

A Walk in the Park? Connecting a Child's Early Childhood Experience with School



Authors: Christina Leef, Lorraine Sands and Melissa Osmond

This article explores the growing relationship between Greenpark School and Greerton Early Childhood Centre as we began to listen actively to the passion and commitment to make a difference for children's learning that was the motivating force for teachers in each setting.

Christina, Assistant Principal at Greenpark School and Lorraine and Melissa, teachers from Greerton Early Childhood Centre, present their perspectives on this journey. We talk about the difference it made to the relationship between our primary and early childhood teachers and the way we began to re-think how we supported children's learning as they moved from early childhood into school.

Imagine for a moment the morning of a child's fourth birthday. Excitement is high, the presents have been opened and the candles are lit. One, two three, four.... and someone says: "Next year you'll be starting school." In New Zealand, this is about the time these conversations begin in earnest and expectation builds, yet what does this really mean for a child and their family? Will going to school be a 'walk in the park', a natural transition from one learning experience to another? Will a child's learning continue to strengthen because the pathway is wide and familiar or is the drawbridge raised, a gap exposed?

We've often thought about Malaguzzi's vision for learning and teaching.

Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water. Through an active, reciprocal exchange,

teaching can strengthen learning how to learn. (Malaguzzi, 1996, p.79)

At Greerton Early Childhood Centre and Greenpark School the teachers did not want to be standing on opposite sides of the bank. We wanted our learning and teaching settings to be connected and to make the transition process a seamless one that builds on children's strengths and interests. We also wanted to support children and their families, through strengthening relationships and so we began conversations about possibilities and 'what- ifs' with open minds and thoughtful, collegial discussion. In this article, we track these growing conversations, offering an exemplar that begins with intentional teachers wanting to make a difference. We follow our experiences and work through the ideas that bubbled to the surface as we considered how we might practically and sustainably 'journey down the water together'.

We know families desperately want their children to be successful at school, in the widest sense of what successful can mean, and there is much anxiety about how that might be achieved. The last few weeks political furore (June 2012) is evidence of this as the unprecedented unity across every sector of New Zealand society saw the government back down on their intention to increase class sizes. Unfortunately, this social unity has never extended to an understanding of what kind of learning and teaching environments support children to be successful learners. 'Schoolification' (Moss & Bennett, 2006) in the early childhood sector is a problem that is not easily shifted by 21st century research to the contrary (see for example: watch Ken Robinson's 2010 RSA Edge Lecture - Changing Paradigms or watch the shorter RSA Animate - Changing Paradigms) as many parents and teachers still think more structured learning,

earlier, will give their children the edge to ensure their children's success at school.

At Greerton, teachers have actively documented children's learning from infancy in ways that have made valued learning visible. Learning Stories have provided children and families with a folder full of thoughtfully written narratives that, over time, track learning progress and support children's identities as strong competent learners-in-action (Margaret Carr, 2001, p.13).

These narratives have enabled families to have a strong sense that learning is supported when children have many, repeated opportunities to set their own goals and pursue complex investigations. They further support families to understand that their children drive their learning through dispositions like perseverance, effort, hard work and creative attitudes to solving problems that engage and challenge them. Most essentially, the teachers write about the intrinsic rewards children have through stretching themselves to the edges of learning, where they keep striving to learn and where they learn to love the pursuit of learning. These are the learning traits that are transferrable from one context to another and offer the best opportunity for children to thrive as they move into the more formal learning context of school.

The Greerton teachers could see the value of the children's Learning Story folders going to school where they would offer an insight into each child's capacity to learn in ways that primary teachers would usually not have an opportunity to see. Several problems have traditionally inhibited this. One has been the way families have treasured these documents, rich in describing and analysing their children's early learning life. They value these and the thought of leaving them in a new space where relationships have not yet been established is a big ask.

Another issue arising from the feedback we have had from families is that when they have taken these folders to school, primary teachers have not understood their value, often flicked through them, made a comment about how lovely they are, then returned them. To be fair, these folders are a little overwhelming, in terms of the volume of content and expecting primary teachers to read them extensively is quite possibly unrealistic. In any case, the value for children is in keeping them in the classroom as literacy

artifacts that children and teachers dip into over a long period of time. This is where children are able to re-visit learning, share their identities as a learner with others and use them to build relationships. We first heard about this way of using children's folders through Mangere Bridge Kindergarten's Centre of Innovation (COI) Research (Peters et al., 2009).

Mangere Bridge Kindergarten's latest book, *Crossing Borders* (2012) builds on their COI research and is an essential read for teachers looking to expand their transition processes. This work gave us important insight and has been a catalyst for us to think more about the value of building closer relationships with our local primary schools to generate shared understandings about our respective curricula. In so doing we hoped to build a culture of respect and collegiality that bridged the transitional gap, making the move to school a natural progression.

