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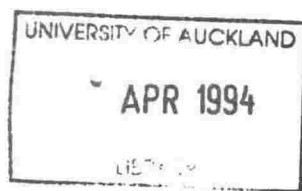
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**FACILITATING INDEPENDENT LEARNING
EARLY IN THE FIRST YEAR OF SCHOOL**

BARBARA WATSON

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ABSTRACT

This is a study of a) the nature and incidence of independent learning* in new entrant classroom settings and, b) the nature of the teacher-child interactions associated with such independent learning.

Systematic observation was used at school entry and three months later, to identify aspects of independent learning and the associated teacher behaviours. Six categories of child directed acts identified the range of behaviours from which independent learning could be inferred. Each category of teacher behaviour that appeared to facilitate independent learning in children was developed as a "mirror image" of each category of child directed acts. The teacher and four children in two new entrant classes were observed over the whole day for five days during two observation periods, one at the beginning of Term three and the other after 12 weeks. Each class was involved in normal classroom activities that covered the whole curriculum.

The children were engaging in a considerable amount of independent learning on entry to school and three months later. Many facilitative teaching acts occurred in the interactive style that was demonstrated in all aspects of the curriculum. The teachers spent a considerable portion of teaching time assisting children in one-to-one teaching situations and in small groups, encouraging their responses and fostering and supporting independence in their learning. There was some difference observed between teachers in the attention given to different categories and in the facilitative behaviour occurring in one-to-one interactions and small group teaching interactions.

A way of teaching emerges that differs from a teaching agenda determined by didactic, traditional instruction. The two teachers were deemed to be using the children's agenda

*Defined as "knowing how to generate and direct the processes of learning..." (see p.3).

to foster and support them in independent learning in the various curriculum areas. Some of the practical and philosophical features of the New Zealand education system that may contribute to this particular style of teaching are discussed.

The theories of learning and teaching deriving from this study place a value on independent learning (as here defined) in new entrant children and on the teacher's role in providing opportunities for it to develop. Independent learning a) ensures the continuation of learning at times when the teacher is directly engaged with other children, and b) derives from a teacher expectation that children will be able to actively process ideas and make some decisions about their learning. It engenders a power in children that sustains the momentum of learning.

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