Chapter 8
Chasms, Bridges and Borderlands: A Transitions Research 'Across the Border' from Early Childhood Education to School in New Zealand

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8.1 Introduction

Theories are set within particular ways of seeing the world. 'Different discourses produce different kinds of explanations – they even draw our attention to different kinds of problems' (Claibourne and Drewery 2009, p. 23). When considering theoretical approaches, it is important to see theory as a resource for understanding (Claibourne and Drewery 2009), rather than a justification for universal claims. The theories themselves are often shaped and changed as their authors refine their ideas.

Like a number of other transitions researchers, I have been drawn to ecological and sociocultural theoretical approaches to provide a framework for understanding transitions. These approaches acknowledge the complexity inherent in understanding the multiple transactional factors that influence each child's learning and transition experiences and the diversity that exists within groups as well as between groups of children.

8.2 Theoretical Perspectives

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, which forms the basis of my theoretical foundation, was developed and refined over time. Later iterations (e.g. Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1997) offer a dynamic structure, at the core of which is the notion that developmental pathways vary as a result of proximal processes, the interaction of individual and environment over time. The power of such processes to influence development

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varies as a function of the characteristics of the person, the immediate and more remote environments and the time periods in which the transactions take place.

Key features of the person in this model are the individual's dispositions, resources (e.g. ability, experience) and demand characteristics (that invite or discourage reactions from the social environment). These interact with features of the environment that inhibit, permit or invite engagement (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1997). Environmental features of the immediate microsystem include interactions with people (who also have the individual characteristics described above), as well as with objects and symbols. This idea resonates with the approach to learning in the early childhood and school curriculum documents in New Zealand. The early childhood curriculum recognises that 'children learn through positive and reciprocal relationships with people, places, and things' (Ministry of Education 1996, p. 14). Similarly, the school curriculum notes the role in children's learning of interactions with 'people, places, ideas, and things' (Ministry of Education 2007, p. 12).

When applied to transitions research, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model draws attention to the patterns of activities, roles and relationships experienced in a given setting (microsystem) and the ways in which a child's positioning in the ecological environment is altered during a transition, as a result of entry into a new microsystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979). There can be a paradoxical sense of stepping up to the next level of the education system but also a step down in terms of status (Hallinan and Hallinan 1992, cited in Jindal-Snape and Miller 2010) as the early childhood 'expert' is positioned as a novice at school. In this process, 'the star of the crèche' can sometimes be transformed into 'a new entrant with problem behaviour' (Norris 1999). Understanding how these positions are shaped by the interactions within a particular setting, rather than due solely to an individual's characteristics, can add valuable explanatory insights. 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. This understanding provides a focus for action as adjustments can be made to the contexts and strategies implemented to support more positive experiences (Peters 2010).

If development is thought of as a process of 'people's changing participation in the sociocultural activities of their communities' (Rogoff 2003, p. 52), the idea that transition to school may require a transformation of participation within the new learning community offers another lens on the process. Although Rogoff draws our attention to participation, rather than the internalisation of knowledge, Vygotsky's theory offers some perspectives on providing support or scaffolding in this process. He noted that '…a variety of internal development processes… are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his [sic] environment and in cooperation with his peers' (Vygotsky 1978, p. 90). Once these processes are internalised, they become part of the child's independent developmental achievement. The distance between what can be achieved independently, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers, is described as the 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky 1978, p. 86).

Later Bruner (1985) proposed that the person offering support provides

> a vicarious form of consciousness until such a time as the learner is able to master his [sic] own consciousness and control…. The tutor in effect performs the critical function of "scaffolding" the learning task to make it possible for the child, in Vygotsky's words, to internalize external knowledge and convert it into a tool for conscious control. (pp. 24–25)

With regard to transition, it is not only adults but older siblings and peers who can support the child within the zone of proximal development. In New Zealand, this approach is consistent with the Māori practice of tuakana/teina where an older child assists a younger one in his/her learning (Royal-Tangaere 1997). However, not all assistance in becoming a member in a new setting involves deliberate scaffolding. Some of the strategies children might use are observation, eavesdropping and imitation. Similar to anyone learning in an unfamiliar cultural setting, children may stay near trusted guides: watching what they do and getting involved where possible (Rogoff 2003). This view also supports the notion of allowing time for legitimate peripheral participation as newcomers move towards full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community (Lave and Wenger 1991). This may be particularly important in countries like New Zealand where enrolment practices mean that children often join an established class and may be faced with a range of potentially bewildering experiences such as sports events or school concerts, when they first arrive. The challenge however is to decide when and how to assist some children to move towards fuller participation.

