

Facebook: A place to build relationships and to collaboratively support each family's journey to school

Hazel Woodhouse

[+DOI]

Abstract

Children's transition from an early childhood education setting to school needs to involve children and their families to best support the family in this time of change. This article focuses on a case study from doctoral research exploring the potential of Facebook™ to create a virtual community of practice to support children and their families' transition to school. Analysis of data supported other research about online communities in relation to the stages of participation that families progressed through as they developed a sense of belonging both in the online community and within the physical and social spaces of the new entrant classroom. The findings also indicate the significance of teachers being responsive to families' needs and interests and that a social media platform can be a very successful tool for supporting families and children's transition into a new environment. Drawing on the concepts of Gilly Salmon's five-stage model (2001 for e-learning; the article argues that social media can provide opportunities for families to co-construct and support their sense of belonging in a new environment.

Transition to school

According to Dockett and Perry (2001), effective transitions are based on establishing and maintaining relationships between all participants. Dockett et al. (2012) identified in their research that, during transition to school, families possess two roles; firstly, they seek to provide continuity and stability for their child as their caregiver and key stakeholder, but simultaneously they are undergoing their own transition in becoming school parents. If parents are to support their children in transitioning to school and be successful in adapting to their new role as school parents, they may require the knowledge and tools that schools and centres can offer them to assist their transition. When parents understand their new role, they are better able to provide for the targeted needs of their children in a more personal and confident fashion.

Central to centres and schools being able to support families in a way that works and targets their needs is time. Instead of using the limited time available to families to exclusively deliver information, schools could prioritise building connections among families as they enter their new school community. This way, individual families' needs can be better met. Transition is a process that is often done *to* families and not *with* families. By prioritising the building of relationships, families may actively contribute to the ways in which schools shape their transition to school processes. There is a considerable difference between transition experiences that actively involve families, focusing on relationships over time, and those transitions that prioritise orientation-placing families in a passive position. Orientation is a surface-stage feature of transition and typically involves presentations that deliver information to families, resulting in them knowing where to go on the first day of school and some of the expectations of the school. Parents' willingness to support these meetings appears to be dwindling, both in research and in my own experience as a new entrant teacher. Limited time availability was identified in Mitchell et al.'s (2006) research. They found that teachers within their study identified a "lack of connection" (p. 99) with some busy working families explaining that there were few opportunities for them to engage with each other and teachers. Offering alternative methods of communicating and building relationships can strengthen the connections between home and school for families and provide a smoother transition. Digital platforms that provide opportunities for communicating, sharing information, and connecting people can be a useful tool to assist families' transition to school. Such virtual tools may be more convenient for engagement and offer more opportunities for different stages of participation. These stages of participation have been described in Salmon et al. (2010) as a five-stage model that focused on the development of relationships and interactivity over time in a digital environment.

Five-stage model

The five-stage model proposed by Salmon et al. (2010) begins with Stage 1 which concerns itself with a participant's access and motivation to the online environment. Access and motivation are prerequisites for being able to engage with the digital content and page environment, helping participants to orientate themselves to what is available in this digital space. Stage 2 describes the establishment of participants' identities and socialisation online, wherein they familiarise themselves with others whom they feel comfortable interacting with in the group. Stage 3 refers to the exchanging of information via participants questioning and responding, seeking or imparting recommendations or advice. Stage 4 is focused around knowledge construction, exchanging views, and learning from each other to achieve a common goal. Finally, Stage 5 focuses on development: the application of the learning sourced from the online environment to the face-to-face environment. The five-stage model offers an evolutionary perspective to tracking participant interaction online and was useful in this respect in my research. Yet the model does not recognise blended interactions (both physical and virtual), as it is exclusively focused online and the research that supports the model was conducted over a short period of time; therefore, it may not be applicable in longer-term contexts (Moule, 2007).

