

**The Challenges New Zealand Intermediate School Leaders  
Face As They Transition Year Six Primary Students Into Year  
Seven, Intermediate Schools.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

There is strong evidence, internationally and in New Zealand, of the interruption to learning that occurs on transition from one school setting to another. In New Zealand the risks are greatest particularly for those students from Maori, Pacifica and new immigrant backgrounds, situated in low socio-economic communities. There is a gap in the literature regarding what strategies school leaders can confidently implement to effectively diminish the interruption to learning and to reduce the potential risks posed.

School leaders are charged with deeply understanding their school communities so they can make decisions to meet the needs of their students. All decisions school leaders make should be focussed on improving learning outcomes for the students in their schools. School leaders are charged with establishing systems and processes that support students learning. School leaders are also charged with ensuring that the teachers in their schools are able to provide school-specific, high quality, educational opportunities for the students.

This research was conducted in three intermediate schools situated in the low socio-economic inner city communities who cater predominantly for those students who are 'the most at risk.' In these schools interviews were conducted with the school leaders who were identified as 'being responsible' for transition from Year 6, primary school to year 7 intermediate schools. Also interviewed were the year 7 teachers, supporting newly enrolled year 7 students, in the same schools. This was to identify the challenges these school leaders and teachers face while transitioning students from a year 6 primary school into their year 7 classes. It sought to uncover what these school leaders and year 7 teachers did to address the risks from the interruption caused by the transition and to support the students' learning.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

P 1/2/3	Principal or School Leader responsible for transition from schools 1, 2 or 3
AP	Associate Principal from School 1, a school leader designated as being responsible for transition
T 1/2/3/4/5/6/7/8	Year 7 Teacher numbered 1 to 8
ERO	Education Review Office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SENCo	Special Needs Coordinator
PD	Professional Development
PROBE	A reading assessment tool
NUMPA	Numeracy Project Assessment
GLoSS	Global Strategy Snapshot: a mathematics assessment
AsTTLe	Assessment Tool for Teaching and Learning: an on line assessment tool to assess Reading, Writing and Mathematics

# Chapter One

## INTRODUCTION

*There appears to be evidence that any transition may cause a drop in achievement,  
regardless of the age at which it takes place  
(The Education Review Office, 2003)*

### BACKGROUND

In New Zealand the compulsory education system includes primary, intermediate and secondary schools. The majority of students experience these three transitions within the thirteen years of their compulsory schooling; on starting school, from an early childhood setting to a primary school; then as they move from primary school into the intermediate school at Year 7; and then again from the intermediate school into secondary school at Year 9. There are other countries that also have a three-tier system but, unlike their overseas counterparts, “the majority of New Zealand students (52%) experience two transitions within a two-year period, i.e. at Years 7 and 9” (Hill & Hawke, 2001, p.3).

New Zealand intermediate schools are most commonly situated in inner city areas where there are larger student populations. They commonly gather students from a variety of contributing primary schools. Some intermediate schools cater for predominantly lower socio-economic communities. These communities have higher proportions of Maori and Pacifica and new immigrant students. Recent national educational priorities in New Zealand focus heavily on improving outcomes particularly for these students. These schools have been required, over recent years, to introduce and improve teaching in ‘Careers’, ‘Languages other than English’, ‘Puberty and Sexuality’, ‘Technology’, ‘Information Literacies’ alongside the introduction of ‘The National Standards’, other assessment strategies such as ‘e-AsTTLe’ and the ‘Numeracy and Literacy Projects’. The New Zealand Government have been proactive in the development of initiatives to support particularly intermediate schools, early childhood providers, secondary schools and students as they transition into tertiary institutions.



New Zealand schools are expected to provide what is described in the New Zealand Curriculum (2010) documents as “a broad education that makes links within and across learning areas, provides for coherent transitions, and opens up pathways to further learning” (p.9). In addition it requires them to “design their curriculum so that students find the transitions positive and have a clear sense of continuity and direction” (p.41). These must provide effective strategies for transition between schools and classes. In this, New Zealand intermediate and middle school teachers and school leaders are required to choose appropriate assessment strategies, provide positive learning environments and adequate resources to support this continual, age and stage appropriate progressions.

