STARTING SCHOOL IN NEW ZEALAND: PEER LEARNING DURING THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL

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Abstract
Starting school is a time of change for children as they are required to engage with unfamiliar learning experiences. This case study investigates a child’s transition into a new entrant classroom in New Zealand and highlights how peer learning helped her to engage with these unfamiliar experiences. Observations and interviews of the teacher and the child established that both the child and her more experienced peers used strategies that resulted in learning about what to do and how to participate at school. The findings highlight and describe key aspects of the teacher’s pedagogy which supported effective peer learning during transition to school.

Introduction
It has become tradition that children in New Zealand start school on their fifth birthday (May, 2011). In comparison, children in other parts of the world typically start school in a group at the beginning of the year or term. There is no known rationale as to why New Zealand differs but one advantage of this system is that new entrants can learn about what to do and how to act from their more experienced peers who started school before them. This study illustrates how this phenomenon of peer learning happens and the impact of the teacher’s pedagogy.

There are many discontinuities associated with starting school. When children start school they must learn how to take part in a new culture, unfamiliar routines, experiences and ways of learning (Hartley, Rogers, Smith, Peters, & Carr, 2012; Peters, 2004). Einsardottir (2013) investigated preschool and primary school children’s thinking about starting school in four studies from 2003 to 2007. The children in these studies said starting school was a time of significant change involving less choice and more restriction and teacher direction in what and how they learned. Children in Dockett and Perry’s (2007) Australian project had similar views stating that they were at school to learn and expected to learn quickly. White and Sharp’s (2007) research in twelve English schools further confirms Einarsdottir’s findings highlighting a lack of choice, increased amounts of formal work, increased time sitting still and decreased access to the outdoors. It is important that new entrant children quickly learn how to navigate these discontinuities from their pre-school days as the speed and ease of this adjustment has been associated with quality of educational outcomes (Brooker, 2008; Peters, 2010). Furthermore, the change in setting can affect a child’s sense of identity, status and the roles they take on as they engage in new experiences (Fabian, 2007). Understanding how children can be supported during their transition to school is thus worthy of further investigation.

Early research investigating children’s transition to school looked at their readiness for school in the belief that children needed to meet certain standards before they could cope with school learning. In the United States, this led to children being held back from starting school if they were deemed not ready (Graue, 1999; Peters, 2003). While New Zealand has never had a policy of preventing children from entering school based on their readiness, Renwick (1984) discussed the characteristics that New Zealand teachers felt children possessed when they were ready to start school. Many early childhood centres today offer ‘transition programmes’ and primary schools often run ‘pre-school afternoons’ to prepare four year olds for school suggesting the concept of the ‘ready child’ is still prevalent. Researchers also continue to
explore how children can be prepared for school entry (Dockett & Perry, 2013; Margetts & Kienig, 2013).

Influenced by theorists such as Bronfenbrenner (1979), Vygotsky (1978) and Rogoff (2003), recent literature has recognised that the child’s transition to school is a jointly constructed endeavour between everyone involved rather than being an individual experience; a successful transition being a shared responsibility. Research has explored a range of ways new entrant and early childhood teachers and parents can support children’s transition to school such as creating continuity between settings (Hartley et al., 2012), the importance of developing children’s familiarity with the new context (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Fabian, 2007; Hartley et al., 2012; Peters, 2004, 2010) and the value of communication and collaboration between early childhood and school settings (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Fabian, 2007; Peters, 2010).

Some research has recognised the role of friendships and social skills in helping children to adjust to the school setting reflecting Rogoff’s (2003) claim that one way children learn to participate in new experiences is by the ‘side by side or distal arrangements in which children participate in the values, skills and practices of their communities without intentional instruction’ (p.284). Peters’ (2004) interpretive study showed that new entrants learned by observing, copying, and being instructed by their peers. She suggests that fostering relationships and supporting friendships are important teaching considerations during the first year of schooling. Similarly, Hagan’s (2005, 2007) research highlighted the way peers supported and guided new entrants to increase their social participation in the classroom. He found that the new entrants watched and copied other children and noted that opportunities for peer learning were limited by the constraints of the curriculum. Hagan concluded that it would be useful for teachers to consider how to promote children’s collaboration and to provide opportunities for children to support each other. He called for further research exploring the link between social interaction and learning over the transition to school. If, as Vygotsky (1978) posited, “human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (p. 88), this exploration of the social nature of learning during the transition to school will help address the gap identified by Hagan.