[Image of Salmon, Nie and Edirisingha adapted 5-stage model (2010)]

Figure 1 Salmon, Nie and Edirisingha (2010) adapted Five stage model

An online environment that can offer the potential for interactions and relationships to develop akin to the model proposed by Salmon et al. (2010) is Facebook. There are currently 2.38 billion users of Facebook (as of March 2019), cementing this social network as an integral part of people's everyday world. Despite its grand scale, Facebook can be a deeply personal experience for its users which belies a largely untapped potential for meaningful interaction online. Through Facebook there is the capacity for users to create together their own virtual room around a common purpose. Within this virtual room, participants can share information in real time, adding their thoughts and contributions at a time that suits them. In order to be safe in the knowledge that their conversations and postings remain within the room, participants will require an invitation to become a member of this space. Field (2015) suggests that Facebook serves as an engine that powers groups. However, Facebook may be best understood as a platform that provides the space for and to facilitate user interaction. The engine then, is the motivation that inspires those users to interact and build connections within groups. While Field (2015) views engagement as a central organising characteristic, a common goal is perhaps most often the impetus in forming groups whereas engagement, interaction, and activity are necessary in sustaining these. This raises questions of how a sense of belonging can be achieved in a predominantly digital environment among the group of families transitioning to school.

Research methodology and findings

The data collected for this paper are from my ongoing PhD study. My research involved a new entrant setting of a large decile 10 primary school and three early childhood centres (one adjacent to the school and two at more distant locations). Nine families from these centres, whose children were all due to join the same new entrant class during term 3, 2018, were invited to be participants in the research. The families were experienced users of Facebook, with each of the nine families having at least one parent who was an active Facebook user, sometimes both parents having their own separate accounts. Within the group of nine families, four were first-time parents of a child transitioning to school. One family for whom English was a second language had just emigrated to New Zealand. My dual role within this research was that of the researcher and the families' new entrant class teacher. An initial questionnaire was sent to all families during the first term, including the participant families, in all three centres' preschool rooms. The questionnaire provided baseline information that was used to set up the families' Facebook closed group page. Some of the key ideas that came through the questionnaire from the families were that the participants preferred transition visits with the school to be one term (3 months) before their child's starting date. Families were supportive of attending "events" and gatherings within their early childhood education (ECE) centre and were largely happy to attend school functions. However, time during the working week in the evenings was at a premium due to family commitments and responsibilities. The families wanted specific information given to them before their start date about the school day and about their new class teacher; this could help them prepare their child by talking about both topics at home during the count-down to starting school. All names used within this article are pseudonyms.

The closed group status of the page meant that only the families who were invited via a link could join or see the material that the group generated in the space. Families were also reminded to review their own personal settings within Facebook so that they were comfortable with how much of their personal profile could be viewed or accessed by the rest of the group. The interactions of the group were tracked and analysed within the first 3 months of Facebook activity and again at 6 months. The interactivity and connection within the space involving the families is described through application of the five-stage model below (Salmon et al., 2010).

Stage 1. Minimum participation: The post had been seen by the parent.

Stage 2. The post had been acknowledged by the parent.

Stage 3. The parent had interacted with the post.

Stage 4. Maximum participation: The post was instigated/led by the parent.

Stage 5. Development: Relationships formed (e.g., parent extended invitation to other families to meet outside of the school and digital environment).

Time of postings	Type of postings	Linked stage-type of interactivity evidenced on Facebook (Salmon et al., 2010) five-stage model
0–3 months	Information postings (e.g., digital stories about the school day, digital stories about the principal and class teacher)	Stage 1 “Seen by”—parents just viewing posts Stage 2 Early acknowledgement of posts using “like” emoji
	Polling facilities used on Facebook to organise events and gain parent ideas (e.g., arranging the Rock Hunt date and time)	Stage 3 Parents replying to postings
3–6 months	Sharing children’s learning postings Live feed, videos, images—sharing the school day	Stage 4 Varying emojis occurring More parent feedback Parents tagging other families and other family members into their responses
6+ months	Sharing children’s learning— postings, videos, photos	New entrant teacher and families sharing photo and video postings
	Sharing events on Facebook—both from parents and class teacher through photos and videos	
	Parent-initiated questions and advice giving	Stage 5—invitations between family to families for play dates

	Connections being made outside of the digital and classroom environment between families	and connections being made for over the summer break between families
--	--	---

Table 1. How purpose of postings changed over time

Findings

Initial 3 months

The material added to the page prior to the families' arrival at school was informed by the questionnaire responses submitted by families, before their connection to the group. This was so that they would have resources to interact with once they joined the page. When the parents connected with the page, most posts were "seen" by families. This information was located in a feature of Facebook that provides data about who viewed the postings. Members who had "seen" the postings were at the first stage of their participation at this point. During the first 3 months of the group becoming connected, there were indications that the group was moving towards Stage 2 of the participation scale. Acknowledging the posts by using the "like" emoji became more prevalent though there was very little interaction with the posts beyond this second stage.