The New Zealand Ministry of Education has commissioned research into ‘Schooling Transitions’ and has published on its website ‘Education Counts’ several of the reports on findings from those investigations. Included in these reports are some strategies that support both transition and middle schooling. Furthermore regular circulars issued to schools also provide principals and school leaders information and support in regards to ‘transition’ and ways they can best support students. The information provided by the Ministry of Education in the New Zealand Curriculum Update, (2012) stated the following, “Supporting students through this process requires schools to know each learner well and to build positive relationships among students, teachers, families and whānau, and “feeder” and “receiving” schools.”

The Education Review Office (ERO) provided a booklet titled ‘National Report; Transitions from Primary School to Secondary School’ to all schools that contained some clear recommendations for schools and school leaders as they manage these processes. Overall, the evidence from wider education research and particularly from the ERO’s evaluations found in National Report; Transitions from Primary School to Secondary School’ (2012) suggests that teachers and leaders should take the following actions;

- ensure that students experience success in their learning so they stay engaged in education;
- identify vulnerable students before their entry...; proactively address any likely threats to students’ wellbeing and academic progress such as putting in place learning and pastoral care support for students; have processes in place to monitor the wellbeing and progress of all students, (especially vulnerable students); continue to offer support to students

throughout the year (not just in the initial weeks); ensure that support for students is inclusive of the appropriate specialist personnel, parents, whānau and aiga; make plans for the sustainable wellbeing and progress for students (including helping students to acquire the Key Competencies of *The New Zealand Curriculum*, as well as positive dispositions to school and learning); adopt a responsive and solutions-oriented approach to working through issues of students not adjusting to their new school (p.10 - 11)

These relatively rapid transitions create an imperative for the leaders of these intermediate schools to create and manage processes and systems to minimise the risks posed to students as they transition between school settings. There is little well researched and documented evidence as to what New Zealand intermediate school leaders should do as they transition primary school students into their school. The development of beliefs around effective transition is left to the school leaders to establish.

This research sought to investigate how these leaders developed their beliefs and understandings. This aspect is fundamental to this research. The research also sought to investigate what intermediate school leaders *believe* makes for the effective transition of Year 6 students into their school at Year 7 and what they *did* to ensure that the teachers enacted those beliefs.

## **RATIONALE**

In New Zealand and indeed internationally, particularly in low socio-economic areas, “there is interruption to learning that occurs on transition from one school setting to another” (McGee, Ward, Gibbons & Harlow, 2003, p.27). International and New Zealand-based research also acknowledges that there are numerous gaps about what is known about transition from one school setting to another (McGee et.al., 2003, p.53). This research shows that generally on transition from one setting to another, there are “gaps in subject content, inconsistencies in expectations of students and unnecessary differences in teaching and learning practices” (McGee et.al., 2003, p.9). Furthermore research commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education found “there is often a decline in achievement following transition” (McGee, et.al., 2003, p.47).

In addition the New Zealand Education Review Office (ERO), the national body that reviews schools and early childhood education services and publishes national reports on current educational practice has, over successive years considered the impact of transition on students' educational development. A report published by the Office identified the following:

Loss of ground in academic achievement because of difficulties in adjusting to a new environment, including losing old friends and making new ones, coping with a variety of teachers and their different expectations about work, the impact of long summer break on previous knowledge and skills, and repetition of work when students expected learning to be new and challenging (Education Review Office National Report; Transitions, 2000, p.9).

This national report also identifies challenges particularly for New Zealand schools based on the research which identifies that "Students who make two transitions, to middle school and then to secondary school, appear to experience the achievement drop twice" (ERO, 2012 p.3). This ERO report also indicates that there appears to be evidence that any transition may cause a drop in achievement, regardless of the age at which it takes place.

