Piechowski (2009) in relation to gifted children, illustrate the emotional intensities of the gifted child. Often gifted children are affected by the overwhelming drives of their emotions, and find these extremely difficult to regulate or control. These intensities are aligned to Dabrowski's

¹ [i] Kāhui ako/communities of learning are cross-sector community groups where early childhood and primary teachers come together to discuss education and work together to enhance educational movements across the two domains.

term overexcitabilities, and refer to the intense responses individuals have to external stimuli. For gifted children, sensory experience is magnified with their experiences and their responses are equally magnified. As Daniels and Piechowski (2009) state, “life is experienced in a manner that is deeper, more vivid, and more acutely sensed” (p. 9). These intensities affect relational attachment, with more intense responses to separation and change being expressed at times of transition. Whilst such characteristics are neither all encompassing nor representative of every gifted child, they are important to consider when gifted children transition from early childhood to school. There can be misconceptions about gifted children’s sensitivities in new situations. Due to their exceptional abilities, it is often assumed gifted children will cope easily through the transition phase, but in most cases this is not true (Grant, 2013). Smith (2014) argues that while there are differing views on how the emotions of gifted children develop, how they are expressed is of interest and concern to teachers. When it comes to change some gifted children are perceived as less capable of coping, some moreso (Delaune, 2016).

By the time a gifted child moves from the early childhood setting to school, it would be expected that this child has developed a sense of belonging which enables their unfiltered expression of self. It is expected that within every early childhood setting each child will be “accepted for who they are, and [know] that they can make a difference” (MoE, 2017, p. 31). In the process of transition, young gifted children who have developed this sense of belonging are confronted with moving from security into the unknown. For some, this experience can be daunting. The outward expression of this uncertainty may be masked in the same way that gifted children can mask their capabilities due to their ability to comprehend at an early age that they are different (Margrain, 2005; Porter, 1999). Gifted children can be uncertain about how their exceptionalities will be regarded within the new space: “Will they like me? Will they be surprised? Will they assume I can do other things?” are some questions which may spring to mind. In addition to these anxieties, there are many changes that children need to adapt to during the transition. For example, becoming familiar with the school setting, the size of the classrooms, getting to know the teacher as well as other staff, finding the toilets, library, office and hall. The playground can also be a daunting area, particularly at morning tea time and lunch where the children have free rein to a much bigger play area than early childhood settings. While there will be many gifted children who undertake this transition without these concerns considering the anxieties of the gifted child may add to misconceptions of the ‘socially misaligned’ gifted child. When children find the transition to school challenging, it is important to aid their adjustment to this change.

Gifted children’s wellbeing is interdependent with and affected by the expectations of adults and individual perceptions of giftedness (Delaune, 2018; Wong & Whitburn, 2018). Gifted children may mask their capabilities when confronted by adults who do not understand or appreciate their precocity, yet will still demonstrate emotional intensities which affect their relationships with others. The transition to school can heighten these emotional responses. While this transition should be a time of excited nervousness and an eagerness to move onto a new learning environment, the change and necessity to reattach to a new teacher and set of friends in a new environment can create high anxiety levels and be very stressful if supportive strategies are not put in place.

For teachers interested in exploring supportive strategies, there is scant literature directly relating to transition for gifted children. The chief focus of the Ministry of Education publications on giftedness relate to the primary and secondary sectors (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008; MoE, 2012). This discrepancy generates issues in the transition process which are outside the scope of this paper to comment on at length. However, what is worth noting is how the social construction of giftedness in early childhood is affected by this delineation, with consequences for children and whānau/family (Wong, 2018). A subsection of the Ministry of Education gifted learners webpage (www.gifted.tki.org.nz) provides information on giftedness in the early years, but nothing specifically on transition. While *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) does not identify giftedness as a specific area of concern, there is much within the curriculum that aligns with the objectives of gifted education (Margrain, 2017). For example, when considering transitions and children, *Te Whāriki* states “children need consistency and continuity, especially at times of transition.

A foundation of remembered and anticipated people, places, things and experiences will give them the confidence to engage successfully in new settings” (MoE, 2017, p. 26). Furthermore, with specific reference to the transition between early childhood and school, *Te Whāriki* states, “young children look forward to going on to school or kura, and they expect it to be different, but they do not always anticipate quite how different the expectations, structures and routines may be” (MoE, 2017, p. 51). Yet, the continuing concern with scholars within gifted education (Bicknell & Riley, 2013; Silverman, 1992) is that not only do gifted children need to be identified early, but there is a need for teachers to participate in specialised professional learning on giftedness. This is considered essential since without a necessary understanding and appreciation of the characteristics of giftedness it is easy for children’s behaviours to be misinterpreted.

