

# Transitions: Shifting from what we comfortably know to new possibilities.

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When it comes to transitions every community will have established a routine of practice and, unfortunately, as adults we lose sight of how fundamental these moments are in a young child's life. To put them in perspective, perhaps we can ask ourselves some questions.

How often would you choose to be dropped off at a party where you didn't know anyone? Would you feel comfortable sitting to eat at their table while everyone else bustled about, settled and safe in the relationships they had already formed? Would you be willing to slip into a strange bed and sleep there restfully? As the hours crept by, would you long for the familiar smile, hug or heartfelt reassurance from someone you loved and trusted?

Would you feel sad?  
Lonely?  
Scared?  
Abandoned?

How long might you hold onto these insecure feelings? Will they rise again the next time you are feeling unsure? What about the person who dropped you off at the party knowing you will be without people you know and trust? How will they feel? Will they worry about you every moment of the day until they see you again?

When we think about transitions, no matter how big or small, we must remember what it feels like to be placed into a strange place, often without choice. Transitions are fundamental in establishing reciprocal relationships with children and whānau. They set the benchmark for all future events. So what's important to forefront when we consider transitions? What do we value and are these values based upon sound theoretical findings?

The Teachers at Greerton Early Childhood Centres (who I am privileged to work with) have worked alongside Mararet Carr and Wendy Lee as a Centre of Innovation for three years. We explored the many and varied aspects of transitions in the process, coming to realise how powerfully they affect children's abilities to engage in learning, however, our research is in every way an ongoing reflective journey. Whenever we ponder the possibility of changing our practice we notice that nothing stands alone, therefore every change we make, will in some way affect the other practices we have in place.

Our action based research is done by passionate teachers who seek within themselves and their community the wisest practice possible. For many years we have found that teachers teaching teachers is a very empowering and authentic way to work, so my intention as the author of this article, is to share with you some of the ideas that have sparked our curiosity to ponder our teaching practice.

A point to highlight here is that our teachers work within a model of Shared Leadership, where ideas are shared by all and unpacked by all. Communities of teachers who work together in this way will celebrate a more robust depth to their pedagogy. Mayo (2005, p. 56) suggests,

[...] new knowledge is, arguably, located within the community rather than within the individuals. In some way, this new knowledge reflects the idea of an adaptive community where the community is changing its very culture without jettisoning its past, but simply adapting, creatively, to new challenges.



This article identifies four areas of reflective change that came about from our research. **Transitions** themselves, **A Key Teacher Strategy**, **The Rhythm of the Day** and finally, how with cloaks of trust and confidence worn, children are **Taking a step into Teaching and Learning**.

These are the practices we engage in for all of our families, no matter the age of the child. From infancy until school, we ensure every member of our community is empowered to 'fly' and we believe transitions hold the key. No recipe for success could possibly be provided to

those who enquire about our practice. Instead we encourage of fellow teachers the courage to look deep inside their practice, reflectively considering the guiding principles of Te Whāriki and deciding as a community how they might wisely build on their professional practice.

## Transitions

### Building understanding from the first point of contact.

As a community we began to see transitions as a process of listening. Not just listening with our ears, but listening with our eyes, our minds and our hearts. In this way we have come to discover an intuitive dance where reciprocity drives our practice and strengthens our relationships with every child and their whānau. In our research we called this a Listening Dialogue and defined it as follows:

A Listening Dialogue situated inside ever deepening relationships that create intriguing spaces for curiosity to flourish, is a thread of inquiry that keeps teachers 'intuitively tuned in' to children's interests and allows us to work in flexible ways that keep learning meaningful.

When we began to think about transitions into our centres it became evident that from the very first point of contact with a new family it was important to establish an understanding of the 'culture of our place'. We wanted to ensure that families understood our way of life at Greerton and felt comfortable with the practices and theories that guided teaching and learning. This led to teachers reflecting on how we welcomed everyone who walked through our doors. We pondered how we approached visitors and chose carefully the philosophies that were important to share from this very first meeting.