Ogbu (2009) indicates that inner city schools tend to have increased numbers of new immigrant populations and this is echoed by Atkinson and McGarrigle (2009) who have noted that inner city schools in low socio-economic and disadvantaged areas have a higher proportion of immigrant populations. It follows therefore that these schools face higher numbers of student populations at risk. Further New Zealand based research states "...many local [inner-city Auckland] schools have been challenged by the sudden increase in new immigrant students, and found themselves on a steep and sometimes painful learning curve in providing for English language teaching, curriculum presentation, and social integration" (Everts, 2008 p.41).

Historic perception of interruption caused by transition, is supported in a recent Ministerial review which indicates that while New Zealand education compares well internationally and is generally of a high quality, McNaughton and Gluckman (2011) indicate that it does not "adequately address the risks facing students living in low socio-economic areas, particularly students from Maori and Pasifika backgrounds" (p.11). Furthermore this review also

supports the belief identified by Gluckman (2012) that transition to secondary school (Year 9) is associated with “a shift towards more negative attitudes to academic achievement and lowered achievement patterns, especially for ‘minority’ and poor students” (p.97).

By contrast the New Zealand Curriculum (2010) expects all schools to provide seamless learning opportunities for all students from early childhood to tertiary level. ‘Effective transition’ is addressed in the curriculum under the concept of ‘coherence,’ one of the foundation principles of the document. The Curriculum states that the “curriculum offers all students a broad education that makes links within and across learning areas, provides for coherent transitions, and opens up pathways to further learning”(p.4). The curriculum is specific about the need to maintain continuity especially in the ‘middle’ schooling years (Years 7 to 10).

While the literature review, in Chapter Two, provides well researched evidence regarding the negative effects of transition, there is little research into the identification of what can be done to address these effects; “Despite our best efforts to date, the impact of transition from one educational ‘island’ to another, even when the ‘islands’ are on the same site, can be traumatic for students” (McGee et al., 2004 p.9).

The literature reviewed strongly identifies that the leaders of schools, the principals and leadership teams should identify strategies to minimise interruptions to learning, particularly for those students facing the greatest risks. Leithwood, Harris and Strauss (2010) indicate that:

Successful leaders are also exquisitely sensitive to the context in which they find themselves. Large schools present much different leadership challenges than do small schools. The challenges facing leaders of inner city schools are typically much different to those in the leafy suburbs (p.17)

This research project focused particularly on the leaders in middle-sized intermediate schools serving low socio-economic, inner-city communities. It sought to identify what these leaders knew about transition, the risks that the leaders identified for the students in their schools and the strategies these leaders believe minimizes those risks. Furthermore, it

sought to investigate how leaders gathered this information and developed the strategies. Finally it sought to investigate any links between what the leaders knew and what the teachers of the newly enrolled Year 7 students did and how the schools checked the effectiveness of the strategies.

## **RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS**

The aim of this research was to investigate the perspectives of principals and teachers in relation to their perceptions of the transitional needs of students in their communities. It is set within an interpretive paradigm and data was collected using qualitative methods and instruments. The research centred on three key research questions:

1. What are the beliefs and understandings you hold regarding effective primary student transitions in your educational community?
2. What challenges do you identify as the school leader for primary students transitioning into your school?
3. What strategies have been developed in your school to minimise transition challenges for Year 6 students transitioning into your school at Year 7?

## **THESIS OUTLINE**

Following this chapter, Chapter Two provides a critical review of literature from New Zealand and international research related to the challenges school leaders face as they oversee the transition of primary students into their schools.

Chapter Three outlines the research design, the methods used, sampling and data analysis used in this study. The selected qualitative approach that provides rich data from different perspectives is justified. The chapter also discusses reliability and validity, triangulation and ethical considerations.

Chapter Four focuses on the research findings and an analysis of the data gathered using interviews with principals and focus groups with year seven teachers and how they correspond to the findings with close linkage to the literature reviewed in chapter two. The findings are organised according to the themes identified during the research.

Chapter Five presents the conclusions and lists the recommendations for future practice and for future research. Limitations of this research process are also identified.

## **Chapter Two**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The review of the literature sought to understand the complex nature of school leadership and the ways intermediate school leaders could work in their school communities to support these students as they undergo transition from primary school, Year 6, to intermediate school, Year 7. It investigates ways the intermediate school leaders and teachers develop and enact their beliefs and understandings regarding 'effective transitions'.