Transition to school folders

All these factors led us to think about other ways to enable early childhood teachers' knowledge and insight into children's learning dispositions and abilities to be gifted to our primary colleagues. We played around with ideas and decided to make a transition to school folder that used a selection of the Learning Stories in children's profile books. This was not designed to be additional work. We intended using the stories written during the preceding six months, align these with the Key Competencies in the NZ Curriculum and the principles of Te Whāriki and so provide a holistic, formative assessment booklet that could stay in the classroom. It was a partial duplicate of the child's large folder and we intended this to be a much more manageable tool for primary school teachers to use.

We had at least four hopes that these booklets would be used as:

- A chance at the very beginning for the new entrant teacher to have a conversation with the child about the wide, complex learning in this booklet and gain insight into the 'funds of knowledge children bring to school (Carr, 2001).
- An opportunity for children to easily share a part of themselves that they were

extremely confident about, inside a setting that was new and largely unfamiliar.

- An on going access to a literacy artifact that could be used to re-tell a story and be useful to build relationships with other children.
- A useful reference for the teacher to say: 'Remember the time when you tried something new at Greerton, you worked hard and got better and better. Reading is just like that...'

Developing a primary/ece 'buddy'

Melissa had mentioned to Lorraine that Greenpark had a buddy classroom initiative and right at the beginning of the conversations around how to develop closer ties, we wondered if we could somehow start this buddy initiative earlier, introducing the primary buddy to the child before they started school. We all started to think about possibilities, deciding to explore this further.

- Jahla, by then a 10-year-old student at Greenpark School, had attended Greerton ECC from infancy and she was now a leader at Greenpark, so with her knowledge of both learning settings, it was decided to ask her if she would like to be Jordan's buddy (our next child to start Greenpark). Jahla was ready for the challenge, full of her own ideas about how this might work.
- Our emphasis on a shared leadership approach was widening our community of learners and teachers as we now embraced Jahla's contributions.
- Our thoughts were always centred on the ways we could start, build and extend relationships and we hoped an initial skype session would break the ice and begin the friendship.

Melissa writes in a Learning Story to Jordan and his family about the process of getting to know Jahla.

...Today we arranged to Skype with Jahla, who is a 'House Leader' at Greenpark and a very dedicated role-model to the students there. Along with Mrs Leef, the Assistant Principal, Jahla has taken time

out of her classroom to build a buddy relationship with Jordan. It was a fantastic opportunity for Jordan and his friends to listen to stories about school as shared first hand by Jahla and Mrs Leef. They told us about the role of 'House Leaders', what happens when you go to school and all of the exciting opportunities there are every day.

Jordan shared stories with Jahla too. He told her of his interests in art, and that he had visited his class room and met his teacher. Jordan was very attentive and listened carefully to his new friends with keen interest....

They arranged to visit and just a few days later they arrived. Jordan was feeling very nervous; he was understandably keen for his Mum to stay that morning!

When Jahla arrived however she instantly became a celebrity and Jordan quickly felt at ease. He began to show Jahla around the centre, pointing out all the things he likes to do here. Jahla was a keen follower and soon she was drawn into the fun! A game of tag in the tree drew her into the branches and the children laughed with joy together.

What surprised us?

We didn't expect Jordan to be so nervous and were really pleased we had invited Mum to stay to be part of this process as Stephanie was able to support Jordan, as well as meet both Jahla and Christina. This enabled conversations to continue at home.

We were all very surprised that Jahla brought two books with her. We were expecting her photobook of the things at school she thought Jordan would be interested in because we had talked about this visit being a reciprocal learning opportunity. Jahla would be extending her own literacy repertoire of skills by making this ICT resource for Jordan. The second book really cemented for us what an inspired buddy choice Jahla had been. Her knowledge of both settings and her dispositional learning perspective meant she used her leadership and initiative to think wider than we could ever have envisaged. Jahla

had decided to bring her own learning portfolio to show Jordan, knowing that this would be something they had in common. At first we hadn't recognised the book as it looked very different from the folders we had used when Jahla had attended Greerton. It turned out that Jahla and her mum had rebound the Learning Stories written for her in her last year at Greerton because Jahla thought these would be the most useful ones for Jordan to see.

It made us think about the New Zealand Centre for Educational Research, Competent Children's Longitudinal study (Wylie et al., 2004, p.80) which reinforced the importance of quality interactions with Early Childhood teachers and later educational achievement. This was the Jahla we remembered and seeing her now at 10, exhibiting so much competence, was an extraordinary affirmation of the role of early childhood education in children's lives. Our research time and again has shown us how learners thrive when whānau and teachers work together in a partnership as learning travels between home and centre. We were now seeing evidence of the longer term effects of this foundational learning continuing to flourish. Most essentially, we were witnessing the outcomes for children when they are part of a school community that values their contributions, offers wide, vibrant learning opportunities and actively seeks strong connections with whānau.