The study

This paper reports the findings of a case study that was part of a wider research project involving three case studies (Hayes, 2013) which gained ethical approval from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee. The case study investigated the role more experienced school children played in supporting the transition process for one new entrant in the New Zealand context. In doing so the objectives were to identify:

- Strategies new entrants use to learn from those who are more experienced;
- Strategies experienced peers use to help new entrants learn what to do at school; and
- Strategies teachers use to support peer learning.

The case study began with six classroom observations in the focus child’s (Eve’s) first two weeks at school. A written running record of interactions involving Eve was made and written up as field notes as soon as possible after the observations. As May (2001) suggests observations enable some ‘understanding of the social scene’ (p. 166) to be gained. Repeated observations give time to establish some perspective of common and less usual behaviours (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Observations focussed on the interaction between Eve
and the more experienced children in the class. Any involvement the teacher had in these interactions was also noted.

Following the observations, two semi-structured interviews were conducted, one with the teacher and one with Eve. Thus the voices of both teacher and child could be heard and responses could be probed to unpack their meaning (Danby, Ewing, & Thorpe, 2011). Photographs taken during observations were used as a prompt to help stimulate discussion with the child (Danby, et al., 2011). Questions could be asked about some of the observed episodes so that the teacher’s intentions could be clarified and as Gollop (2000) suggests, Eve’s perspective, filtered through the perceptions of the researcher, could be captured. Data from the observations and interviews was first coded in relation to the three research objectives. The resulting sets of data were further examined to identify repeated types of behaviours. Subcategories were then inductively determined by the types of behaviours which occurred.

**Participannts**

The case study took place in a school with 400 students situated in a middle SES community of a regional New Zealand town. Eve attended weekly pre-school afternoons at the school for between five to ten weeks before beginning school on her fifth birthday. Eve attended a local kindergarten before starting school in May. Mrs Austin was an experienced new entrant teacher. There were 15 other children in the class, some of whom had started school in the previous year. Two other children joined the class while the observations took place.

**Findings**

Analyses and coding of data from observations and interviews identified a range of strategies used by Eve, her peers and her teacher to help Eve’s transition to primary school. These are summarised in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Strategies used to support Eve’s transition to school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New entrant strategies</td>
<td>Listening in and observing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer strategies</td>
<td>Explaining what to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Showing what to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Providing physical support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doing work for Eve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher strategies</td>
<td>Providing opportunities for children to work together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Selecting groups and buddies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching children effective ways of helping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using experienced children as models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affirming peer helpers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Strategies Eve used in transition

Children are active participants in learning experiences, and in constructing their own and others’ learning. Eve played an active part in learning from her peers about what to do and how to go about her learning at school by listening in and observing.
Listening in and observing

Research has highlighted the role of observation in children’s learning. Rogoff et al. (2003) argue that children learn as they watch and listen to others and that when they are ready they become involved in what is occurring. This process of ‘intent participation’ (Rogoff et al., p. 175) was observed in this case study.

Interview data showed that both Eve and Mrs Austin were aware of the benefit of new entrants watching and copying other children. Eve was asked how she learned to put up her hand:

_Eve: No one told._

_Researcher: No one told you? How did you learn about that then?_

_Eve: I just looked._

_Researcher: You just looked?_

_Eve: I looked at them when they put up their hand. (INT C p.2)_

On her first morning at school, Eve was frequently observed watching other children put up their hands, but she was not observed doing this herself until she had been at school for one week. It is possible that although Eve learned about raising her hand from her observations, she needed time to think about and gain the confidence to enact this learning.

Eve also watched and listened so she would know how to participate in group experiences as was evident during a drama game. She did not join in the game until she had observed what the other children were doing. She moved from watching, to joining in, first with the physical action, to full participation in all aspects of the game.

Hagan (2007) noted that adjustment to school is not just about negotiating participation in group activity, but also involves learning to engage with academic aspects of the curriculum. When the children were completing writing tasks, Eve was observed watching what the other children were doing and looking at their work. At times Eve copied the other children. Even when she did not immediately copy them it is possible that the learning may have been demonstrated at a later date. In this way, it appears that observation helped Eve work out how learning happens at school and how to engage with the tasks involved.

Peer strategies that support transition

Children who have been at school for some time have become familiar with the routines and ways of learning at school and are able to support new entrants in their transition to school (Hagan, 2005; Peters, 2004).