This literature review underwent two iterations and focuses on the phenomenon of transition. The first prior to the interviews and data collection, focussed on school leadership. The research was initially designed to investigate the beliefs and understanding that intermediate school leaders held regarding effective transition and the actions they took to minimise the challenges caused by transition. The second iteration, as a result of the collected data, focussed more on the nature of transition, the critical relationships and the impact transitions have on students. It also reviewed the research indicating ways that intermediate or middle schools, their leaders and teachers, support students and minimise the risks.

This chapter reviewed relevant literature regarding transition. From this review of literature several significant areas of investigation were developed. These have been presented under the following headings:

- Transition
- Influencing Practices
- Leadership for Transition
- Critical Relationships
- Decision Making
- Challenges of Diversity
- Systems Development

## **TRANSITION**

Transition processes occur throughout the time children attend school. For most children it starts with transition into school at ages 5 years or 6 years, and is repeated again at intermediate or middle school at around age 11 years and then again later to secondary school. Most children move from class to class and teacher to teacher throughout their time at school. Different people manage and are affected by transitions in differing ways, as indicated by McKenzie, McMaugh and O'Sullivan (2012):

During any transition period, people must utilize their previously developed strategies and resources to counteract any issues that arise as change invariably brings about new challenges (p. 298)

However the ability to move from one environment to another, to 'transition' and to cope with the changes cannot be seen as simply a negative context but one that does indeed promote learning as identified by Lucey and Reay (2000) "... in this internal landscape anxiety is for most not only an inevitable consequence of the transition but central to the development of effective coping strategies" (p.192)

According to Coffey (2013) and Yates (2008) the transition from the primary school setting to a middle or secondary school setting is an expected lifetime change that involves moving from the known to the unknown. This global educational phenomenon as cited in Coffey (2013) can be defined and described in the following way:

Moving from the familiar environs of the primary school to secondary school is both an important milestone and challenge that confronts most early adolescents. Whilst there are variations between school systems around the world, the challenges that this transition presents bear remarkable similarity ... and are, in large measure, due to the disparity between the cultures of primary and secondary school. (p.261)

It is apparent that these 'cultural' differences between primary, middle and secondary school educational settings are also a world-wide phenomenon. Yates (2008) echoes Hargreaves (1990) in that the differences between the two settings are as follows; "Primary schooling as operating with key principals of 'care and control' whereas secondary schools are seen to be driven by 'academic orientation, student polarisation and fragmented individualism" (p.26).



Yates (2008) also indicates that the majority of children look forward to the changes and states “they are attached to the shift to high school as a marker of their growing maturity” (p.27). However not all students, or their parents and caregivers greet the changes with the same positive attitude and enthusiasm. Coffey (2013) indicates:

Whilst most students cope with this transition in one way or another, there is no doubt that some struggle. This struggle may be evidenced by subsequent declines in academic performance, school attendance, self-image, and engagement in learning. (p. 263)

The transition at 11 years is identified as the one pivotal to a student’s on-going success at school and indeed beyond school. Coffey (2013) goes on to state:

Transition from primary to secondary school has been identified as a significant issue for young adolescents as this period is associated with a range of behavioural problems and a substantial decline in academic performance. The transition period has also been associated with mental health concerns. (p.299)

Research on transition commonly identifies the interruption to learning and the decline in achievement and engagement and mental health that occurs. According to West, Sweeting and Young (2010); “These drops in achievement, in positive behaviour and in well-being, are of great concern for care givers, teachers and society at large” (p.519). However these may not all be attributed to the transition itself but also to adolescent trends. These authors cite a comparative study by Weiss and Bearman which “demonstrates that it may not be the transition *per se* that is difficult but that difficulties could be due to developmental aspects of adolescence as cited” (p.520). They go on to say “Regardless of whether the students are involved in a school transition or not perceptions of teacher support do, however decline gradually with increasing student age” (p.529).

