Strengthening the Transition for Children with **Moderate Needs: Perceptions of Participants**

Candice Larson
RTLB, Christchurch

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the transition of a child with moderate special education needs to a primary school setting. It was generated out of the professional interest of the author and a prevailing concern over the apparent delay in providing support for children with moderate special education needs within the primary school system. A case study approach was used to examine the varying perspectives of the parents and teaching staff in a transition process from early childhood to school. The study highlighted the fact that a decrease in support at school during the transition phase placed increased reliance on communication between agencies as well as the importance of aligning early childhood and primary school expectations in terms of learning and behaviour of students with special needs. Implications of this case study identified a number of ways in which to improve transition of children with moderate special educational needs that can continue to build on the specific progress made by these children in their pre-schools.

Research

Keywords: *Early childhood education, Individual Education Plan (IEP), interagency communication, kindergarten, resourcing, school, sending and receiving agencies, moderate SEN, Special Education Needs (SEN), transition*

BACKGROUND

In New Zealand, support for children with moderate and high needs becomes available when children begin primary school (Ministry of Education, 2007). Prior to starting school, Early Intervention (EI) services are provided for children with Special Education Needs (SEN), from the time their needs are identified until they are five years old or 'settled in school' (Ministry of Education, 2009a). In order to receive EI support, a child suspected of having special education needs can be referred to the local Ministry of Education, Special Education (MOE:SE) service. The child will be assessed by a member of the EI service and if they qualify for support, referred on to an EI team. These teams can include specialists such as early intervention teachers, speech language therapists, psychologists and occupational therapists, as well as other health professionals at times, who work collaboratively with the family/whānau to assess, plan and provide an intervention to meet the child's SEN (Ministry of Education, 2009a).

The process to access any SEN support in primary school should begin approximately three months prior to the child starting school (Ministry of Education, 2005). This may involve the preparation of an Ongoing Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS) application which documents the child's skills in relation to their peers. This application is analysed to determine whether the child should receive support for *very high, high, or moderate* needs at primary school. If a child does not meet the criteria for high needs support under ORRS, schools can use their Special Education Grant (SEG)[1] to provide the required level of support. Support is also available through the Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) service, a school-based specialist teacher resource, which is available to support children with moderate special education needs.

Research continues to highlight that effective transition to school has the potential to positively influence a child's social, emotional and academic development (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Rous & Hallum, 2006c; Schulting, Malone & Dodge, 2005). Moreover, Dockett and Perry (2001) have demonstrated that transition is a time when children begin to develop a positive conceptualisation of school. They also observed that the way in which a transition to school is managed can set the stage not only for children's success at school but also their response to future transitions (Dockett & Perry, 1999). These findings indicate that a well-supported, planned and executed transition can maintain the gains made through an early childhood education

1 This funding is allocated to schools and is based on a funding formula that takes into account the decile ranking of the school and the total number of students (Ministry of Education, 2008).

programme and help children adjust socially and academically to the new expectations and culture of the school.

When viewed from an ecological perspective, it is evident that a transition to primary school involves changes to multiple layers of a child's ecological system. As a result, it is quite evident that the transition to school can be considerably more difficult for children with special needs and their families (Fowler, Schwartz & Atwater, 1991; Janus, Lafort, Cameron & Kopenchanski, 2007; McIntyre, Blacher & Baker, 2006; Rous & Hallum, 2006c; Wolery & Odom, 2003). While most would not question these findings, concerns appear to centre on the potential barriers to implement effective transitions for children with moderate SEN within the current systems of support. This may be exacerbated by the complications in the transfer of responsibility from the MOE:SE to the primary school, in the current system of support for children with moderate SEN. Research within New Zealand has also highlighted a number of concerns within the current system. These pertain to: the coordination and continuity of support for children with SEN (Ministry of Education, 2009b; Mitchell, 2001), availability and allocation of the SEG and the effective communication of children's unique special education needs (Salter & Redman, 2006), assessment of SEN within the new school environment (Faloon & Redman, in press), and the need to improve continuity between *Te Whāriki* and *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Peters, 2000). These concerns indicate potential for improvements in "doing better with what we have." (Ministry of Education, 2009c, p. 1).

CASE STUDY

This case study is about Tom (pseudonym), who transitioned to school in 2009. The study focused on the steps that were taken following the declining of ORRS and the participants' perceptions of this process.

Prior to school entry, Tom received Early Intervention support, provided by a team of specialists and led by the Early Intervention Teacher (EIT). The EIT took responsibility for submitting the ORRS application, which was declined. Subsequently, the EIT applied for an additional 20 hours of Education Support Worker (ESW) support at school, which was approved. As a result the EIT and the teacher-aide worked with Tom for an additional 20 hours within the school environment to help him settle into school. Once the transition was complete, the Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and class teacher took on the responsibility to support the child's educational needs.

