



# Waikato Journal of Education

Journal website: <http://wje.org.nz>

ISSN 2382-0373

Published by the [Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research](#)



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## Volume 24, Issue 2, 2019

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**Editor:** Noeline Wright

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**To cite this article:** Woodhouse, H. M. (2009). “Spider man does not get lost”: Examining transitional objects in supporting a child’s transition to school. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 24(2), 3-10.  
<https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v%vi%i.661>

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v%vi%i.661>

**To link to this volume:** <https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v24i2>

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## “Spider man does not get lost”: Examining transitional objects in supporting a child’s transition to school

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### Abstract

*In their move to school, children and their family are faced with significant changes in their relationships, environment and routine. In this article, the experiences of a group of children transitioning into a new entrant (NE) school classroom from their early childhood centre (ECE) are discussed. As they began adapting to the new social and geographical climate of school, the use of digital images and transitional objects became a foundational tool to support them in forming a connection and sense of belonging in this new place. Through the combination of these images and transitional objects there is potential to support their roleplay, enabling them to rehearse social and geographical scenarios that are affecting them in their world. This article will discuss that play is the medium through which children can show teachers where they are in their understandings, in effect planning their own next steps in their transition journey. This emphasises the importance of the NE teacher observing children’s play to provide a thorough and responsive transition plan.*

### Keywords

Digital images; transitional object; roleplay; social and geographical adjustment

### Introduction

A major milestone for families and their young children is starting school. The move from ECE to school can be challenging and rewarding, but conversely, there is also the possibility for families and children to feel vulnerable and overwhelmed by this new experience. According to research by Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani (2001), a successful transition from ECE to school can have lifelong educational and social benefits for children.

An effective transitioning period for both children and their families is considered to be essential in setting a solid foundation for future education and social outcomes (West, Sweeting, & Young, 2008). In order to achieve this, there needs to be a realisation that transition is an open-ended process that supports children and their families for as long needed. It is therefore essential for educators to develop supportive relationships that are sustained throughout the child’s and their family’s journey. Children and their families need to be valued and recognised as a central part of school life. This paper explores



the transitions of a group of 5-year-old children from their ECE to a NE play based Innovative Learning Environment (ILE—a flexible, adaptable learning space involving a team of teachers). This paper reports on some initial findings from doctoral research into exploring the impact of transitional objects in the form of digital images of the child and how these can be used to support children in their adjustment to school. With time invested in observing these children reacting to and communicating through play, teachers can begin ‘improvising’ (Lobman, 2006) and educating based on observing the actions of their learners.

## Transitional objects

Transitional objects can be called security objects, such as blankets or a special toy, that form part of the emotional support system that a child needs in their early years, providing support when they are in an unfamiliar place, helping to provide the comforts of home. They help children make the emotional transition from dependence to independence, making a child feel more at ease. The term ‘transitional object’ was initially mentioned in the research of Winnicott (1953). Later, the term interchanged to ‘attachment object’ (Jones, 2002), appearing in literature to mean a similar concept.

Winnicott (1953) discussed that the child’s attachment to the object can be used to enable the child to move away from its mother. The object can also be used as a prop to give the child a memory of feeling comfortable, representing a way for the child to reduce any tension that they were feeling. Winnicott (1953) also discussed the object holding a capacity for symbolisation, enabling the child to personalise the object and the opportunity to bring it to life with human like qualities, providing a way for the child to participate meaningfully in an unfamiliar environment or with unfamiliar people. The effect of transitional objects continues through our lives as we link objects with meaningfulness and memories that are connected with other ideas, places and people. Photographs and mementos are a means of remembering good times and special people. Virtually all possessions have a value in creating the self.

## Digital images and belonging

Digital images, such as photographs, are powerful transitional objects as they can be used to “build, almost instantly, a sense of community and belonging, promote feelings of security and build children’s self-esteem” (Good, 2005, p. 79). As a generalisation, a child’s identity references how they think about themselves, their physical appearance, personality, ability, age, gender or ethnic group (Good, 2005). The concept of belonging constructed through these initial connections with the child’s images, are bound together with that of their identity, enabling them to evaluate their stance within a specific setting, for example, within their family or peer group (O’Dwyer, 2006). In other words, to feel a true sense of belonging within a setting, a child and their family needs to feel welcomed, understood, included and valued. The development of a person’s identity primarily comes from experience; children acquire new ideas about themselves and others, and modify their existing experiences, as they encounter their social and physical world (O’Dwyer, 2006). When a child is three or four years of age, the family structure provides the child with an understanding of their role within the family group, and so has a powerful effect on the child’s sense of identity (Dowling, 2000).

