

# Transitions from early childhood education to primary school

*An interview with Sally Peters*

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Dr Sally Peters is a leading researcher in transitions from early childhood education to primary school. She recently co-edited a special issue of *set's* sister journal, *Early Childhood Folio*, motivated by a “desire to enhance the transition experiences of young children moving between home, early childhood, and primary school settings” (Ballam and Peters, 2014). We asked Sally about the special issue, current thinking on transitions, and where she’s headed next. She replied to our questions as she travelled to two international conferences and represented New Zealand in a five-country research consortium on transitions.

*When you read across the Early Childhood Folio special issue on transitions what do you think are the most powerful messages for primary school teachers and leaders to consider?*

The 2014 special edition of *Early Childhood Folio* (18(2), <http://www.nzcer.org.nz/nzcerpress/early-childhood-folio/early-childhood-folio-vol-18-no-2-2014>) drew together transitions research from a range of countries involved in a Marie Curie International Research Staff Exchange Project focused on Pedagogies of Educational Transitions [POET]. Looking across the articles it was interesting to see some commonalities in the experience of transition, despite the differences in the educational systems that are represented. A number of key messages emerged, but

perhaps the most powerful ones are around addressing inequities and the importance of communication. These aspects are strongly interlinked.

The views of “priority families” reported by Mitchell (2014) offered insights into inequities that can begin long before children get to school. These families’ descriptions of their experiences with early childhood services carry important messages for school teachers and leaders in terms of how to foster a sense of welcome and belonging for families. The findings showed that simple things such as friendly greetings, the way teachers interact with children, and ongoing reciprocal sharing of information, can go a long way in developing trust and supporting engagement. Just as importantly, the study highlighted

detrimental strategies that we might seek to avoid. These included families feeling uncomfortable, or unwelcome, or experiencing a lack of respect. Developing strategies to build strong relationships and a sense of belonging for both child and family right from the first encounters can be a first step in overcoming inequities. No matter how much we may feel we have an “open door”, not everyone will experience it as such (Peters, 2004). For some families an extra welcome (that is culturally appropriate) and encouragement might make all the difference.

Another article in the collection reminds us that teachers also make transitions. Within a teaching team there may be a number of different backgrounds and it is relevant to reflect on the encounters we have with others. Thinking about interactions with colleagues and the experiences of the team can open up possibilities for assumptions and expectations to be unpacked so practices that marginalise certain groups or individuals are avoided (Ardnt, 2014).

Addressing inequities also comes through in Dockett and Perry’s (2014) article on maps in research, which could be read by school teachers and leaders with a view to considering the implicit and explicit “maps” used to evaluate children and families. In my very first transitions research (Peters, 2004) I found:

it was evident that, in practice, teachers had some implicit images of parents and children, which operated as norms against which both groups were judged. For the children who met these norms, this did not appear problematic. Those who exceeded expectations were acclaimed, and positive cycles of experience often resulted. Others, who fell below the teachers’ judgments of appropriate ‘five-year-old’ behaviour and skills, were problematised from the very beginning, which tended to overshadow their strengths, and positioned them in ways that could make initial reputations self-fulfilling, unless something happened to change the pattern. Similarly, families were positioned in particular ways, depending on how they conformed to expected norms for ‘good’ parenting. (pp. 419–420)

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a very different understanding (Peters, 2004). Dockett and Perry (2014) remind readers to reflect on the ways in which the maps we use can “project particular views of what is valued or important” derived from the views of particular stakeholders, and potentially omitting or ignoring the views and values of other groups (p. 37). For example, Paki (2014) described work from a TLRI project (see Peters, Paki & Davis, in press), which sought to address the fact that the voices of Māori children and their families are noticeably absent from the research literature on transitions. This study has begun to develop understandings of success and “effective transitions” from the point of view of participants. These include recognising children’s cultural knowledge and whakapapa, and the value of relationships with whānau. As one teacher noted:

It’s all about whanaungatanga and the importance of working together. If we can include the whānau right from the start and be guided by their aspirations for their tamariki then I think this would help when the child transitions to school. (teacher interview)

We also found schools could foster a sense of whānau within the school community. One mother who was Māori commented that at her school relationships and communication were “great”. “It’s like a community and everyone knows pretty much what’s going to happen tomorrow”.

Although some insights have been gained, more work is needed to understand the transition experiences of different groups. Dockett and Perry (2014) remind us to question:

the appropriateness of the milestones and the landscape that surrounds transition experiences. For example, are the pathways (and directions) inclusive, or do they seem to be relevant for some groups more than others? What alternative journeys are possible? What are the barriers in such journeys? What are considered to be appropriate markers of transition? Of positive transitions? Are these markers considered to be universal? (p. 36)

The issues of cost raised by the families in Mitchell’s (2014) article are relevant for schools to consider too. At the University of Waikato we recently hosted academic visitors from Finland who explained that in schools in Finland no child should be disadvantaged in any activity because of family circumstances. This may be difficult to implement fully here in New Zealand without policy backing, but could be something schools consider when families are struggling to meet all the incidental costs that occur so that children are not marginalised.