Likewise, while these statements within *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) are designed for all children, something can be missed when they are not considered in light of the specific needs of gifted children. The consideration of the characteristics of giftedness can enable educators to reconceive the child’s responses in a different light, and offer ways of aiding the child which may not have otherwise been considered; it offers an opportunity to ‘see and do different’ based upon the experiences of others.

Transition into school for gifted young children: What can teachers do to help?

Building collaborative relationships between children, parents and teachers within early childhood and school settings is essential (Cameron & Margrain, 2015; Peters, 2010). As educators, we need to help identify what children are concerned about and address these concerns with children. Ensuring that we seek children’s perspectives and opinions, listen, understand and validate them. The child is at the core of the matter, while educators provide the wrap around support. If we consider the principle of Empowerment within the early childhood curriculum it relates clearly to transition and collaborative relationships. The New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) “recognises and enhances their mana and supports them to enhance the mana of others and” and “empowers the child to learn and grow” (MoE, 2017, p. 18). To empower our children and whānau/family we must listen to them. Gifted children are likely to have deeper understandings, thoughts, insights and strong communication skills, therefore are likely to have a different voice to share.

Advocating for our gifted children is an integral part of inclusive practice. Developing a clear transition policy in collaboration with the teaching team and consulting with whānau/family about the procedure is a positive way forward. This could be undertaken as a part of a wider community meeting with local schools and whānau/family of children who are soon to be transitioning.

As a guide for practitioners, the following recommendations will assist educators to implement practices to support the smoother transition of gifted children from early childhood education into primary schooling. These recommendations have been garnered from evidence based best practices (Cameron & Margrain, 2015; Peters, 2010), and our experiential findings through academic research (Delaune, 2015; Margrain, Murphy, Dean, 2015), teacher observations, talking with children and parents, and centre appraisal research projects while working with gifted children and their teachers:

- Plan early and offer plenty of room for gifted children to have many visits before making the change to primary school. Having a number of school visits is certainly valuable for children as well as the parents who may be apprehensive about this shift also. Some schools offer a program which enables enrolled children to visit every week at a set time for a whole term before starting school. All the new children will come at this time, so gifted children may find a buddy who is also new and can identify with their feelings of uncertainty. Requesting more than the standard three or four visits can be helpful in developing a sense of belonging. It prepares children to

understand what might happen during the day at school, get to know the teacher, other children, and the classroom setting. This is also an opportunity to hear what the child may be concerned about.

- Initiate a meeting with the new primary teacher to discuss the child's exceptionalities. Many kāhui ako/communities of learning make space for early childhood teachers to talk with primary teachers about transitions. Instigate a discussion about how you can become a part of these conversations.
- Work with whānau/family to allow children to take a video or camera on their school visit. This will need to be arranged with the primary school, so it does not infringe on any privacy issues. After the visit, print the children's photos and create a big book so that the children can revisit the experience in the early childhood setting with their teachers and peers. The child could also share the video back with the children at the centre, which could encourage further positive discussion.
- If your child has a portfolio from the early childhood setting encourage them to take it to school and share it with the teacher. Highlight three or four favourite stories which can illustrate a picture of the capabilities of the child in the early childhood context.
- A number of early childhood centres have moved to online platforms where portfolios are filed. Options on the site allows opportunities to invite the new entrant teacher onto a child's portfolio well in advance of the transition and the educators can learn about the child's interests and strengths.
- If the child is artistic, encourage them or their whānau/family to take along a piece of their artwork as a way to interact and engage in conversation with the teacher or other children. This can also work for any other interests the child holds. By taking a photo of the work they take pride in it.
- Encourage the whānau/family to visit the playground after school hours so that their child may develop a familiarity with the setting.
- For gifted children, knowing other children or like minded peers already attending school can help build social skills.
- Continuing to support children's interests outside of school through local extra-curricular activities can provide a good balance of physical, creative, social and cognitive skills and learning dispositions. These interests can be supported through memberships to sports clubs, galleries or museums and groups such as Small Poppies (child centred programmes offering extended and stimulating learning experiences) and other network learning communities.

Recognising and acknowledging each child for their unique skills, strengths and interests will certainly support a promising transition. As teachers and parents it is important to respect these important changes for our young gifted children and help them make the transition to school a positive experience.

Conclusion

Transitions are a delicate time for all individuals, and the emotional intensities felt by many gifted children can deepen their experiences at this time of change. In order to support these children fully during their transition, it is critical for educators to both individualise transition processes, and work to enhance their knowledge of gifted children's characteristics in order to prepare a smooth path for movement from one space to the next. Working from the strong relationships that have been built with educators, gifted children will have a firm base to transition from, and with the support of all individuals surrounding the gifted child, there will be a solid bridge to move across into the next space.

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