Excerpt from Melissa's Learning Story for Jordan:

Jahla presented Jordan with a book she had made at school that would help him make connections with the new environment. They shared stories together about school and Jordan's sense of comfort in this new relationship continued to grow. Now he had taken on a leadership role himself and he shared his knowledge with the growing group of friends who were keen to hear stories of school. Reid, Alex, Cameron and Nate were keen listeners and learners today. Jordan's mum (Steph) and Mrs Leef were also sharing knowledge together and discussing Jordan's transition. It seemed that the whāriki of knowledge and relationships was being woven before our eyes.

Our next visit was to school and a small group of friends joined Melissa and Jordan on this adventure. By now we were beginning to understand how social this journey was. Not just for Jordan but for his friends who were vying to participate. In terms of the practicability of making this process equitable for everyone, taking a small group together meant we were widening the experiences and setting up a stronger sense of belonging and relational connection with Greenpark School for children who would be attending there in a few months time. We thought too that this was cementing the notion that transitions are a normal part of life and an opportunity for new learning.

We were beginning to understand how important friendships were in developing those positive learning dispositions that underly children's abilities to fully enjoy the transition experience. During this visit to school, Jahla was Jordan's host and attended class with him and his friends. Meanwhile, Jordan was also participating in the normal transition meetings with his mother and other children and families who would be starting school with him. We were connecting now much more cohesively as family and teachers supported each other to widen Jordan's experience.

The growing relationship continued as, once starting school, Jahla met Jordan to ensure he was comfortable. Again she and Jordan became the celebrities of the classroom. Whenever Jahla would appear a chorus would sing out, "Jordan, Jahla's here". When Jordan was in the playground he would acknowledge Jahla and she him.

Sally Peters' comments in her literature review report to the Ministry of Education on transition to school, gave us further food for thought:

Another view of success that was evident in the literature was for children to establish a positive identity as a learner at school, and to develop positive learning dispositions, so they are "ready, willing and able" to engage with learning and utilise the knowledge and skills that develop. (Peters, 2010, pp.13-23)

Sally further describes this as a feeling like being 'a fish in water'. We rather liked that metaphor. We found this report full of valuable insights into

wise transition to school practice, supported by research and theory and we highly recommend it as a resource for teachers wanting to explore transitions further.

The teachers at Greerton Early Childhood Centre and Greenpark School are still in the 'getting to know each other' phase, particularly for the new entrant teacher. As classrooms are established, teacher appointments, due to funding criteria often occur later in the process and children may already be deep inside the transitioning experience before they actually meet their new teacher. For this reason wider relational connections become so meaningful.

In our research we have realised what a crucial part the leaders of early childhood centres and primary schools play in opening the doors for relationships to be able to grow. For our part, we all want to find additional ways to be responsive to children's transitional learning. Now that we have begun this process we intend to grow it and over time, as more children transition we will refine this journey further.

We are both part of a wider transition cluster, meeting with schools and early childhood centres in our area. More than ever before, there is a clear recognition that an early childhood curriculum,

should not be predetermined by a school curriculum because the school curriculum is not intended to be appropriate for the learning needs of infants, toddlers and young children. (Brewerton 1996, quoted in Peters, 2010, p. 8)

So there is no passivity in these meetings, from either perspective. Yet we must learn about each other and deepen respect and collegiality through this process as we learn with and alongside one another. The big thing we have in common is the synergy between our curricula, Te Whāriki principles and strands and the key competences of the New Zealand Curriculum.

The teachers at Greerton and Greenpark wanted to support our children to recognise that transitions are a normal part of life and an opportunity for new learning and for being excited, not overwhelmed by this. We have used the relationships we know about to our advantage in drawing people into the process.

Christina's two boys had attended Greerton and Lorraine and Christina have known each other for 13 years, so one might wonder why it has taken so long to think about these kinds of closer transition ties. Things have their time though and Maya Angelou says it so beautifully: "I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better." (Angelou quoted on Goodreads Inc.)

Melissa is on the Board of trustees at Greenpark and Jahla and her family were old friends from Greerton days. Our research/self review has taught us to value this social network and the conversations that grew into action will continue to thrive because of this.

It appears that those children who can negotiate classroom life and build relationships are likely to make a successful transition (O'Kane, 2007, quoted in Peters, 2010, p. 17).

Even in a study of new entrant mathematics 'friendships' were a dominant theme:

Whilst grappling with their role as a learner in a new environment, ways of relating to others were uppermost in children's minds. (Belcher, 2006, p. 46)

We understand now how true this is and it is our intention to build this further across more schools and more early childhood centres as we both contribute and receive children from many settings.

If you are interested to find out further about the culture of learning and teaching at Greenpark and Greerton click on the website addresses below.

www.greenparkschool.co.nz

www.earlychildcare.co.nz

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