Explaining to Eve what to do

Peers can play a role in explaining what should be done and in regulating behaviour (Wood & Fidd, 2005). The experienced children helped Eve by telling her what to do, what not to do, or explaining how to do things. Children often told Eve to hurry up and finish her work and when Eve started to play with the doll’s house during reading time, a child was quick to inform her “It’s not time to play with that!” (OB Day 4)

Eve took a few days to gain the confidence to speak at circle time. On her sixth day at school a peer supported her to do so by telling her what to say. The teacher asked the children to share something they were thankful for and gave an example. Several children shared before it was Eve’s turn. Eve sat silently.
James (leaning towards and prompting her): Thank you.

Eve is silent.

Mrs Austin: I think we will wait a minute and give Eve time to think. (Pause)
Mrs Austin: I think you went somewhere special at the weekend. (Pause)
Mrs Austin: Can we help our friend? She went somewhere with animals.
Children: Zoo.

James to Eve: You have to say “thank you for the zoo.”

Eve (quietly): Thank you for the zoo. (OB Day 6)

Although Eve listened to the other children as they shared, she was still not confident to participate. When Eve did not immediately speak, James tried to prompt her. The teacher then provided some scaffolding for Eve by giving her an idea of something she could be thankful for. However, it was not until James actually told her what to say that Eve was able to participate.

Williams (2007) found that children can successfully teach other children to play a game and in this classroom the more experienced children were expected to teach the new entrants how to play games. For this to happen successfully, the children needed to have a good understanding of how to play, as the following observation of a game with dice shows:

Sue: She doesn’t know how to play.
Belle: You have to tell her.
Children give a jumbled explanation of the game
Caira: Do you know now?
Eve nods. Children roll the dice. It is Eve’s turn.
Sue: Do you know how to play?
Eve looks confused and shakes her head. (OB Day 1)

In contrast, another child was more successful in supporting Eve and another new entrant (Jane) to play a maths game by telling them when to have a turn, how to keep to the rules and what to do when it was their turn.

Manu tells Jane to find the dog which corresponds to her last spin. “You can keep it” she directs when Jane does this.

Eve spins a 4. She picks up a dog which has 3 spots.

Manu states: “That’s not 4.” Eve looks again and picks up the right card.

Manu: “Let’s count it.” They count together.

As the game continues Manu hands the spinner round to make sure the children all have turns. (OB C1 Day 6)

Showing Eve what to do

Sometimes the more experienced children showed Eve how to do unfamiliar tasks. During reading time Eve needed to learn how to read the task board showing the rotations for the activities. Eve and was reading when Mrs Austin called out that it was time to change activities, Eve chose another book.
Sue: No, you have to go to the next.

Mrs Austin: Thank you Sue. Take her to the board and show her how to check what to do.

Sue takes Eve to the board and points to her name and the activity. They move to the big books. Eve sits and looks at the books somewhat aimlessly.

Sue: OK. I’ll read to you.

Sue opens her book. She reads to Eve, pointing to the words using a pointer. (OB Day 4)

Sue began by telling Eve what to do. At the teacher’s prompting, Sue showed Eve how to read the task board and work out what to do next. When they moved to the next area, Sue was also involved in showing Eve the way in which she should be reading the books. By demonstrating how to point to the words as she read the relationship between the written and spoken words was modelled for Eve. Based on the work of Hagan (2005), this is an example of how social participation assisted Eve to gain access to the formal curriculum.

Providing physical support for Eve

When children start school they are frequently expected to take part in unfamiliar experiences (Einarsdottir, 2013; Dockett & Perry, 2007). Many times children were observed supporting Eve’s participation in school experiences by taking her hand. It appeared that some of the children were adept at reading Eve’s body language and sensing when she needed support to join in. On one occasion, the class were playing a game where they had to move in the way the teacher said. Eve looked very uncertain.

Mrs Austin: “Skipping."

Megan takes Eve’s hand. They skip around together.

Mrs Austin: “Freeze.”

Megan and Eve freeze together holding hands.

Mrs Austin: “Marching”.

Megan and Eve march together. Megan leaves the room to go to the toilet. Eve looks unsure.

Mrs Austin: “Everyone walk backwards."

Eve stands and watches. Another child takes her hand and she moves backwards. The child drops her hand. Eve begins to join in by herself. (OB Day 1)

Initially, Eve was reluctant to join in, but when Megan took her hand she began to participate in the learning experience with the other children. When left by Megan, Eve did not join in until another child took her hand. Without the support of her peers Eve may have taken longer to participate. This is only one of many observed instances of Eve participating in classroom experiences through the “guided participation” of another child (Rogoff, 2003).