Feedback from the questionnaire indicated that the 3 months prior to starting school was when families began thinking more seriously about starting school. A suggestion from the questionnaire was that families were also supportive of attending social events hosted by their educational setting. In unpacking "events" within their ECE settings, families suggested quiz nights, gatherings, and special occasions such as Diwali as examples where they could engage socially. By weaving these two findings into one event, families were offered to participate in a Rock Hunt, creating an opportunity to engage face to face and connect for a fun purpose on school grounds. I wanted to explore two concepts: how effective had the Facebook page been in building connections between the families: and could face-to-face meetings that focused on getting to know each other, in turn develop stronger connections between the group in their online environment?

Chowcat (2005) discussed that the Salmon's earlier five-stage models (see Salmon, 2002) did not provide any flexibility for a mixed approach of contexts such as the addition of face-to-face connections between the group members. Jones and Peachey (2005) added an introductory face-to-face session to their research into online interaction to make it easier for participants to socialise online. However, Salmon later reviewed her research of the five-stage model, and in 2007 added a face-to-face component to her online group, demonstrating the flexibility of the five-stage model framework to differing contexts. So, perhaps a common consensus can be drawn that adding face-to-face opportunities to a group who mainly interact online can accelerate their socialising within the digital space through connections established through face-to-face opportunities.

The Facebook polling features were used to organise a convenient time for our Rock Hunt. Families had four options and they could vote for which time suited them the most. The families negotiated through the online poll and individual postings to hold the event on a

weekend, working around family commitments, and quickly reaching a group agreement of when to schedule this event.

This Rock Hunt was followed up soon after by an event involving the whole of the new entrant class: a whakatau (a welcoming ceremony). A whakatau is a smaller and quieter welcome with much less community involvement than a pōwhiri (Mead, 2003, p. 131). However, at the same time, the whakatau is intended to make a person feel more at ease in their surroundings, less inhibited, and reassured (Harris & O'Sullivan, 2013, p. 6). A whakatau for families was seen to be one way for the school to express and show manaakitanga, promoting a sense of belonging and becoming part of the community. We wanted the existing group of new entrant children to be active participants at the whakatau so that the new group had an opportunity to reconnect with familiar faces from their ECE centres. We also personalised the welcome by inviting the school principal to take on the role of leading the whakatau, along with the support of Te Rōpu Whai Mana (a student welcoming group) to support our younger children in singing of the waiata, which was a way young children could be part of the group and welcome the new children to the school. The importance of inviting the ECE centre from which the child had come helped the school seek guidance and wisdom from those who had previously worked with the child. This enabled us to better plan for the child's future at school. According to Walker (1990), it is often said that Māori are people who walk backwards into the future and this is a perspective which as a school we valued in our approach.

As part of the protocol of a whakatau, morning tea was offered at the end of the gathering. Whilst we all gathered informally after the whakatau, the participant families seemed much more at ease and gathered with the other families they recognised from Facebook. Among the group of participating families, I noted some early connections between myself and families linked to our shared Facebook interactions. For example, a small group of parents were discussing the digital stories that I posted on Facebook to address everyday dilemmas children could face at school. They offered me a few suggestions for further story themes that could support an aspect of transition pertinent to their child. This familiarity at the face-to-face function enabled families to offer suggestions about what could be added to the page. The Facebook page was the main topic of conversation that connected the group, and provided opportunities for their children to meet their Facebook friends. There was a feeling of ease and familiarity between the Facebook group. However, in contrast, the families who were not part of the research appeared less comfortable in this new environment of school, and were meeting me as their teacher for the very first time. This prompted me to amend my initial ethics application so that I could invite all of the families who were part of the new entrant class to be part of our Facebook group, boosting the membership to 35 participants.

At 6 months

As the children started school in term 3, 2018, I added the remaining families who already had children in my new entrant class to our Facebook page. Along with the growth of the group, the purpose of Facebook began to change. Parents no longer needed the information that they had initially received about what to expect when starting school, thus the page naturally shifted to sharing the school day. This shift also affected the responses and activity online. Through the use of photos, videos, and live-streaming our parents were given a window into their children's transition to school, but also got to take part by responding and commenting about what was posted.