Participants

At the time of the study, Tom was five years old, an only child and living with his mother in a single parent home. He was diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum with specific difficulties in the areas of communication, social and emotional development. The participants mentioned in this study include Tom's mother, kindergarten teacher, primary school teacher, ESW, and the EIT who acted as the lead worker for the 20 hours of extra transition time. It is important to note that due to the family's location at the time, Tom did not transition to the primary school closely associated with his kindergarten.

Procedure

Data about the transition process were collected using Rous and Hallum's (2006c) *Assessing Status of Transition Activities Questionnaire*. The first section of the questionnaire considered the communication and relationships between participants, and in the second section the participants rated if particular aspects of the transition process, such as providing one contact person and scheduling regular meetings, were in place, partially in place or not in place. Semi structured interviews were used to obtain further detail regarding these areas and to provide descriptive information on the ecological variables, in terms of the child, their family and their community, specific to this transition.

In addition, Ministry of Education documentation regarding the transition to school for children with moderate SEN was reviewed. *Te Whāriki*[2] and *The New Zealand Curriculum* documents were also accessed to describe community factors within the ecological model, and also to determine the alignment and continuity of pedagogy in the two sectors. Data obtained in the questionnaire was triangulated with the interview data and the review of documents, and analysed using Rous and Hallum's (2006b) conceptual model.

Analysis

Rous and Hallam's (2006a, 2006b) conceptual framework, shown overleaf in Figures 1 and 2, provided the theoretical base and served as the analytical tool for this research. The two frameworks supported the systematic analysis of the ecological contextual factors which could affect Tom's transition and the transition process itself.

2 New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum

The first model (Figure 1) supports the description of ecological contextual factors in terms of the child, their family, and their community. This model also specifies four further areas within community factors which can affect transition – the teachers involved in the child's learning, their teaching programme, the overall regulations on service provision in the area and the current national policy regarding education.

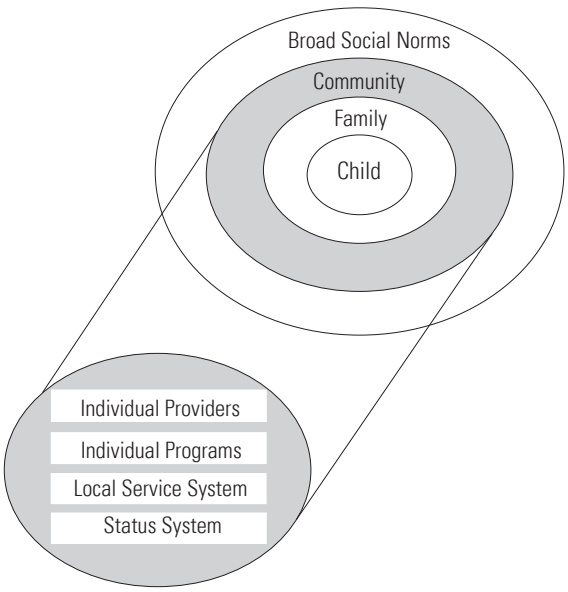

Figure 1: Theoretical ecological model of transition (Rous & Hallum, 2006b).

The second model (Figure 2) by Rous and Hallum (2006a) describes the interaction among the interagency variables where communication, structures to support the continuity of transition, and alignment of teaching philosophies and content of the programmes interact in a reciprocal manner with the transitional practices and activities.

Key findings

Triangulating the questionnaire and interview data using Rous and Hallum's (2006a;2006b) conceptual framework, identified the key strengths and weaknesses of Tom's transition process. Some key findings of this study are discussed in this article in relation to existing literature, which identified areas for improvement in the transition process for children with moderate special educational needs.

TRANSITIONAL PRACTICES AND ACTIVITIES

Transition support

In considering the process followed in Tom's transition it became clear that the EIT's (who had taken on the lead worker's role) practice was aligned with the current Ministry of Education guidelines. Following the allocation of 20 hours ESW support, the EIT facilitated a transition meeting at the kindergarten, attended by the ESW, Tom's mother, his kindergarten teacher and the SENCO from the primary school. In preparation for school entry, there were three school visits by Tom with his mother.

Tom began school in Term 2, 2009, and for the first term attended school until lunchtime each day. He was supported by the ESW whose role in settling the child into school was guided by a checklist of routine-based skills. Approximately five weeks into the term, the EIT facilitated an IEP meeting attended by the classroom teacher, ESW and parent. At the beginning of Term 3, Tom began attending school fulltime and received teacher-aide support for his learning. His teacher's request for support from RTLB was accepted and the RTLB began working with him in Term Four, 2009.