Returning to the experience of transitioning from one microsystem to another, each with its activities, roles and relationships (Bronfenbrenner 1979), there is a potential link to the notion of 'rites of passage' which Van Gennep used to describe the various forms of ritual by which an individual comes to occupy a new position in a social structure (cited in Piddington 1957). Fabian (1998) applied this idea to school entry, looking at the preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition) and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation) that form this process. Turner (1968, cited in James and Prout 1997, p. 247) noted in the liminal zone, demanding feats of endurance may be required from those being initiated, which implies that transition is an opportunity for change and some challenges could be expected. In earlier research (Peters 2004) it appeared that children who valued the new role of school pupil (perhaps because it provided status or opportunities they wanted, such as a child who was now able to join her older sister's gym class) were more likely to accept and navigate some challenges compared to children who did not seem to value the new role. While not articulated by the children as a rite of passage, the willingness to endure some initiation challenges to gain a new status means that it could be viewed as such.

External factors at other levels of the environment (meso-, exo- and macrosystems) also contribute to each individual's cycle of experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). The mesosystem comprises the interrelationships between the microsystems. Events in one microsystem can affect what happens in another (Bronfenbrenner 1986), so that experiences at school can impact on experiences at home and vice versa. The mesosystem also considers the connections between

the microsystems, (e.g. a child's friends from early childhood settings may be present when the child starts school; siblings may be part of the current microsystems at both home and school). Respectful relationships and communication between settings are also important. For example, Pianta (2004) proposed that 'the quality of the parents' relationships with teachers, with school staff, and with the child's schooling' may be a key indicator of how successful a transition to school has been (p. 6). The mesosystem therefore provides another site to consider in relation to transitions.

These central levels of the ecological framework link to other theoretical approaches. One useful example is Bourdieu's (1997) notion of cultural capital and habitus. Brooker (2002) drew on Bourdieu's work to consider primary habitus, resulting from learning to be a child (in the microsystem of the family), and secondary habitus, learning to be a pupil (in the new microsystem at school). She described a continuum of advantage for children whose social and cultural capital was evident to their teachers and who experienced continuity between home and school. For others, learning to be a pupil meant learning to be someone quite different from their primary habitus. Thomson (2002) made a similar point in her proposal that we can picture children coming to school with 'virtual school bags' filled with knowledge, experiences and dispositions. In some contexts, schools only draw on the contents of selected bags, 'those whose resources match those required in the game of education' (Thomson and Hall 2008, p. 89). If this practice continues, the gap grows between the children whose 'virtual school bags' are opened and welcomed, when compared with those whose existing knowledge and dispositions are ignored (Thomson 2002). The idea of different habitus (as opposed to assuming all children from a similar background also have similar 'ways of being' and experiences) helps to explain findings such as those documented by Ledger (2000, p. 7), where children from wealthy, well-educated families, from the dominant culture (who one would assume had what Bourdieu (1997) described as both social and cultural capital), had transitions that were 'fraught with difficulties'. In these cases, their habitus, or the contents of their 'virtual backpacks', may not have been identified or valued.

The exosystem refers to settings that do not involve the developing person but affect, or are affected by, what happens in the microsystem (e.g. the parents' workplace, decision-making groups such as the school management or Board of Trustee groups). For example, parents who have tight working schedules may feel pressured in the mornings and find it difficult to take time to settle a new child at school; management groups can decide to support teachers at the beginning school level by reducing their out of classroom school duties (such as supervising road crossings or breaks) to increase their availability to children and families.

The macrosystem refers to the overriding beliefs, values, ideology, practices and so on that exist within a culture (Bronfenbrenner 1986). Theories and beliefs at the macrosystem level help to shape curriculum and pedagogy in each sector and inform people's thoughts about transition. They also include policies that determine the nature and number of educational transitions that children make and the age at which these typically happen.

Bronfenbrenner (1992) added the element of time to his model, noting that the environment is not a fixed entity. This is helpful, not only for thinking about the length of a transition process and changes in the child, family and school over time but also changes in the historical context and the dominant discourses that shape how education, children, families, etc., are viewed. Developmental processes are not only shaped by these changes, they also produce these changes in society (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1997).

