

## The real lives of five years olds at school

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Has anyone else noticed how many reality shows occupy space on televisions at present? They claim to provide us with a microscopic view into what goes on in the 'real' lives of people who bear very little similarity to ourselves, or those we hold close to us, and the lives that we lead. And yet, despite this, we get sucked into this 'fly-on-the-wall' style viewing, and so they keep going. Although I question and can happily analyse such programmes for their authenticity and meaningful viewing, I do believe there is something we can learn from them when we come to working with children. If we were able to be an observer of those we work with, would we, first, have a better understanding of their lives, and secondly, be able to support them more effectively as a result?

As a passionate Junior School enthusiast and educator, this is something for which I am always advocating, particularly when thinking about how we best support our young learners by considering the whole child. And, if I put my hand on my heart, I can honestly say that is something that fell off my radar from time-to-time whilst feeling the pressures and reality of everyday teaching. However, as many of my colleagues and friends are currently experiencing the reality of their own children starting school, and watching their babies either thrive or shrivel up in their new environment, my thought processes have begun whirling yet again, particularly as many of these children thrive in their ECE environments prior to starting school.

So, what is happening between early childhood and primary education? My experience and discussions have shown that starting school is one of the major events in a child's early life (Aimes, n.d.). It also tells me that each child is unique and responds to this transition in different ways. Some take it in their stride, whilst others fall at the starting block. This is what we see happening and what I have been left wondering is, what is happening internally for these learners? We know that change/stress can have a huge impact on the brain; its ability to process new information and hold on to that which is already there. In fact, when we experience stress, our bodies as a whole prepare to either fight or flight. Just imagine that level of cortisol coursing through their wee veins. What impact does this have on their ability to learn?

I believe that there are several layers to delving deeper to the root cause of this. Firstly, the role teachers play and, secondly, the development progressions of each child. What we do know is that the things teachers say and do have a huge impact on children's learning through the way they connect and communicate with learners. Piaget's work (as cited by Anthony, n.d.) demonstrates how what teachers say and do is taken literally by young learners. Now, put that into the realm of learning, and you can imagine the number of things that get lost in translation along the way, which, as you can imagine, can be rather unnerving to anybody let alone a five-year-old.

Another aspect of this is the processing learners go through in development stages. With children often talking to themselves or speaking out loud to complete activities. As educators, we can often miss this and pass it off as being disruptive, when, in actual fact, according to Vygotsky, this is the vital foundation of their executive function skills (as cited by Anthony, n.d.). These are the very skills we want our children to strive for in an agentic environment. If we line this up with Graham Nuthall's (2007) work on the hidden lives of learners, it shows just how vital the level of social development is — including building relationships, negotiating social norms, and problem-solving. As educators, do we make time for this, or, are we asking too much of them to gain academic scores as well? And should we be more understanding when seemingly simple things appear to fall off the memory bandwagon?

Finally, the thing that I believe is missing is the inclusion of play. Play and freedom to explore has a much more vital role in development and learning than we can ever imagine. Thinking as an adult, I will quite often tinker with things to work out how they work and what they are about. As a child, you play to explore the world and its social realms. Kids tend to play roles that are familiar to them and have a persistence to completion when they have achieved something just as we do through tinkering. This is embraced through Te Whāriki the New Zealand early childhood curriculum (1996), but seems to get lost when learners turn five. Maybe it is about us rethinking about what play is. It is purposeful and meaningful. The times when children are left to explore seem to be when they walk away with the biggest learning, whether it be jumping in the mud or pretending to be the prime minister.