Doing work for Eve

Observation notes showed children doing Eve’s work for her. Sometimes this happened when Eve was unable to do the required task, but at other times she was capable of doing the task
herself. At one point, the teacher handed out a worksheet and told the children to write the letters of the alphabet then colour in the picture. Another child completed the written part of Eve’s worksheet. The teacher’s intention was that each child would learn how to form the letters through this tracing experience. However, even though Eve did not write the letters herself, she watched closely and may have been learning what to do for the next time she was given a similar exercise.

Mrs Austin was aware that children would often do things for new entrants and commented that she often reminded them not to as this could prevent the new child from becoming independent. However, she also said that this was not too much of a concern as “most kids will quite quickly tell them that they don’t need them to do it for them anymore, because they want to do it for themselves.” (INT T p.2) This was certainly what happened in Eve’s case as the following extract shows:

Karen has been helping Eve glue her mask pieces onto card. She starts cutting the pieces out.

Eve: I can do it!

They tussle for a moment then Karen goes off and Eve continues to make her mask by herself. (OB Day 6)

This contrasts with earlier observations where Eve had passively allowed others to do things for her. Eve appeared to have gained the confidence to tell other children when she did not want them to do things for her. Eve was gradually gaining independence and moving towards full participation as a student in the classroom. While Barnard (2002) cautioned teachers that peer learning can result in dependencies, this observation demonstrates that dependencies do not always develop.

Teacher strategies that support transition

Social interaction in new entrant classrooms is negotiated between the teacher and the children (Hagan, 2005). Therefore, the teacher has a role to play in promoting or limiting how peer learning occurs. The teacher in this case study used many intentional strategies to support peer learning.

**Providing opportunities for children to work together**

For peer learning to occur, opportunities for shared learning must be provided (Tamati, 2005). Shared learning occurred in many ways in this classroom. Mrs Austin planned group and paired learning experiences which involved children playing games or working together and children were seated at tables where they could interact and discuss their work. In this way, the children were given the chance to learn from, and with, each other and Eve had opportunities to learn from her more experienced peers.

Reading and maths were times when there were frequent opportunities for children to work together and for Eve to learn from her peers. At these times children worked in groups, both with the teacher and independently. At reading time the children rotated around a series of reading activities with the help of a task board. Maths time often involved children playing maths games together. Many of the observed instances of peer learning occurred when the children were working independently of the teacher. Hagan (2005) also found that peer learning occurred more frequently when children were not working with the teacher.
Selecting groups and buddies

Opportunities for peer learning to occur during group work are enhanced when the teacher pays attention to the composition of groups and ensures that groups consist of children with mixed abilities (Barnard, 2002; Fawcett & Garton, 2005). In this case study, the inclusion of children with different ability levels in groups enabled scaffolding and co-construction to occur and gave the more skilled children the opportunity to take responsibility for Eve. Sometimes children chose their own groups but at other times Mrs Austin directed who would work with whom as she explained:

...when they come to me as a reading group... they’re ability-based groups but their independent groups... are across the board with abilities, which enables the more able kids to lead the other kids and to help them. (INT T p.2)

When selecting buddies to support new entrants at playtime and lunchtime, Mrs Austin also chose carefully. Careful choice of lunchtime buddies can be important as previous studies have shown that the use of buddies at break times can be problematic (Peters, 2004). Mrs Austin highlighted her strategies for making sure buddies were useful to the new entrant:

I try to look for children who have got a pretty good attention span, ...I generally would pick more than one so that if somebody did go off, then somebody else would be there with them. I give them a set of guidelines like you need to show her where the toilets are... (INT T p.4)

Although observations did not take place over the playtime, it was noted on Eve’s first day that the teacher followed this process prior to playtime. After playtime, a smiling Eve ran back to class with the girls who had been asked to be her buddy.

Teaching children effective ways of helping

Mrs Austin was aware that the children might need support in knowing how and when to help Eve. Several times Mrs Austin asked children to help Eve with practical tasks such as doing the buckles up on her shoes, or she would model what to do or say. At times, Mrs Austin guided children to offer effective help to Eve. This guidance was necessary as Eve was very happy to let the other children do things for her. If the teacher had not provided scaffolding, it was possible that a dependency could have developed (Barnard, 2002). On several occasions, children were reminded to help Eve rather than do things for her. Mrs Austin commented that she had needed to take some children aside to talk with them about how to support the new entrant children.

Mrs Austin also suggested ways to help Eve. When Paula wrote Eve’s story for her, Mrs Austin responded:

Mrs Austin: She needs to do it herself. When you do it for her you are not helping. You could help her find the word on the card. (OB Day 3).

Children are not always skilled in knowing how to help each other and may need support to understand the best way of giving help. The teachers’ intentional actions to scaffold this guidance can increase the effectiveness of peer learning (Fawcett & Garton, 2005).