When children begin attending their school setting, they adapt their familiar patterns and values of home life to face a world where others may do things differently or have different values. When a child begins school, their new teacher shares this responsibility of developing the child’s sense of identity within this new place (The Centre for Early Childhood and Education, 2017). The influence of their role is to guide the child’s sense of self and their interaction with others, how to establish and maintain friendships and to cope with the management of adversities. (The Centre for Early Childhood and Education, 2017). According to The Centre for Early Childhood and Education (2017), in their Irish publication of *Siolta Standards manual*, a child needs to know that they are recognised and that their behaviour and personality are understood so that they feel comfortable and develop a sense of belonging within the setting.

In the *New Zealand Curriculum* (NZC) (Ministry of Education, 2007), the key competency of 'Participating and contributing' states, "Students who participate and contribute in communities have a sense of belonging and the confidence to participate within new contexts" (p. 13) while the NZ national early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* states in the belonging strand, "Feeling that they belong contributes to their (children's) well-being and gives them the confidence to try new experiences" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 31).

This remainder of this paper discusses the use of digital images of individual children as transitional objects to assist their transition from ECE to school and the usefulness of teacher observations of children's use of these objects to understand the richness of their sociodramatic play in contributing to their transition and their growing sense of belonging in a new environment.

## The study

My doctoral research focuses on a collaborative approach to transition, using Facebook as a digital platform to meet, share and contribute to the families' transition to school.

One of the initiatives I implemented was to display digital images of the children in different areas of the classroom in anticipation of their first visit. I wanted to create a connection to this new environment for the child and their family where their digital images would support a feeling of belonging rather than unfamiliarity. The digital images of each child were located in a prominent place in the classroom in order to be noticed by the families on their arrival. Similar images were used on coat peg cards so that the children would quickly recognise where to put their bag and belongings. I wanted to use this initial idea of creating a space of personal belonging to help the child establish themselves within the space by affixing a photograph onto a wooden block to make their image more tangible and portable. Each child had their own individual block person and could play with it at any time they chose.

As children began to use the block people, I started to observe how they were using them and how I felt this was assisting, or not, their transition into classroom life. I had not envisaged that these block people would be so significant in enabling children to make sense of their new environment and express their ideas and feelings. As I reflected on my observations, I was interested in what literature might contribute in helping me theorise about children's experiences and transition process.

## Findings

Jake, one of the newest children to start school, immediately asked if his block person could be a superhero just like Batman. Jake was wearing his Batman costume at the time, so it seemed a great place to start. Jake was also noticeably connected to the photographic images of himself in the classroom. He would take his photo from his peg card and begin to look at himself. I wondered if this strong interest and curiosity he was displaying of his self-image could be captured within his block person and the potential this object may have in easing some emotions he was feeling about school. Jake had been very upset at regular intervals during the day and needed a lot of support, he declined to integrate with the others and showed little indication of trying to cope with particular parts of his day. White and Carlson (2016) describe these more stressful moments of Jake's day as being 'hot', and the more settled moments of his day as being 'cool' contexts. White and Carlson (2016) go on to discuss how a child's ability to manage and cope in day-to-day situations is linked to the strength and development of their executive functions. They highlight three main areas of these functions which influence a child's competencies to cope: working memory, flexible or cognitive thinking, and inhibitory control inclusive of self-control. If a child is still developing in any of these three key areas, they may find it difficult to understand other's points of view, regulate their emotions, and enduring difficulty in handling changes in the day. Jake had already shown investment in personalising his block person into Batman, he had a strong interest in his self-image and I wondered if he may view his block person as a potential transitional object.

## Roleplay and social adjustment

Jake was generally unsettled when he arrived at school each morning. He would isolate himself from the others by going to the writing table and making masks. He liked to wear his creations and run around the classroom in pretence of being a superhero character, roaring loudly at the other children. Boisterous play associated with boys, which Jake was displaying, was highlighted in Paley's (1984) research into children's play within her own classroom environment. She discussed this energetic play as the notion of 'momentum'. She reflected that due to this, boys tended to be reminded regularly throughout the day to calm down, not the most effective way for Jake to feel constantly cautioned. I tried to look past Jake's boisterousness and endeavoured to fundamentally understand more about the actual roleplay that I observed Jake engaged in. By wearing his mask and being in role, it was giving Jake an opportunity to rehearse those real-life situations troubling him in a safe, low threat environment (White & Carlson, 2016). I had observed that Jake's roleplay took on quite complex stories. I saw the opportunity to ask Jake to draw a picture about his story and that maybe we could write it down together (Paley, 1984). Jake explained his story about Spiderman and the day he got lost and so could not save the people.

Harris (2000) suggests that role-play, in which children imagine and act out the part of another person or creature, has special significance for the development of social understanding. According to White and Carlson (2016) the psychological distance of being in role as a superhero promotes a bird's-eye view on situations in which children may be feeling stressed or finding difficult to handle. Once children view the situation within their adopted role, they can see choices more clearly, reflect on them more fully and ultimately exert greater control over their actions.