Diminishing the negative effects of transition, at the onset of adolescence, is internationally a focus for all educational systems, along with developing continuity of learning and curriculum delivery. However Yates (2008) points out that the despite the desire and efforts made to develop a continuous learning pathway this is not generally achieved, “On curriculum issues, the study reiterates findings of earlier researchers regarding some

unsatisfactory aspects of the Year 7 curriculum; in particular, the sense of marking time, repetition, and uninventive approaches to core subjects reported by many students” (p.38).

## **INFLUENCING PRACTICES**

In New Zealand the student populations identified as being most ‘at risk on transition’ are those described by Gluckman (2010) as being from inner-city, low socio-economic, Maori, Pacifica and new immigrant backgrounds. Gluckman also identifies that there is a lack of well-researched evidence regarding effective strategies for specific groups of students within these communities and urges New Zealand educators to consider:

that there can be context specific conditions for the effectiveness of programmes, so the focus in outlining what works is on evidence for New Zealand applications... Given the focus on what happens in school and the significance of engagement at school the programmes which are associated with effective engagement at school are a priority....This is a concern for cultural well-being and central to the overarching concerns of optimising the transition (pp.102 - 103).

Schools world-wide grapple with managing these transitions in positive and productive ways knowing that poor transitions increase the likelihood of ‘disengagement’ and ‘academic failure’ particularly for students ‘at risk’ during the transition from one school setting to another. Bru, Stornes, Munthe and Thuen (2010) identify those students most at risk in the following ways:

Vulnerable pupils tend to be younger, less able and more disruptive, to have lower self-esteem, to have parents who are less encouraging of autonomy, and to come from lower SES backgrounds. Finally there is universal agreement that pupils experience a post-transition ‘dip’ in educational attainment, though what part the transition itself plays remains uncertain (p.20).

Transitions are complicated not only by differences in teachers, settings, changes in pedagogy and curriculum focus but also by prior understandings and expectations, culture, language, poverty, self-image and the support provided by family and parents.

However just *knowing* there is a problem is not enough. The Education Review Office National Report: 'Transitions' (2012) clearly states the need for schools to work with the school community; students and their families.

[This] involves leaders working with staff to decide on, and implement practices that support students when they come into the school, *and* as they move through the school. To increase the likelihood that policies and practices serve students well, they should be developed, and reviewed, with appropriate input from those most affected by the transition process –students and their parents (p.9).

Intermediate school leaders during the transitional school period must be *able* to relate to, work with and co-construct strategies that will work *for* the students *and* their families. There is incontrovertible proof that what schools do to support the transitions for the most vulnerable students could be more effective. In the face of these challenges school leaders, Timperley (2006) suggests, must develop ways to work in conjunction with their communities to develop increasingly effective methodologies. This is supported by Ganeson and Ehrich who state “Much rests in the hands of a school’s community – peers, teachers and administrators – to make transition to high school a relatively smooth and stress-free experience for new school students” (2008, p.76). The development of the required co-construction is based on the effective leadership of schools which is critical when supporting the transition of students.

## **LEADERSHIP FOR TRANSITION**

Although leadership of a school is not confined to the principal or head teacher, a principal’s primary role is “to influence others in order to improve learning and teaching” (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1990, p.8). School leadership is complex (Leithwood & Reihl, 2003). Leaders in schools are involved with what Starratt (cited in Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006) identifies as:

The refocusing from leadership of the organisation and its structures, roles, responsibilities and tasks to the leadership of learning as being the new direction of effective educational leadership, (p.31)

Starratt (2003) indicates that it is the “talent of insight that enables the leader” (p.15). He goes on to suggest that it is the vision of the leader that will become “embodied in the institutional structures, frameworks and policies of the school” (p.15). In order for this to happen Starratt notes that “articulation of the vision is crucial” (p.15). Furthermore he indicates that “school leaders must not only be able to focus on pupils’ learning but also on ‘orchestrating teachers’ professional learning” (p.16). It is what intermediate “school leaders believe and understand that is described as theories of leadership” (Bass, cited in Robinson & Lal, 2006 p.64) that drives the decision-making processes within schools. Bass (1990) suggests that it is these theories of leadership that define and describe the ways in which effective leaders motivate their followers.