I can't help being left with a feeling of discomfort in the pit of my stomach when I reflect on what I have seen and observed from recently transitioned learners, both in new entrant classes and in their lives outside of school. Instead of embracing the individuals that they are and the learnings they have acquired, we tend to fall into the trap of 'preparing' our young children for a formal education and to learn the 'rules of school'. This feeling has only been heightened by recent research that informs us that when formalised teaching is introduced

too soon, the impact on learners can be negative in the long run. For example, the results of a worldwide study by the University of Cambridge (2013) showed ‘...that the early introduction of formal learning approaches to literacy does not improve children’s reading development, and may be damaging’. Also, those ‘children started at 5 developed less positive attitudes to reading, and showed poorer text comprehension than those children who had started later’. Is this really what we want for our learners? My gut response is a massive NO!

Now, the good thing. It is never too late to make a change and empower our learners right from the moment they walk in the door. Here are my top 5 suggestions to help you embrace the hidden lives of your learners today, for a better future for them all:

- Embrace the front part of the New Zealand Curriculum (2007) — this is what learning is all about: values, key competencies and principles. Also if you look closely, it builds on from Te Whāriki (1996) nicely:

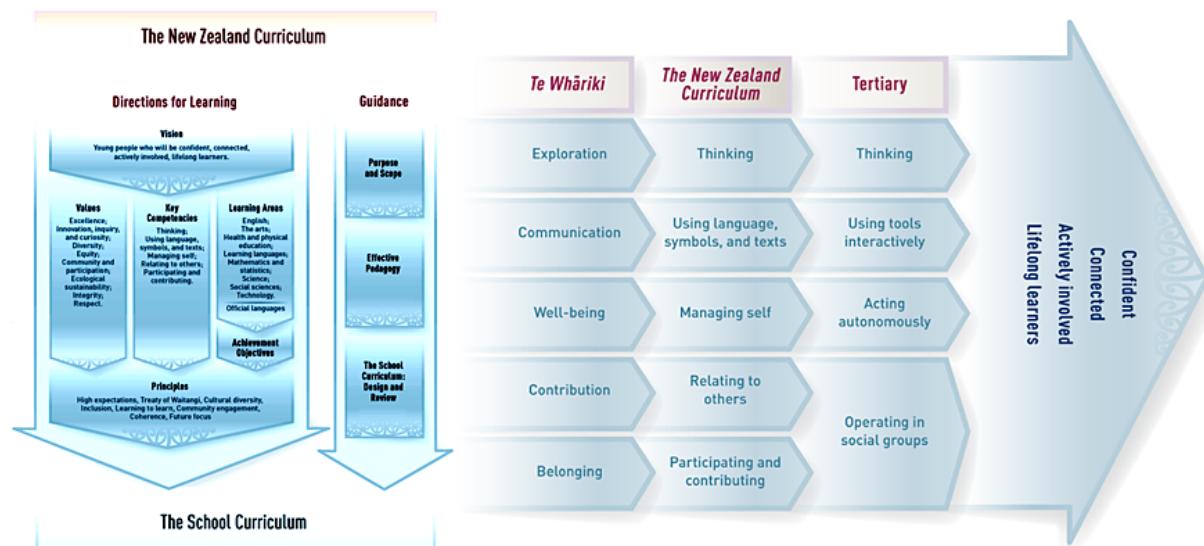


Image credit: [nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz](http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz)

- Develop strong relationship with family and whānau; utilise their expertise around their children, such as this [education gazette link](#) indicates. Check out [this link](#) from the inclusive education site for ideas of how you can do this.
- Get to know your learners; sit back and watch them; take meaningful interest in their lives, not just their ability to count backwards from 10. You can do this by spending 10 minutes a day sitting down with a child and talking with them. Let them lead the way and then use the knowledge you gain to reconnect throughout their time.
- Build on each child’s learning from Early Childhood Education to make the transition as seamless as possible. This is something that was identified in the ERO research publication about successful transition. Have a [look through it](#) and see what you can do to make your New Entrant programme ECE friendly.
- Place more emphasis on play-based education. This earlier [CORE blog post](#) on powerful play goes into more detail.

So go on, get out of their way; let our young learner explore and learn!

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## Feature image source

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