When Jake was out of playing role, he tended to struggle with the social aspects of his school day, and his anxiety increased. When he was in role, he emulated the strengths or powers of a superhero, believing in them as strong role models, feeling fearless and ready to deal with any situation, which was what I was observing him display within his boisterous behaviour (Coyne, Ruh, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson, & Collier, 2014). Superhero play is also often associated with rough-and-tumble play. Pellegrini (1998) studied teachers' and playground supervisors' perceptions of this type of play. He found that many teachers believed this type of play progressed to real fighting; however, based on some of Pellegrini's (2002) later studies, he found that with rough-and-tumble play, play fighting only occurred 10 percent of the time on the playground, and only about one percent of this led to real fighting. When observing the boys playing together with their block superheroes, I noticed the level of noise and boisterousness did subside, their play became more imaginative; they were constantly adding to each other's narratives about their superheroes. Through my observations I noted that superhero play had the potential to promote more creative and complex stories. Jake and Raymond were dressed as Batman in their block people images; they both hooked into becoming superheroes, playing alongside of each other, flying their block person through the air creating stories about the two batmen being friends and fighting the bad guys together. In his study of friendships in a preschool, Corsaro (1985) found many themes of children constructing peer cultures including bad guys and good, reflecting upon good versus evil. When viewed within the peer culture perspective, the children's narrative performance may have reflected their interest in these themes and their attempts to construct their knowledge and understanding of these issues together in their newly formed peer culture group.

I found it encouraging to observe Jake participating and beginning to build connections with Raymond, forming their own peer group. According to Dockett and Perry (2007) children who start school with an existing friend, or who develop a new friendship during their first year of school are reported to have positive attitudes towards school and to adjust to the environment of school more easily than children without such strong friendships. For Jake, this was finally beginning to happen due to the boys discovering a common cultural connection to superheroes. Jake and his new friend attracted the attention of a third boy and the small group moved into the home corner, playing role play games together, focusing around their superhero adventures. As Marcolino & Mello (2015) suggest, roleplay and stories about superheroes can have a significant influence on the context and themes of children's imaginative play. This is because superhero stories present the relationships between the characters in a lively way. The key role of the superhero is particularly attractive to children for personifying intense

movement and interaction with various characters in the plot. I observed how Jake and his friends were certainly hooking into the creation of their own exciting storylines and movements!

### **Children's decisions about protocols for the block people**

The class decided that the block people had to go back on the maths table at the end of each session, that way they would not get lost. I noticed that this agreement did not last! Kamsan's block person would regularly be missing from the maths table at the end of the day and turn up in random places such as in my classroom cupboard or in the sand the next morning. What in fact was occurring was that Kamsan was taking his block person home and leaving it beside his bed. Kamsan was finding comfort and familiarity in his block person. It had become his transitional object, travelling between home and school. Kamsan began personalising his block person, eagerly telling us that his block person, 'mini Kamsan', liked to go on adventures at night when there was nobody in the classroom. When Jake arrived at school in the morning, he would ask Kamsan what his block person had been doing last night and what adventures he had been on. This was a cue for Kamsan to begin his story, much to Jake's delight. For Jake, the block people were beginning to be the common ground he was using to socialise and begin to make friends. His chats with Kamsan about his block person's nightly movements began to extend and the two boys began to bond over the new concept of constructing spaceships and hotels for their superheroes.

### **Multiple self-images**

Jake decided that he wanted to add another superhero to his Batman block person. He said that he would like to be Spiderman sometimes too. Indeed, Jake alternates superhero outfits; one day he arrives at school as Batman and the next day he is dressed as Spiderman. According to Galbraith (2007), children's perspectives of superheroes can change every day; it can be dependent on a multitude of factors such as their siblings influence, what they have watched on TV that day or peer opinion about who their social group think is the coolest superhero right now (p. 265). I asked Jake what was special about Spiderman that was perhaps different from Batman. According to Jake, "Spiderman does not get lost because he uses his special web so that he can swing over buildings to know where he is going". Children's understanding of a hero's superpowers was the focus of Fernie's (1981) study, which highlighted that young children often thought that superpowers were real and had difficulty separating reality from fantasy. Spiderman's superpowers had made a real connection with Jake. The fact that Jake, when not in role, struggled with aspects of the day, was in contrast to taking on a superhero role that helped him to emotionally cope and manage. Jake's experience of feeling empowered by his superhero role are similar to the children in Fernie's (1981) research who believed that, "he who flies does not cry" (p. 5).