Using experienced children as models

Peters (2004) documented how new entrants learn by observing their peers and using other children as role models. Mrs Austin supported this way of learning. Mrs Austin deliberately
asked other children to say or do things before she asked Eve, as the following observation of calling the roll using Māori language demonstrates:

*Mrs Austin: Kei konei koe (name)?*  
*The children respond “Kei konei ahau”.  
*She asks Eve last. (OB Day 3)*

Eve was given the opportunity to listen and to observe the other children before she was called on to complete many classroom tasks. In this way, Mrs Austin was facilitating what Rogoff et al. (2003) refer to as intent participation.

Other children were held up as a model when the teacher drew attention to their good behaviour. Behaviours such as working hard and putting hands up were praised and this gave Eve the chance to identify the kinds of behaviours expected at school. When Mrs Austin praised someone for appropriate behaviour, Eve often looked at that child and sometimes copied them.

As well as helping new entrants know how to behave appropriately, new entrants can also be supported in their academic learning when the teacher uses other children as a model. One of the ways this happened was when Mrs Austin involved the children in writing a story together:

*Mrs Austin: How do we write ‘I’?  
Some children put their hands up.  
Mrs Austin: John can you show us in the air?  
John draws an ‘I’ in the air and the teacher writes ‘I’.  
Mrs Austin gets a child to point to ‘like’ on the word card and writes it in the storybook. She does the same with ‘going’ and ‘to’. She exaggerates the sounds in ‘shops’ and children call out the letters for the sounds they can hear. Eve is watching and listening throughout this process. (OB Day 1)*

Rather than modelling the way to approach story writing herself, the teacher uses the children in the class to model different aspects of writing the story. This modelling enabled Eve to watch and learn from her peers. Eve saw the children finding words on a word card and also heard them trying to identify the phonemes in words; skills needed to write her own stories.

**Affirming peer helpers**

Mrs Austin created an environment where helping others was expected and affirmed. She used positive reinforcement to encourage children to be helpful to Eve. In the following example, a child is rewarded for helping Eve to participate in an action song:

*Eve stands watching the other children but does no actions. At the end of the song the children take hands and move in and out together. Eve does not put out her hand. Sean, grabs her hand, looking at the teacher as he does so. Mrs Austin nods. Eve runs in and out with the other children.  
Mrs Austin: Sean, come here. I am going to give you a sticker because you didn’t forget our new friend and tried to help her. (OB Day 3)*

The helper in this incident looked to the teacher for affirmation that he should reach his hand out to Eve and help her to join in. Although in this case, Sean was given a sticker, the most frequent way of affirming children who supported Eve was through praise and
encouragement. For example, Mrs Austin acknowledged Sue’s support for Eve by saying “Awesome Sue. I love the way you are supporting Eve, helping her but not doing it for her” (OB Day 1). Such comments, show value for the more experienced child’s help and also highlight when they are helping in an appropriate way.

Conclusion

In this case study, peer learning was a significant way through which Eve learned about the culture of classroom life. These findings confirm those of Peters (2004) and Hagan (2005, 2007). While Eve actively watched, listened to and copied her peers, they also helped her to learn about school by telling and showing her what to do, helping her to participate. As interactions between children are mediated by the actions of the teacher (Hagan, 2005; Williams, 2001) the role of the teacher was also influential in the peer learning that occurred. While the teacher controls many of the opportunities and groupings within which peer learning can occur, the children choose whether and how to interact. Thus, the teacher, the new entrant and the peers all influence the peer learning which occurs.

These findings are limited to one context, yet several New Zealand studies have found that peer learning occurs to some degree in other new entrant classrooms (St. George & Cullen, 1999; Hayes, 2013; Peters, 2004). Implications for teachers in similar contexts can thus be drawn. Consistent with Hagan’s (2005) findings more peer learning occurred when children worked in groups without direct teacher supervision. Employing a pedagogy which includes opportunities for children to work in small groups with others of varying abilities and school experience allows those with experience of school to act as a resource for the new entrant. Guidance can be provided by the teacher to enhance the effectiveness of peer learning as children do not always know how best to support their peer’s learning (Fawcett & Garton, 2005). It is also important that newcomers are given the time to observe and listen to their peers so that the process of ‘intent participation’ (Rogoff, 2003, p.175) can occur. Affirming the help-giving behaviours of other children and using other children to model curriculum related learning are other effective ways to support new entrants to learn about the culture of school. The challenge for teachers is to reflect on how they enable more experienced children to work alongside them in initiating new children to the classroom.

References


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