First and foremost it was essential that relationships stood out as a fundamental component of our community.

A strong sense of belonging and wellbeing can only be established when children and families feel a sense of engagement in the people, places and things they come into contact with. The team decided that our utmost attention would be given to all potential families, meaning that they would be greeted warmly, introduced to every teacher, shown around the environment with care, and given an insight into the flow of the day. We began to discuss our qualifications, ratios, group size and ongoing professional development plans. We unpacked briefly our assessment practices, ways to be involved in the centre, and how important the disposition to be a life long learner was in our place. The purpose of this practice was to ensure that all families felt they were making an informed decision when finding care for their young tamariki. In making this informed decision, based on robust understanding of our practice, they would value the importance of building relationships in the transition process.

Once a start date has been arranged, a carefully selected key teacher takes on the responsibility of ensuring the formal transition runs smoothly. Their role is complex, but I will discuss the key teacher further as this paper continues. Most transitions into the centre will occur over a two week period, where families are encouraged to visit with the child as often as they can, usually these are around 6 visits. During this time listening is most important. Teachers spend the first hours of the transition visits watching, listening and learning from the relationships the parent/whānau has with the child. In these moments we aim to notice the smallest messages, like how a bottle or kai is offered, how the child likes to be held, how they are settled to sleep etc. For older children we might notice how best they respond to challenge, what strengths they have developed in terms of social competence or what interests they have.

Malaguzzi sums up our quest to truly listen when he is asked by Gandini, "[...] how (do) you succeed in enlisting and maintaining the participation of families at such a high level?" To which Malaguzzi replies,

Family participation requires many things, but most of all it demands of teachers a multitude of adjustments. Teachers must possess a habit of questioning their certainties, a growth of sensitivity, awareness, and availability, the assuming of a critical style of research and continually updated knowledge of children, an enriched evaluation of parental roles, and skills to talk, listen and learn from parents. (Edwards et. al, 1994, p. 63)

It is important to note that transitions are not limited to transitions into centres either. A move from a cot to a mattress is often one of the first of many internal changes a family makes with consultation and support from their key teacher. In a way, transitions sit hand in hand with change, therefore whenever change is involved, we endeavor to be reflectively considerate of the rights of the

child, the wishes of the family and the intuitive knowledge of the key teacher.



Karen Hose, one of the teachers in our Infant Whare, introduced us to the metaphor of a keystone and we think this is a beautiful description of the key teacher relationship. This is her teacher reflection,

The role of a key teacher for me is like the keystone in a block wall or arch. When you look at the wall it is undistinguishable from the rest of the blocks but to the trained observer they will see it. In the wall, if this block is removed, unlike another block, this will cause the wall to fall. When a child enters the centre, and for the family as well, they need this key block to establish that deep, respectful relationship, to be a support block, as they become accustomed to this new environment. Care routines are very important for the key teacher at this stage as they allow trust and meaningful relationships to form. The key teacher on the block wall would be highlighted at this early stage, but as the family and child feel more comfortable the teachers in the team begin to form and develop their own personal relationships. At this point the wall or arch is very strong, as all the blocks are working together to create this amazing structure and in our case relationship. Now when you view the wall the key teacher or keystone is unrecognisable. It however is still there, and in those moments of stress, ill health, or when important information needs relaying its purpose of strengthening and supporting the wall or child, is once again very clear.

Key teaching is an intuitive dance with a single objective; **that is to ensure every child has someone they feel deeply connected to.** This person will be someone they can trust unquestionably. Someone who will protect their rights no matter what. In consultation with family they will know when the time is right to consider the changes that become apparent as the child grows and develops. More importantly, they will know the most supportive and appropriate approach to take because their relationship has been built on countless and connected learning moments spent together. The role of the key teacher is pivotal in any transition. As Karen Hose suggests, children will broaden their horizons once this base of trust has been laid and yet their courage will always draw

upon this foundation of security. Key teachers work within a 'Buddy Teacher' system, ensuring that secondary relationships are formed in the first instance and, over time as they build confidence, children will develop relationships with all the teachers. Once again though the keystone effect as highlighted will stand strong.