I reflected back on Jake's emotional outbursts that now only occurred before morning break and lunchtime. I talked to his mum about what could be possibly triggering them. We discovered that Jake in fact wanted to play rugby on the field during the breaks, but he was frightened that he would get lost. This fear stemmed back to Jake's very first day of school when he arrived full of confidence and went to play outside before the morning bell, but unfortunately Jake became disoriented and could not find his way back to class without the help of an older child. I decided that the block people may be a way to help Jake tackle his ability to locate his way around school. He was very attached to his block person, and I thought I could set up some invitations to play within the construction space, of photographed block buildings around our school situating them into a simple play map. This could provide an invitation to integrate these key landmarks as a way to increase Jake's familiarity with the school environment. I then set up the block people into the play, leaving it as an invitation for the children to explore. I wanted to observe Jake's reactions and if he integrated these local landmarks into his play.

## Supporting geographical adjustment through the block people

According to Dockett and Perry (2014), there are a wide range of tools that can be used and labelled as a map. These include mind maps, photo maps, story maps and concept maps (p. 33). The idea of having a ‘block map’ to go with our block people was to use the concept of a photo map (Dockett & Perry, 2014). The blocks were set up on a mat with some geographical accuracy in terms of proximity from our classroom to the other buildings located on the mat. Dockett and Perry (2014) termed this idea as being ‘points of interest’ (p. 33), where they drew attention to the similarities of this concept to be just like a road map that often includes some regional highlights. The concept of using a map to link to an area of personal connection with an individual can often offer views into how people see their world, providing an understanding of what is important to them, their social links to these locations and where they spend their time (Powell, 2010, p. 553). For Jake, I felt this was of key importance as it would provide him with the opportunity to rehearse his route to the school field, the location he struggled most to find. Hopefully, too, I would be able to observe and understand more about Jake’s feelings and apprehensions through his interactions with his block person. The school field was for Jake, his point of interest.

I set up the block people around the different locations of the block school and left the map as an invitation to play. I had no expectations or clue whether or how the children would use the blocks. Jake, Raymond and Kamsan instantly took up the invitation to play. They set up their block people and moved them around the block school. They became so absorbed in the play that Raymond asked me if they could use the iPads to take photos of their different maps so they could remember the different places that their block people visited, forming their own picture map route. When the photos were printed out, the boys sequenced the places in the order they wanted to visit. The boys wanted to keep these images and we put them into their own book about maps. According to Dockett and Perry (2014), a ‘story map’ can be used as a tool to facilitate communication of information and maps can be used to tell a range of stories from differing individual perspectives. The connections between self and place are unique (Harmon, 2004); the same place can be seen so differently and there are stories embedded within the map of the children’s already lived experience of the school environment. For Jake, the importance of the school field was a priority to him, but the other children may have differing perspectives and experiences of some of the other locations on the play map. I will continue to watch with interest.

## Conclusion

These children have taught me, through the power of observation, that their transition is happening every second of every day for them. They are constantly adjusting to their new environment and forming connections with the people and the buildings in that place. For these five-year-old children, they showed their concerns and thoughts through their roleplay. For Jake and others, it was easier to transfer their anxieties or need to rehearse something that they were mulling over through dressing up or using their block person to represent their thoughts. Giving time for children to play, respecting their needs to get into role to help them cope with new or tricky situations and allowing them the space to adopt a superheroes powers helped them to work things out in their own way and in their own time.

Within a NE classroom, accountability to the timetable may have a restrictive influence on time and space that a teacher has for children constructing their own story telling. However, according to Hamilton and Weiss (2005), “the process of constructing stories in the mind, is one of the most fundamental ways of making meaning and thus pervades all aspects of learning” (p. 2). Therefore, storytelling generated through play could be considered as an essential skill that crosses all areas of the curriculum. Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasesk and Golinkoff (2013) reiterate that the concept of play directly benefits children’s language development because it incorporates many of the socially interactive and cognitive elements known to enhance language. Indeed, the opportunities to play in contexts that are important to children in the classroom continue to benefit language development well after their first year of school (Christie & Roskos, 2006). As Bruner (1983) reiterates, “The most complicated grammatical and pragmatic forms of language appear first in play activity” (p. 65). This

evidence suggests that children are indeed more likely to use complex language when they play than when they do not (Christie & Roskos, 2006).

According to Lobman (2005), a responsive teacher hooks into the children’s experiences, connecting with the children through meaningful, content-rich interactions. The block people have become a transitional object that has given me an insight as to how a child is adjusting socially and geographically to school. My role, as a responsive teacher, was to take time out to listen, valuing and acting upon the children’s thoughts that they showed throughout their play. The children are actively planning their next step on their transitional journey; they are in the driving seat of their own transition and we just need to take time to observe and listen. After all, as Paley (1984) intuitively shared, “the best insights appear, it seems when the unexpected happens” (p. 33).

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