8.3 Implications for Practice and Research

My own research has been underpinned by a strong social justice perspective, which seeks to address some of the inequities in the practices and definitions described by Skinner et al. (1998):

> there are classroom practices and constructions that, even in the first weeks of school, begin moving some children into the track of school failure. That a child can be on a trajectory for school failure by the age of 5 has led us to examine closely how various meanings and practices, which are historically and culturally constructed, work to define both kindergarten teachers and children and place them in certain relationships vis-a-vis one another. (p. 307)

Although Furedi (2002) suggests that adults in the twenty-first century have been socialised to pathologise challenging events in ways that are unhelpful to children's development, the idea of 'rites of passage' indicates some challenges could be anticipated as part of attaining a new role. Simply to ignore difficulties that are beyond the children's abilities to negotiate for themselves raises important equity issues and therefore leads to research and practice implications.

The complexity inherent in understanding transitions through ecological and sociocultural lenses raises a number of challenges for researching transitions. Research is necessarily bounded by time, place and culture (Holliday 2002; Miles and Huberman 1994), and the data that are gathered and analysed form only a small segment of the much wider mélange of social life (Holliday 2002). In addition, the data that are gathered will be influenced by the preoccupations and agendas of the participants, including the researcher (Holliday 2002). The implications of this include the necessity to keep the bigger picture in mind while focusing on the segment(s) that are being researched and to acknowledge the preoccupations that drive particular studies. In New Zealand, kaupapa Māori research approaches (Bishop 1996, 1997) help to make these agendas visible to participants as well as researchers.

My early research on 'border crossing' (Peters 2004) involved an interpretive approach and explored detailed case studies over time, as children moved through their last months in early childhood education into the first year at school. Follow up interviews continued until the children were aged eight. The study provided insights into the complex interweaving of characteristics of individual children and their immediate and more remote environments, providing some understanding of the

ways in which different patterns of experiences developed. Nevertheless, even with rich detail and thick description, only part of the picture was captured.

This early research was conducted when there was, in many settings in New Zealand, something of a chasm between prior-to-school early childhood education (ECE) and school in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, image of a learner, role of the family and so on. Hence, the children's journey to becoming a school pupil involved crossing a cultural as well as a physical border. Giroux's (1992) discussion of cultural borders could be appropriated to consider this experience and Mullholland and Wallace's (2000) analogy of 'border crossing' applied to children and their families as they made the transition journey to school. This connected with the theoretical ideas about supporting children through scaffolding and other ways to gain confidence in the new setting. It challenged the practice of focusing on the increased independence of the five-year-old and instead highlighted the value of fostering relationships with peers and keeping families informed. For example, at the time of the study, school visits were to be made by the child alone, and parents were discouraged from parent helping in the classroom until the child was 'settled'. Children were discouraged from playing with siblings at lunchtimes because 'brothers and sisters can be a bit protective'. The benefits of peer tutoring were acknowledged, but generally only within same-age groups. Over time, in many schools, all of these practices have changed in favour of a more sociocultural approach to learning.

The temporal dimension of the ecological approach acknowledges the changes to the expectations and events in the wider society (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1997). Since my first transition study, described above (Peters 2004), a review of the school curriculum in New Zealand has drawn on national and international perspectives regarding what might be seen as valuable learning in the twenty-first century. This led to a new approach to learning, within which key competencies (such as relating to others and participating and contributing) were central. The resulting changes mean that the key competencies in the school curriculum (Ministry of Education 2007) now align with the strands of the early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education 1996). The school curriculum also includes explicit statements about supporting the transition from early childhood education to school, including building on and making connections with early childhood learning and experiences (see Ministry of Education 2007, pp. 41–42). In addition, the aspirations for children underpinning Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education 1996) sit comfortably with the vision for learners at school (Ministry of Education 2007).

These curriculum changes, and the research opportunities that eventuated, sharpened my focus on children's learning journeys, a key thread within their complex transition journeys. The curriculum changes provided a potential bridge to support many aspects of border crossing between early childhood education and school. However, through two collaborative research projects which explored the key competencies at school and their potential links with the early childhood curriculum's focus on dispositions (Carr and Peters 2005; Carr et al. 2008), it became clear that these theoretical links would only make a difference to children's learning in practice if teachers on both sides worked to create a bridge and turned this potential into reality. The strength of the bridge will depend on the connections made (Peters 2008, 2009).