As the children turned 5 years old and started school there were day-to-day opportunities for some families to build upon their initial digital relationships through the "drop off's and pick

up's" of their children. The addition of the classroom context may have contributed to motivating online interactions to increase and become more group-wide. Two factors could add a connection to this increase. Firstly, the relationships that were being built every day in the classroom and, secondly, the shift in purpose of the page. The postings were more personal, using photos and videos. Families tended to engage more when it was a photo of their child or a friend of their child.

There were exceptions to these two identified factors. Dylan's Mum and other working parents maintained their digital presence with very little classroom presence. Dylan's Mum was one of the most active participants online. Dylan was an only child, and as such his mum asked questions or posted for advice on the group page; for example, her posting around her concerns with lunchtime and the safety and security of her child at this time of the day.

From the original seven focus family groups there were three children who regularly attended before and after school care, meaning their parents maintained their connection through the Facebook page as a way of adding to the group through their postings. Therefore the five-stage model (Salmon et al., 2010) was still very much relevant to track their digital participation. The five-stage model (Salmon et al., 2010) focuses on development, with an end goal of participants becoming independent and able to reflect on their learning through their development online. With the context of the Facebook group, their independent learning and the reflective understandings needed to be transferred to their start to school. A criticism of Salmon's original five-stage model, developed during the late 1990s by Anderson (2000), was a lack of consideration as to how newly learnt knowledge could be translated into other areas of practice and contexts—perhaps rendering the five-stage model as not the most informative tool in interpreting the transferability of the participant's knowledge and understanding to their actual start to school. In order to better capture these data, a questionnaire was offered as a feedback opportunity after one term of schooling and was sent to all families on the Facebook page. This offered an opportunity to better explore the potential transferability and usefulness of the online discussion in supporting the families' transition into the classroom and beyond and potentially offering opportunities to explore this transferability more relevantly.

Families were beginning to contribute their own knowledge and experiences to the shared resources. Thereafter, others were able to draw upon these in order to help them maintain their own healthy connection to the group and their transition. We had finally hit stage five of the five-stage model (Salmon et al., 2010) concerning development. An example of this stage of interaction was when one parent asked for advice regarding food allergies as her son had an allergy to cow's milk and was concerned about the free school milk tempting him to try it like his friends. The responses from the group members drew upon their own experiences and offered advice in supporting this parent in helping them to manage this new situation. The parent who instigated the post fed back to the group afterwards and thanked the group for their support. At this point in time on the Facebook page, interaction was prevalent. Some parents started conversations by tagging in other parents, in order to get them to view the post and respond. They were connecting with their own experiences and with others who were also experiencing their own family transition. With the importance of their child starting school, for the parents, the responsibility and passion that they felt to ensure their child made the best start possible drove them to contribute to the Facebook page.

Discussion

The theory of e-learning underpinning the five-stage model (Salmon et al., 2010) was that the researchers believed that participants needed to be scaffolded through each stage in order to build up their skills in interacting in an online group environment. The first two stages of this model are comparable with the group's interaction stages described above. Stage 1 in the five-stage model (Salmon et al., 2010) is reflective of minimum interaction and focused more on encouraging participants to access and find the motivation to get to know their new environment. Stage 2 focuses on the idea of getting to know those in the online space. For the participants on the Facebook page, they showed the initial indications of connecting to the group through viewing the postings. This then gradually developed into acknowledging the post through "likes". This perhaps reflected their increasing confidence in the space and desire to be more visibly interacting within the group. However, within the first 3 months of activity, there was very little engagement instigated by or between the participants and most of the activity was led by me as the facilitator.

Perhaps another perspective is to view the families on the Facebook page as characters playing out the social drama of transitioning to school (Orr, 1990). Developing a sense of the narratives playing out in other families' transitions may help provide a model for other group members to follow. Stories give insights into the families' worlds, helping their peers make sense of the events that are happening around them. A challenge in giving support in a virtual community arises when interactions occur online between people who have never met in person. They may not be bound into a close community (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p. 177); however, many community ties connect offline as well as online, as relationships may "transcend the communication medium" (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p. 182). Shared interests typically drive online relationships with shared characteristics being of lesser concern (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p. 186).