School leaders are charged with establishing beliefs that support the processes for effective learning and teaching within their schools (Fullan, 2001). The literature, regarding the ways that effective school leaders establish beliefs and understandings, is extensive. In contrast to other leadership arenas the role for the school principal according to Leithwood (as cited in Cardno & Collett, 2004) is to ensure the “organisation-wide focus and concentration on ‘big picture’ issues and long term vision” (p.19). Regardless of the context for decision-making, it is incumbent on the school leader to gather the information and make decisions based on the long-term good of the school and all the people in the school (Bishop, 2008).

According to Elmore (as cited in Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2004), “knowing the right thing to do is the central problem of school improvement” (p.50). These decisions are therefore based predominantly upon the development of constructivist understandings as described by Richardson (1997) developed within their own school settings; with teachers, with students and their families; from research; with other intermediate school leaders; with contributing primary school leaders; as well as from personal and related historic experience. This is supported by Southworth (2005) who states “Leaders do not merely exercise personal influence: the structures and systems they create and sustain also play a part” (p.100). As principals focus on improvement for students, in learning and teaching, (Robinson, 2006) states they must be student-focussed and require in-depth understanding in curriculum concepts and pedagogy.

In addition Yates (2008, p.26) identifies that “There is a need to break down these traditional minds-sets. Or ways of doing things, so that a unified approach to learning and teaching can be developed, (Schools Council 1993, p. 52)”. These premises are also supported by Claxton et al., (2011) who identifies that school leaders and teachers, whilst acknowledging the need for change in order to address problems, are actually very resistant to change despite what they know and believe. Claxton et al. (2011) also warns that school leaders and teachers can espouse beliefs and understandings without these having any actual impact on the processes established in the schools in which they work. Although teachers and school leaders know that co-construction is vital in this transition processes they must build effective relationships with a variety of stakeholders in order to inform transition processes and systems.

### **CRITICAL RELATIONSHIPS**

The imperative to build relationships is identified by The Education Review Office National Report: Transitions 2012. This report states that “Relationships are the most critical factor in the transition process” (p.21). Leaders of intermediate schools should know just how important building and sustaining good community relationships is to the well-being and culture of their schools. Hawk, Cowley, Hill and Sutherland (2000) state that “When a positive relationship exists, students are more motivated to learn, more actively participate in their learning and the learning is likely to be more effective” (p.16).

Students and their parents world-wide grapple with ensuring that development and academic learning is not unduly interrupted by any transitions. Students’ anxieties regarding the transition from primary to intermediate school are reflective of their primary teachers and parents as indicated by Lucey and Reay (2000) “It is difficult to separate children’s anxieties from the adults around them” (p.193) and this is supported by Coffey (2013):

When parents are involved in the transition process there is a likelihood that they will remain as a participant in their child’s secondary schooling. This partnership increases the likelihood that students will achieve at a high level, be well-adjusted and are less likely to drop out of school. (p.268)

Teachers and leaders supporting transition processes do work to ensure that parents are involved and remain involved as their children transition from one setting (and culture) to another. Often this is facilitated by the appointment by the school of a 'transition facilitator' described by Coffey (2009) who goes on in later research (Coffey 2013) to describe this person as "the link between the students, parents and teachers and was pivotal in helping students settle into their new environment" (p.268). She also cites the teacher's role in supporting effective transitions in the following ways "The role of the teacher in creating a safe and supportive learning environment cannot be underestimated in helping to foster new relationships both between students and between teachers and students" (pp.266-267).

There is a great deal of evidence that indicates that the student-teacher relationship is crucial to smoothing and supporting the transition process as well as on-going academic success. Givens Rolland (2012) indicates that "Students who reported higher levels of teacher support also reported higher levels of perceived ability, self-efficacy, and expectations for success" (p.418). In contrast she also indicates that "Deteriorating student-teacher interactions are associated with lowered academic performance, aggression, dropout, and other negative student outcomes" (p.398).

