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# SITE VISIT: New Zealand—To School at Five

## The Transition from Home or Preschool to School

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*For many years now, children have been entering the school system in New Zealand at age five. They do so, one at a time, as they become 5 years of age (rather than in groups at a specific time). In order to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach to children's transition from preschool into elementary school, Margery Renwick examines the differing perceptions and expectations of the children entering the school system, of their parents, and of their teachers. The results indicate there are many dimensions to the issue of transition; the process of having children enter on their date of birth cannot be evaluated on its own.*

To understand and document the process of starting school, a research project was begun in 1977. (At the time of the study, about 85% of all four-year-olds and about 50% of all three-year-olds attended some kind of preschool in New Zealand.) First, parents, preschool teachers, and new-entrant teachers were interviewed, and a small group of parents was asked to keep diaries of their children's experiences on entering school. From the information gathered, key issues were isolated and questionnaires prepared which were administered to a national sample of 300 teachers of new entrants, to 300 preschool teachers and supervisors (from three different kinds of preschool experiences), and to 300 parents. An extraordinarily high return (more than 90%) was obtained in all three categories.

The study was comprised of the following areas:

- children's expectations of school, school readiness for children, including the profile of a school beginner and a description of the school experience for the child;
- school entry from the standpoint of parents, covering such issues as whether or not parents should stay in the school during the first day, the relevance of sharing information about children with the teacher, parental attitudes, and participation by parents in the school through parent-helper schemes;
- an examination of the links between preschool and primary school, looking at the liaison between the two, at pre-entry visits, at how new-entrant teachers look at preschools, and at the advantages and disadvantages of children attending preschool;
- administrative issues are discussed and include: the administrative division between preschools and schools, the age of entry into school, and whether entry should be individual or in groups.

The study included some of the following observations:

***Children's expectations.*** Children expect to learn to read (among other things). They expect to have a loving teacher, but they also recognize that they need to work hard and be good all the time or they will be disciplined.

***School readiness.*** There is a wide variation in opinions on the subject of school readiness among teachers and among parents. Some of them believe no such thing as school readiness exists. Others, who believe it is possible to isolate characteristics indicating a child is ready to enter school, refer to the following:

- ***Social maturity:*** The child makes friends easily and is able to cooperate with others; he or she is secure, confident, and independent with respect to activities rather than thought (e.g., is able to go to the toilet alone).
- ***Language development:*** The child speaks confidently, possesses a good vocabulary, has had exposure to books, and exhibits pre-reading skills and a desire to read.
- ***Behaviour and discipline:*** The child accepts and respects authority, is obedient, and can sit still and listen.
- ***Health:*** The child is in good health and has also acquired certain physical skills. He or she also has the ability to cope with personal hygiene.
- ***Desire to learn:*** The child is curious.
- ***Specific skills:*** The child can use equipment (such as scissors or a pencil); count, recognize letters, know his or her address, and can write own name.

Pervading many of the comments made about school readiness is the need for a child to have a positive attitude towards school. This was linked with having at least one teacher with a sense of humour.

***The school experience.*** "In the opinion of the parents, the single most important factor in making a child feel enthusiastic about school is the personality of the teacher, particularly her ability to make the new child feel he or she is welcome.... It is equally clear that if a child has problems, they are likely to be caused either by difficulties in coping with other children, in settling in, in a social sense, or by difficulties in adjusting to the demands and restraints of school organization, routine, and discipline." (Renwick 1984, 19)

The presentation of the classroom and classroom activities can also affect a child's adjustment. Children sometimes have difficulties in accepting and conforming to the demands of classroom routine and organization. This may reflect anxiety about not knowing what is expected of them. Many teachers place great stress on children being disciplined, obedient, and accepting of the teacher's authority.

***The relationship between teachers and parents.*** "The question of whether or not a mother should stay in the classroom on a child's first day illustrates the tension that can occur between mother and teacher when it comes to what many see as the 'handing over' of the child to the

school." (Renwick 1984, 29) Most teachers say the adjustment is better if the mother does not stay. Teachers feel that parental presence simply represents a mother's exaggerated concern and unwillingness to let go; few recognize that parents may want to share this experience with their child, much as they have shared other experiences.

The impact of parents staying on the first day is probably less important than such things as: how well the child already knows the teacher; whether or not the parents have given the child the impression that they like and trust the teacher; whether or not there are plenty of interesting and absorbing things for the new child to do; whether or not the child knows other children in the classroom; and whether the class is small or large. (Renwick 1984, 33)

The sharing of information about children when they start school is important, but it should be done in a way that does not lead to labelling of the children and with the realization that information at this age is quickly out of date because children change so fast. Information about a child's health, including disabilities, is particularly important.

Parental involvement in the school has also proven to be successful. "Parents who are happy with their relationship with the school usually give as their main reason that the school is always welcoming." (Renwick 1984, 42)

***Preschool/School partnership.*** "Although many teachers in all sections of early childhood education are conscious of the need for preschool/school liaison, such liaisons frequently depend on the personal qualities and enthusiasm of individual teachers" (Renwick 1984, 55). Preschool teachers often feel that primary school teachers do not really take preschool education seriously. It was found that regular meetings, or even occasional meetings, were by no means common. However, meetings may be less important than other forms of liaison, such as visits of preschool staff and children to the school as part of a policy to introduce preschool children to school.

***Age and process of admission to primary school.*** Most parents (80%), preschool teachers, and new-entry teachers felt that age 5 was the most appropriate age for entrance into school, although various individuals thought that there should be some flexibility in the age of entrance. Individual admission on a child's fifth birthday is generally taken for granted and accepted as a system which is both reasonable and workable; however, approximately half of all new-entry teachers favoured group admission as compared with about 30% of parents and preschool teachers. Those arguing for continuous and individual admission stressed that this system helped assure individual attention for new children and improved the chances of getting to know individual parents. Those favouring group admission argued mainly that classroom organization and management were easier to maintain. An alternative to individual admission that might have similar advantages would be admission of small groups of 4 to 6 children whose birthdays are close together, perhaps once a month.

The current system of entry into school grew historically because many schools were in small rural towns and had only one or two teachers, and children entering school individually made it less disruptive for the other children. In small towns, the transition is more natural because the teachers tend to know the children before they arrive, the communication with parents is more

informal and the schools are less threatening. With the growth of large urban schools, the situation changes. A question was raised about whether transition is really mainly an urban problem.

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*Early Childhood Counts: Programming Resources for Early Childhood Care and Development.*  
CD-ROM. The Consultative Group on ECCD. Washington D.C.: World Bank, 1999.