Research with Mangere Bridge Kindergarten in their Centre of Innovation study (Hartley et al. 2010, 2012) explored ways of building these bridges and enhancing 'border crossing'. This involved creating and enhancing relationships between transition partners (including teachers in both sectors) through mutually interesting tasks and a range of strategies for fostering familiarisation and a sense of belonging at school for children and families. Learning connections, through key competencies and literacies, were also explored. The community negotiation of this transition was firmly located within a sociocultural approach.

Focusing on learning raises another key issue. Whilst we can theorise that enhancing transitions will support children's learning, given the complexity of the interacting variables, there are challenges in developing research models that can demonstrate the difference that has been made or that can determine if transitions have been successful or effective. In 2010, I undertook a literature review for the New Zealand Ministry of Education (Peters 2010), which addressed some of these points. The Ministry was interested in broad questions regarding what successful transitions might look like and the role that characteristics of children, families and settings might play in how well children transition from early childhood education to school. Whilst these might appear to be straightforward questions on the surface, many issues arise, including whose voices are sought, the time frame under consideration and the ways in which success is conceptualised.

The complexity of individual experiences, and the multiple factors that influence each child's learning, mean that rather than definitive indicators of successful and/ or unsuccessful transitions, the review identified themes in the recent New Zealand and related overseas literature regarding ways in which success might be viewed. Key issues for consideration related to the following:

- Belonging, well-being and feeling 'suitable' at school
- Recognition and acknowledgement of culture
- Respectful, reciprocal relationships
- Engagement in learning
- Learning dispositions and identity as a learner
- Positive teacher expectations
- Building on funds of knowledge from early childhood education and home (Peters 2010)

Some of these features are not directly observable in children, although they may be inferred. They also draw attention for both policy and practice to the ecological system rather than the individual alone. For example, a focus on belonging, involvement and well-being 'places the onus for the outcomes for children on the adults, making a judgment about the context, rather than the child. It gives immediate feedback about the effect of the educators' approach and the environment they establish' (Laevers 1999 cited in Goldspink et al. 2008, p. 3). Rather than locating the 'problem' within the individual, it recognises the complexity of influences and offers a number of sites for action within the ecological system.

All of these ideas have led to a current project, which is exploring children's learning journeys from early childhood into school.

8.4   Challenges and Issues

Some of the challenges and issues that the ecological and sociocultural foundations of my work provoke have been alluded to above, with regard to the complexity of the issues involved in both understanding and researching transitions. Within these concerns there is a key question regarding whose voices are heard (and not heard) in the process. Many researchers have worked hard to gain a variety of perspectives, including those of the children themselves, and families with complex support needs (Dockett et al. 2011). However, in my review of New Zealand research (Peters 2010), many voices were absent, in particular from the groups for whom the Ministry of Education was most interested in enhancing transitions. These include children and families who identify as Māori or Pasifika, those who have English as an additional language, draw from low socioeconomic backgrounds or have children with special educational needs. It is important that policies and strategies draw on insights from the groups concerned and also acknowledge the diversity within these groups.

8.5   Future Directions

Beliefs and practices at the macrosystem level have changed enormously over the 17 years that I have been involved in transitions research. At the same time, the body of research literature has grown exponentially. There are a range of theories and research findings that can provide insights, each drawing from particular world-views. The competing discourses that surround transitions add to the complexity and may coexist and even do battle 'inside our own heads' (Stainton-Rogers 1989, cited in Jenks 2005, p. 68). I find myself wanting to both deconstruct the discourses and the ways our understandings are framed and also to navigate through the complexity to understand more about the experiences of those involved and assist in developing approaches that address inequities and support children, families and teachers engaged in transitions in ways that have ongoing benefits for children's learning.

In New Zealand we have reached the point where much has been achieved in relation to transition practices and policies, and many schools and early childhood settings are working hard to enhance the transition to school for children and their families. However, we are short of research evidence that indicates what makes both an immediate, and lasting, difference to children's overall experience, and within this, to their learning. In addition, there are many voices that are missing from the research literature, often from the groups for whom educational transitions may be most challenging.