CRITICAL INTERAGENCY VARIABLES

Communication and relationships

Comparing the participants' perceptions of the communication and relationships between

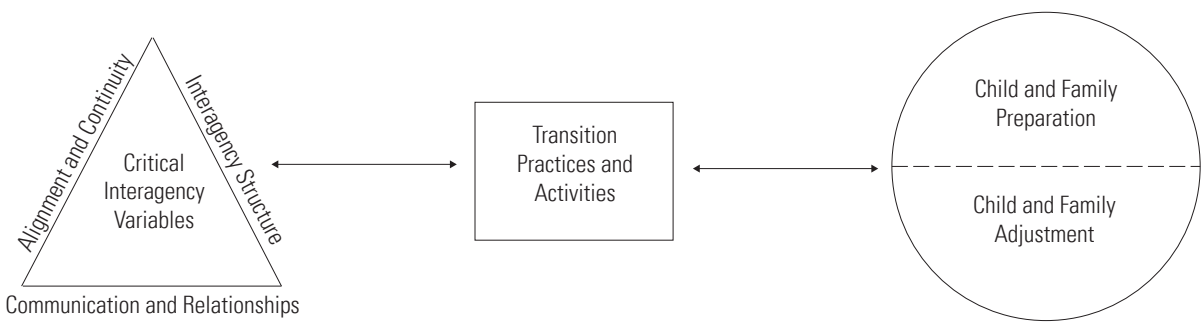

Figure 2: Specific program and community factors of transition model (Rous & Hallum, 2006a).

the two educational settings involved in Tom's transition, revealed a number of concerns. The parent and primary teacher expressed through their questionnaires that they did not have a clear understanding of the transitional process and would have appreciated further clarification of the roles and responsibilities of all concerned. Comments from the kindergarten teacher that she did not feel her involvement was necessary due to the number of participants involved, seemed to further substantiate this point. Participants' comments also indicated that the two settings held different understandings of Tom's special education needs. This was illustrated by comments that the effective approach of supporting Tom's sensory and emotional needs in the early childhood setting was not followed through within the school.

In reviewing participants' perceptions it was apparent that there were differences in the conceptualisation of Tom's special education needs, which also seemed to be hindering effective communication. Reports from his mother and ESW indicated that the people involved in his pre-school education had developed a clearer understanding of Tom's social and emotional needs. Though the early childhood services staff had many helpful ideas to share, it seemed that there were insufficient opportunities to share their knowledge with the school staff. This was illustrated by comments from the primary teacher that she was not familiar with the approach the ESW was using to support Tom while Tom's mother felt she had to take the responsibility herself to disseminate such information. Tom's ESW perceived that the way the child's 'melt downs' were handled was very different in the school environment.

A weakness in communication was also evident when the primary school teacher indicated that she did not utilise the IEP document until a new one was developed in the third term. In analysing all the various comments by the participants, it appeared that professional development to familiarise the teachers with both early child hood and primary school philosophies of learning could have been helpful in better communicating Tom's needs. This may have supported development of the IEP as a working document and empowered the receiving school to better integrate the appropriate support within their school system.

It was apparent in this study that communication of roles, responsibilities and understanding of Tom's special education needs were presenting challenges. Harbin et al., (2004) and Pianta and Cox (1999), emphasise the need to develop formal communication lines between participants in a transition to school. In Tom's case, although the transition and IEP meetings were organised participants' responses highlighted that those involved must have a better understanding of their roles during transition and a more collaborative operationalisation of the IEP could have improved the quality of communication during the transitional process. Moreover, reflecting on the mother's comments, it seemed that informing the parent of her role and the support available to her could have alleviated her anxiety during the stressful time of transition. This finding concurs with existing research by Rous et al., (2007) that encouraging caregivers to participate in the transition by providing them with necessary information can positively effect their child's transition to school.

In addition, as with the parents, it is important for teachers to have a solid understanding of the transitional process and their role in it (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). The kindergarten teacher's perception that she did not feel her participation was important in the transition process due to the number of other participants involved, revealed that she may benefit from support in better understanding her role in the transition process. Also, the primary school teacher's comment that she would like to have a better understanding of the Special Education Policy and the tasks she is responsible for in a transition further substantiated this concern. A better awareness of the Starting School booklet (2006) may have provided support in this area.

Interagency structure

Participants also suggested areas for improvement to the structures currently in place to support the process of transition to school. The parent expressed her preference for a single contact person at school which could have better supported effective communication. The parent and primary teacher perceived that the organisation of meetings, clarification of roles, provision of up-to-date assessment information and extent of IEP goals achieved prior to transition could have resulted in better coordination of support. The primary teacher's report that she did not implement the IEP until it was reviewed in Term 3 could have been a possible reason for this concern.