The purpose of all this groundwork in building relationships with children and families is to create pathways for teaching and learning to occur. When children feel safe in their surroundings they notice within themselves and others the confidence and ability to become a learner in one moment and a teacher the next.

We see learning as a partnership between all members of our community and in this way we co-construct our programme together. Our goal is to view every moment for its potential to be a magical learning moment. In our research we talk about 'growing intelligence' in our community and found the wise theoretical findings of Carol Dweck (1983,1985) to be hugely influential in our reflections on what intelligence meant in our place. Dweck's findings suggest that one's 'Mindset' towards learning will determine the degree to which they will make room for their intelligence to grow. If you have a 'Fixed Mindset' you think of your intelligence as static or fixed. That you are either born smart or you are not and that's final. If you have a 'Growth Mindset' on the other hand, you view your intelligence as work in progress. Essentially you will know that in order to get smarter you will need to work through struggle, practice until you achieve and see setbacks as a necessary part of being a learner. Dweck's work has required of me a complete change of mindset as a teacher, a wife and a mother. No longer will I shy away from challenge! I want my family, especially my son, to see that I am a learner for life and that my hard work, practice and dedication to a task will help me grow my intelligence.



Suffice to say that my ideas of intelligence have changed dramatically! Lauren Resnick's (1999, p. 2) theories on intelligence helped me to clarify my ideas. She says,

Intelligence is the habit of persistently trying to understand things and make them function better. Intelligence is working to figure things out, varying strategies until a workable solution is found. Intelligence is knowing what one does (and doesn't) know, seeking information so that it makes sense and can be remembered. In short, one's intelligence is a sum of one's habits of mind.

These theorists support our practice of highlighting and valuing dispositional learning. Unpacking learning so we might grow our intelligence as a 'community of learners' has been important to us for many years now.

Guy Claxton would call this creating a culture of 'learnacy'. He writes,

[G]rowing more intelligent is not just a matter of learning a few techniques, or even mastering some new skills like 'critical thinking'. It is as much to do with attitudes, beliefs, emotional tolerances and values. (Claxton, 2004, p. 2)

Growing intelligence is about growing empowerment. Empowerment allows children to draw themselves into the magic of knowledge and we notice that the role of the teacher becomes that of a provocateur of thought, rather than a director of ideas. In this way children begin to establish patterns of thought, the construction of questioning and an understanding of where to seek out information. In many cases they look to each other for support, seeking out the experts to achieve their self set task, rather than approaching a teacher. They also become astute in managing their own learning and social competence within the setting.

When children self manage and analyse their own learning they are able to develop the necessary dispositions and habits of mind to make themselves a more persistent, curious and motivated learner. When the work gets difficult, we encourage children to think back to times when they have been successful in their work and this revisiting acts as a scaffold to extend their ideas about how to approach learning during struggle.

## Conclusions

In conclusion we suggest that whanaungatanga, the process of getting to know each other, will be most successful when careful thought and consideration is given to how families are included in each and every transition they take part in. If we draw ourselves back into the very wise words of Te Whāriki we are able to see clear links between our research and the aspirations of our Early Childhood Curriculum. Te Whāriki has been, and will continue to be, a very stoic reminder to us about what is important as we prepare the youngest citizens of Aotearoa for the future. We have embedded these words into our culture and we hope that you will too.

*The Early Childhood education setting should be like a caring home: a secure and safe place where each member is entitled to respect and to the best of care. The feelings of belonging, in the widest sense, contributes to inner well-being, security, and identity. Children need to know that they are accepted for who they are. (Ministry of Education, p.52)*

Perhaps this paper may sow the seed of critical reflection in the minds of others, meaning that the deep and meaningful conversations between teachers in Early Childhood settings might evoke changes to the policies and practices that surround transitions. When many proficient minds are on the matter we find that every minute detail becomes thoughtfully pondered. The wheels of change fall into motion and when we have fore-fronted the possibilities there can be no turning back.

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