My current work with Vanessa Paki involves working with teachers to explore ways of enhancing children's learning journeys from early childhood education into school and to explore the impact of transition practices upon learning over time. Although the work focuses on transitions for all children, a key thread is to work

towards developing understandings of the perceptions of Māori children and their families. Improving transitions to school for Māori children is a key goal in Ka Hikitia Managing for Success: The Māori Education Strategy 2008–2012 (Ministry of Education 2008), and yet Māori voices are noticeably absent from the transitions research literature. We are fortunate to be working in a number of settings, one of which has up to 97 % Māori children attending.

The second broad theme in this study focuses on curriculum links to support learning. In this aim we have considered the possibility that rather than a bridge across a chasm, through shared understandings, we might develop a 'borderland' or shared space of understanding between early childhood education and school (Britt and Sumsion 2003). Borderlands can be thought of as 'those spaces that exist around borders' and which do 'not have a sharp divide line where one leaves one way of making sense for another' (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007, p. 59). We are investigating the alignment between the New Zealand ECE and school curricula in practice and the ways in which shared understandings might develop. A number of strategies are facilitating this process. One has been 'a day in the life of…' observations where a teacher observes in the other sector and then discusses with the teacher from the observed setting what has been noticed, to gain a more informed understanding of the things that have been seen. Teachers from both of the schools involved commented especially on how useful that had been:

> They [our teaching team] feel the most valuable time has been to visit [ECE setting] to build a picture and understanding of their programme, and in turn develop trust with their team. (Primary School 1)

> During the last few months it has been encouraging to see the growing contacts between [ECE setting] and [Primary school 2]. Visits by staff have provided a closer understanding of the learning journeys undertaken by children. This building of relational trust is so important in helping develop future understandings. (Primary School 2)

The curriculum analysis and looking for connections led in some cases to an enhanced understanding for teachers of their own sector's document:

> We realised that aspects of shared understanding, language, meaning, pedagogies and philosophies (for all) are important in supporting a child through transitions.
>   We had opportunities to explore these throughout the first year of the project - Exploring the key competencies, shared visits [including 'A day in the life…'] and dialogue with teachers at [Primary School 2].

> Linking the two curriculums took us on a journey, which surprisingly led us back to looking at Te Whāriki with fresh eyes. We realised that supporting successful transitions did not necessarily require us 'moving up' to a new curriculum, but fully embracing our own. There were benefits when using both as a lens to position the child and filter their learning - however, it is the curriculum 'in action' and 'in context' that ultimately makes meaning. (ECE teacher researcher)

Finally, while a number of recent New Zealand projects have developed strategies for supporting children's transition to school, none of these have looked at the impact on children's learning in the longer term. The research literature is clear about the negative implications for children's learning of poor transitions, but it is important that robust evidence is provided of the longer-term impact of strategies

designed to support transitions. In addressing this aspect we are cognisant of the fact that children's learning journeys are shaped by a complex interaction of different factors. Nevertheless, developing frameworks for evaluation of the work being undertaken is key if these approaches are to meet their aims. Review is essential as potentially useful strategies may be 'too late, too impersonal, and too cursory to have much of an effect' (Pianta 2004, p. 6). In addition, practices have to be renegotiated over time, through staff changes and new dilemmas (Hartley et al. 2012).

We have struggled with the challenges regarding ways to analyse success and effectiveness and are working with the communities involved in order to discover what success looks like from the point of view of the participants and ways in which they feel this can be achieved. Addressing the concerns and interests of the participants means that the research has the potential to support the self-determination of their aspirations (Bishop 1996, 1997; Bishop and Glynn 1999). The ways in which these views align with, or inform, aspirations at the policy (macro) level can then be considered.

The current project is providing a range of new insights, but I hope to build on this in the future to look at a wider range of transition experiences, including for children who have not attended early childhood education. Developing shared meanings with groups whose voices have not been well represented in transitions research will assist in one of my other areas of interest, which is to deconstruct the discourses that shape our understandings. I feel that it is timely to pay more overt attention to the competing discourses around transitions and transitions research as this field intersects with so many other areas of human development and education. This larger project would involve international research connections to examine current knowledge of transitions and explore ways of moving forward in this field to provide new insights into transitions in the twenty-first century. There is a place for new analysis of the theories and agendas that drive transitions research and consideration of social justice within the competing theoretical and political agendas.

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