The importance of communication comes through strongly in all the articles in the special edition. While we know that communication is important, in many cases it can prove challenging to achieve. These articles

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provide a number of insights for schools that are seeking to establish communication with early childhood services and families, in particular to facilitate the requirements of *The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC)* (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 41) to build on “the learning experiences that the child brings with them” and make “connections with early childhood learning and experience”. Research from Sweden showed this is not always easy to achieve, even when their Swedish system created a whole year of “preschool class” designed to bridge between preschool and school (Sandberg, Hellbrom, Thibbin & Garpelin, 2014). As we have learnt in New Zealand, it requires teachers in both sectors working together to build such bridges (Peters, 2010; Peters & Paki, in press). The team from Mangere Bridge Kindergarten (Hartley, Rogers, Smith & Lovat, 2014) have managed to foster such links in their community. In their article they add to the work presented in their book *Crossing the Border: A Community Negotiates the Transition from Early Childhood to Primary* (Hartley et al., 2012) by introducing a transition portfolio for children to share with their new entrant teacher. Hopp’s (2014) findings from Australia reiterate the importance of trust and time in the relationships that develop between early childhood and school teachers. One new point was around the value of feedback. It was a good reminder that if communication is to be effective we need to make time to give feedback. In busy teaching lives it may be easy to overlook this and inadvertently compromise the relationships we are trying to develop.

*After the ECF special issue on transitions, ERO circulated its national report, Continuity of Learning: Transitions from early childhood services to schools. How do ERO’s recommendations relate to ideas in the special issue and your own research?*

The Education Review Office’s (2015) report offers a valuable resource to teachers in ECE and school. It connects very closely with the findings of my own research and to the literature review I undertook for the Ministry of Education (Peters, 2010). The ERO report

also makes links to other recent transitions research and relevant Ministry of Education publications. The findings reiterate concerns raised in the special issue regarding inequities that can begin early and may be exacerbated rather than overcome through the way education is offered. For example, ERO found that Māori and Pasifika children were more likely to be in services that were less supportive of transition. In addition, few services were deemed to be nurturing children’s language, culture, and identity. Fortunately there were clear descriptions of practice from settings where things were working well that provide useful models for reflection. There are also helpful frameworks for self-evaluation included in the Appendix. The approach ERO takes is to help schools to become responsive to all new entrants and their families in order to give them the best start possible. There is a strong emphasis in the document on bridging between curricula, which requires knowledge of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and *NZC*. I particularly liked the reminder to schools to offer programmes that challenge and *motivate* their youngest learners.

Teachers would also be interested in two other reports on continuity of learning, which have recently been released by the Ministry of Education (Carr, Cowie, & Davies, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2015.). The first document (Carr, Cowie, & Davies, 2015) provides an extensive literature scan. It explores important questions such as What educational outcomes are valued? What are the intended and unintended consequences of the outcomes that have been made visible or demonstrated in assessments?

It also considers:

- valued competences or outcomes that have been chosen and how they have been assessed
- rationales for engaging families and learners in this enterprise, and evidence of ways in which this has been done
- ways in which progression and continuity have been documented.

The second report (Mitchell et al., 2015) reports on research on learning outcomes and assessment in ECE and beginning school. It looks particularly at the information that is shared with parents and whānau. The findings raise interesting points for schools to consider regarding continuity of learning between sectors. Data from families suggested they wanted to see a “rounded view of their child across learning domains and competencies” (p. 8). In common with the research by Peters et al. (in press), “parents and whānau wanted teachers to know their child well, what they could do, their culture and where they came from” (p. 1). Interesting examples were provided of information gathered in both settings and the data that is shared at

the transition point. Similar to the point made earlier regarding making families feel welcome, comments indicated that families were appreciative of warm reciprocal relationships, approachable teachers, and the opportunity for communication.

*International contributions to the ECF special issue suggest that New Zealand new entrants are somewhat unique. In starting school around their fifth birthday they are comparatively young and begin individually rather than together in age groups. What do you think are the main strengths and challenges in the New Zealand system? How can schools best support transition and learning pathways for the few children who start school at 6?*

Our POET project has provided the opportunity to observe pedagogies in Iceland and Sweden where children don't start school until age 6 or 7 (respectively). We have discussed this aspect across the country teams. Research suggests that engagement in learning and identity as a learner are key factors in a successful transition (Peters, 2010). If pressure to achieve specific outcomes impacts negatively on these aspects, it is worth keeping in mind that New Zealand children can already be assessed as "below standard" before they would even be eligible to attend school in other countries.