It was also noted that teacher-aide time and RTLB support were not organised prior to Tom's school entry. This was because the teacher felt that it was important to wait to see how Tom would cope at school before applying for additional support, which could have been the existing practice in the school. The resultant decrease in ongoing additional support in the school seemed to have placed an unrealistic reliance on the EIT acting as

lead worker, who was not expected to have a large role in the transition after the IEP meeting.

The EI team's role has been described in Ministry of Education documentation as a service that continues until a child is 'settled into school'. Results from the questionnaire and interviews indicated that participants held different expectations of when that may be and the role of the EI team. For example, the ESW who provided the 20 hours of transitional support felt that completion of the checklist she was provided by the EIT, which specified basic routine-based skills such as hanging up a school bag, was indicative of the child being settled into school. In comparison, the mother commented that Tom might have been better settled if the IEP formulated prior to transition was used to settle Tom in the school setting, as it had specified support specific to his social and emotional needs i.e., social stories or preventative regulatory supports such as rubbing Tom's back.

Alignment and continuity

Participants' responses indicated that there were considerable differences in expectations, particularly in terms of Tom's behaviour when he entered primary school, which reflects the literature on the alignment of *Te Whāriki* and *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Peters, 2000).

It also became apparent that the term 'settled into school' was operationalised in this case as a checklist completed by the ESW which did not seem sufficient to ensure the continuity of support. Moreover, the use of a checklist seemed to detract the use of the IEP which would have provided better guidance for supporting Tom to settle into school routines. In addition, participants' reports indicated that Tom needed support in the area of social and emotional development. The analysis of ecological variables showed that Tom had no siblings and would not be starting school with any of his friends from kindergarten. These factors also contributed to the fact that Tom required more planned support in these areas. As social-emotional competence is critical to maximise students potential to succeed in school and life (Zins & Elias, 2006), and research on the transition to school demonstrates that developing friendships can be a significant strengthening factor in helping a child settle into the new school environment (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Peters, 2003), it seemed that a greater emphasis on setting up support in this area, could have been beneficial in terms of helping Tom to settle into school.

Although there is a common concern over not organising support for a child's SEN prior to school entry, as a child's needs may change in the new school environment, it is proposed that this 'wait and see' approach could result in the need for support only being realised once a need has escalated and has potentially become more difficult to address (Salter & Redman, 2006). Research indicates that effectively preparing the primary school to support a child's special education needs can maintain the gains made through the early childhood education programme and help the child adjust socially and academically to the new expectations and culture of the school (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Pianta & Cox, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Rous & Hallum, 2006c). In analysing participant perspectives of Tom's transition, it appeared that involving an RTLB at school entry might have assisted with the communication of Tom's special educational needs, specifically his social and emotional needs, and continued the provision of effective preventative interventions.

CONCLUSION

This study has underscored some areas that could be improved for transitioning children with moderate special education needs in New Zealand in order 'to do better with what we have'. Specific areas highlighted in Tom's transition are consistent with current literature and included development, use and monitoring of the IEP and better communication and sharing of existing information on facilitating the transition process with families, early childhood and primary teachers, as well as those within the Early Intervention Team responsible in initiating the referral for school-based support. Amongst other factors, this case study has shown that assigning a key professional familiar with both early childhood and the primary sectors who has sound awareness of, and ability to utilise current available resources, and identify evidence-based supports necessary to support the transition process, is vital for effective transition within the current system of support.

In addition, it is pertinent to say that effective and well-supported transition to school for a child, especially those with moderate needs, could be a prudent use of funding, as research indicates that sound transitional support can have a positive effect on the trajectory of a child's social, emotional and academic development as well as their response to future transitions.

IMPLICATIONS

In analysing the participants' perceptions of Tom's transition to school, it seemed that some of the difficulties in the transition process for children with moderate special educational needs could be a result of the structure of current support systems.

This is conceptualised in Rous and Hallum's (2006b) ecological model of transition (Figure 1) as the *State System*. The decrease in support at the receiving end of the transition process appeared to have placed increased reliance on the way the EI team and school staff communicated, the quality of this communication, the structures in place to support the continuity of the transition, and the extent of alignment of the teaching philosophies and content of the programmes in the two settings. The analysis of this particular transition seemed to indicate that either modifying the support systems or strengthening the interagency variables could potentially bring about positive changes to this challenging phase, especially for those children who require additional support to access their learning environment. Outcomes following the transition are not included in this article, but longitudinal research in this area could provide interesting results.

Finally, this case study also showed that Rous and Hallum's (2006a; 2006b) conceptual models, although originally developed to suit the American context, lends itself to be adapted to monitor the efficacy of the transitional process in New Zealand.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Candice Larson

Candice Larson is currently working as an RTLB in Christchurch. She conducted this research in completion of her Masters in Educational Psychology. She has worked in both early childhood and primary school sectors, and is looking to complete her educational psychology internship next year.

EMAIL
candice@heaton.school.nz