Conclusion

The five-stage model proposed by Salmon et al. (2010) has relevance underpinning this research as it explains through stage progression the development of relationships in an online environment, though, admittedly, it did not originally consider the possibility of mixed interactions; both virtual and physical. The model further explained how the purpose behind the interactions of the families shifted over time and how my role as the facilitator adjusted to suit. Time, as the model shows, is an important factor in the developing of relationships and the use of social networking platforms, enabling the parents to take ownership and make better use of the limited time available for nurturing their transition.

My study shows the value of development of relationships in the maintaining of a supportive transition and the ability for online social networking platforms to be capitalised on to achieve this. The accessibility of social networking platforms and indications of their success in fostering transitions makes sense, in that these platforms were designed to promote the development of relationships and interactions between participants, which are vital components of a successful transition. A post from a parent illustrates the importance of both developing these relationships alongside resources, in a successful transition, rather than these essential components being merely bi-products (Gee, 2004). This post saw the parent, Maggie, invite her son's friends to come for a playdate, as he was re-locating to a new school. This exemplifies the value of community bonds within the group members, which Maggie did not want to lose when

her family left the school. What makes this post so revealing is that it further attests to the importance of interactions and relationships in supporting the parents in understanding their own transition into becoming school parents whilst supporting their child's journey to school. As Maggie's story suggests, relationships play a central role in supporting a successful transition to school for families.

References

- Anderson, T. (2000). Book review: E-moderating: the key to teaching and learning online. *Journal of Distance Education*, 15, (1), pp.99-101.
- Chowcat, I. (2005). *Models of e-learning: The importance of context* paper presented at In ALT-C 2005 12th International conference, Manchester University, UK 2005.
- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2001). *Starting school: Effective transitions*. Early Childhood Research and Practice, 3(2). <https://ecrp.illinois.edu/v3n2/dockett.html>
- Dockett, S., Perry, B., & Kearney, E. (2012). Family transitions as children start school. *Family Matters*, 90, 57–67.
- Field, E. (2015). *Community of practice or affinity space: Facebook: An affinity space for young people's environmental learning and action*. Education Graduate Student Symposium. *etropic*, 14(1), 72–83.
- Gee, J. P. (2004). *Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. Routledge.
- Harris, H., & O'Sullivan, J. (2013). *The importance of understanding Māori greetings to doing business in Aotearoa/New Zealand*. https://www.anzam.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf-manager/188_ANZAM-2013-407.PDF
- Jones, N., & Peachey, P. (2005). The development of socialisation in an on-line learning environment. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 3(3), 1–20.
- Mead, H. M. (2003). *Tikanga Māori: Living by Māori values*. Huia.
- Mitchell, L., with Haggerty, M., & Pairman, A. (2006). *Teachers, parents, and whānau working together in early childhood education*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Moule, P. (2007). Challenging the five-stage model for E-learning: A new approach.

ALT-J, 11 (1), pp.55-66.

Orr, J. E. (1990). Sharing knowledge, celebrating identity: Community memory in a service culture. In D. Middleton & D. Edwards (Eds.), *Collective remembering* (pp. 169–189). Sage.

Salmon, G. (2002). *E-tivities: The key to active online learning*. Taylor & Francis.

Salmon, G., Nie, M., & Edirisingha, P. (2010). Developing a five-stage model of learning in second life. *Educational Research*, 52(2), 169–182.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2010.482744>

Walker, R. (1990). *Ka whawhai tonu matou*. Penguin Books.

Wellman, B., & Gulia, M. (1996). Net surfers don't ride alone. In P. Kollock & M. Smith (Eds.), *Communities in cyberspace*, University of California Press.
<http://williamwolff.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Net-Surfers-Dont-Ride-Alone-Virtual-Community-as-Community.pdf>

[author bio]

Hazel Woodhouse has a classroom teacher in both early childhood education and new entrants for over 20 years in both the UK and New Zealand. She is currently a teaching fellow at Te Kura Toi Tangata School of Education at the University of Waikato.

Her research explores innovative ways to support families' transition to school with a focus on building connections and relationships between stakeholders.

Email: hwoodhou@waikato.ac.nz