Interestingly, in Sweden non-compulsory "preschool classes", which meld together the two different pedagogical traditions from preschool and school, were established in 1998 as an alternative to following Norway and reducing the school starting age in Sweden from age 7 to age 6 (Kaga, 2007; Taguma, Litjens & Makowiecki, 2013). "Opponents claimed that lowering the entry age [to 6] would mean taking away a part of childhood—considered in our country as a golden time of life—and feared that schooling at 6 would have a negative impact on children" (Kaga, 2007, p. 1). Our research team are currently in Scotland, where there are debates about whether to raise the school starting age from 5 to 6.

In New Zealand children do not have to attend school until they are 6 but the social practice of starting on or just after the 5th birthday is an established social norm that only a few families resist. It is hard to find any conclusive evidence of whether the individual start we have in New Zealand is more favourable than the termly or yearly school entry arrangements that happen elsewhere. Potentially New Zealand children get an individualised transition and the benefit of an established class with role models and scaffolding support from children already at school. There are lovely examples of the way in which 5-year-olds with a few months' experience welcomed and supported children as they joined a new entrant class (Peters, 2004). An article in

this edition of *set* by Joanne Hayes also indicates that more experienced peers can play an important role in assisting children to learn about what to do and how to learn at school. However, this does not always happen, and sometimes it can be confusing and disorienting to have to join a busy established class. For teachers there is the challenge of constantly managing the orientation and transition of new children and families. Because of the interaction effect of many different factors each child's experience of transition can be very different, even when they join the same class on the same day (see Peters, 2004, for some case study examples).

The ERO (2015) advice and self-review tools for schools would address supporting transition and ongoing learning pathways for the few children who start school at 6. There is always a range of age, knowledge, and abilities within any class, and the school that is focused on being responsive to children, rather than children conforming to particular norms, will embrace what a 6 year old brings and offer appropriate learning pathways.

However, whilst school entry at 6 is in line with many overseas countries, it is a little different when parents/caregivers delay school entry for children who are eligible to start school. This practice raised some interesting debates in the United States, where it was noted that practice of holding children back may create a solution for a particular child, but if many families do this, those children who start at the eligible age may then become disadvantaged because the demands of the new entrant class have been raised due to the older children (Crnic & Lamberty, 1994; Graue, 1993). If a New Zealand school found that many families were delaying their children's school entry it would probably be worthwhile to explore with their community why this is happening.

A review of literature showed that "Almost any child is at risk of making a poor or less successful transition if their individual characteristics are incompatible with features of the environment they encounter" (Peters, 2010, p. 2). Overall, this suggests that what schools do is probably more important than the age at which children start.

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*You are on your way to two international conferences on transitions. Can you tell us about the information you plan to share that will be useful for teachers back home?*

The first conference, *Talking Transitions: Continuity of Learning* in Sydney was run by the New South Wales Government. The exciting 2-day programme focused on:

- effective transition to school
- planning flexible approaches to transition
- shared understanding of curriculum and pedagogy in the early years
- continuity of learning between prior to school and school
- family and community connectedness.

I will be sharing with teachers the energy created by so many early childhood and primary teachers working together to address these issues. In addition to the academic presentations, I was impressed with the number of workshops where teachers were sharing their own research and practice. There were parallels with the work of so many of our New Zealand teachers, who have been engaged in their own research (for example through Teaching and Learning Research Initiative projects, see <http://www.tlri.org.nz/>). The presentations and discussions offered good reminders of the commonalities in the beliefs teachers have about learning that offer a sound basis for cross-sector collaboration. Another aspect that was emphasised was the importance of school leadership in the school culture that is created, and there were a number of school principals who were actively engaged in transition practices in their settings.

Focusing on enhancing the transition to school often leads schools to evaluate their practices for transitioning between classes and from primary school to secondary school, as well as the arrangements made for older children moving between schools. Some vivid stories were shared of children entering Year 3 or 4 classes when they had recently arrived in the country and perhaps did not have any common language with their teacher or peers.

Some of the sessions explored the Aspirations, Expectations, Entitlements and Opportunities described in the 2011 Transition to School position statement. A number of New Zealand teachers have already been using this statement but it could be explored more widely (see <http://www.csu.edu.au/faculty/educat/edu/transitions/publications/Position-Statement.pdf>).

The Australian teachers had also been trialling a collaborative transition to school statement. The feedback was that this required modification but the process might be something New Zealand teachers might consider, although it is likely that in New Zealand the transition portfolio described by Hartley et al (2014) would contain similar information.

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The ECER conference in Budapest looked at transition, educational change and development (see <http://www.eera-ecer.de/ecer-2015-budapest/programme-central-events/conference-theme/>). The presentations examined not only educational transitions (across all levels of education), but also political and societal transitions. There was a strong emphasis on social justice and equity issues. We presented a symposium with papers from three of our POET countries (New Zealand, Scotland, and Sweden), which looked at “Navigating Educational Journeys” in the three contexts.

All five POET country teams are now at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland on a work package focused on “Transitions as a Tool for Change’. After nearly 20 years of transitions research I have become very aware of the value of looking at the breadth of transition experiences and issues. I am looking forward to sharing the deeper understandings and reflections from these international opportunities when I return.

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