According to Coffey (2013) adolescent students place a great deal of importance on their relationships not only with teachers but increasingly with their peers. Coffey cautions that schools should consider the social support needed to support these student transitions;

It is important that transition programmes provide opportunities for transitioning students to feel supported... Feelings of vulnerability can be significantly reduced if students feel they have allies and are accepted as part of a group... Part of the development of a sense of belonging in the new school can also be offered in the extracurricular activities that may be offered by the school. These activities provide the opportunity for the students to establish new friendships (p.266)

Coffey (2013) also notes that this development of friendships and supportive peer groups is also linked to the capabilities of a 'good' teacher who is not just caring but also provides scaffolded opportunities for students to develop meaningful relationships with peers.

Characteristics generally associated with teacher support include being caring, friendly, understanding and dependable... By developing classrooms that foster relationship building between students, establish clear guidelines for behaviour, encourage co-operation and utilize students' strengths, teachers can create a classroom environment conducive to learning. (p.263)

This relationship-building according to Alton-Lee (2003) prepares the ground for creating partnerships, between the school and its wider community. As indicated by Spillane et al., (2009) this relationship-building is fundamental to the building of 'co-operative communities'. These relationships form the basis of the 'school-specific curriculums', and therefore require processes for effective communication between the school and the school's community. This is strengthened by New Zealand Curriculum Online, Effective Pedagogy (Published online: 19 Sep 2007) which states:

Learning is inseparable from its social and cultural context. Students learn best when they feel accepted, when they enjoy positive relationships with their fellow students and teachers, and when they are able to be active, visible members of the learning community.

Decisions regarding transition therefore should be made not just by teachers, parents and the wider community but also with input from students.

## **DECISION MAKING**

School leaders are also well advised by Fullan (2012) to take into account, when making decisions, the concerns students express. According to Duchesne, Ratelle and Roy (2011) student concerns about transition can be categorised in the following ways:

- a) *worries about academic demands*, bearing on the nature of tasks to be done in class and at home, classroom rules and routines, formal evaluation systems and learning evaluation methods,
- b) *worries about teachers*, involving exposure to excessively rigid teachers, unfair treatment by these teachers, and not getting enough attention and

- c) *worries about peers*, such as fear of losing touch with friends from elementary school, difficulty in making new friends, and fear of being bullied by older students (p. 684)

The most effective transition processes take into serious consideration the feedback students give regarding what has and has not worked. The Education Review Office National Report: Transitions (2012) suggests that “...involving students and the community in policy and practice decisions that relate to transition initiatives...” is fundamental to the establishment of more successful processes. The ERO review goes on to say;

How well students respond to the changes is largely dependent on two key aspects – 1) students’ personal resources and coping skills (such as their acquisition of the Key Competencies described in *The New Zealand Curriculum* framework); 2) and the school culture into which students transition....Schools can support students to make successful transitions, by helping them to develop a sense of themselves; as competent and capable beings (pp.9-10)

In addition Jelly, Fuller and Byers (2000) indicate that there is clear evidence that consulting students about their learning enhances self-esteem and confidence, promotes stronger engagement and motivation to learn, and encourages students to become more active members of their school community.

The resources online for the New Zealand Curriculum (2010), encourages intermediate school leaders to work with their teachers in the development of this ‘school-specific’ curriculum. The New Zealand Curriculum anticipates that they co-construct expectations and understandings of the students in their schools; what works and does not work, in order to improve outcomes. This is further supported by Marzano, Pickering and Pollock (2001) who indicate that understanding the similarities and the differences between schools is fundamental to decision-making within the differing contexts. In New Zealand, schools are required by educational legislation, to consult with their communities about the directional decisions they make (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). Relationships between primary and intermediate schools must focus on developing cohesion and continuity through the transition process.



The New Zealand Curriculum, School Curriculum Online: Design and Review (2010) requires that schools provide continuous learning pathways; as students journey from early childhood through secondary school and, in many cases, onto tertiary training or tertiary education in one of its various forms, they should find that each stage of the journey prepares them for and connects well with the next. Furthermore the New Zealand Curriculum emphasises that building positive relationships with contributing primary principals supports community-wide understandings about transition between the educational communities. It goes on to say that as leaders get to know the students in their school, to understand their levels of achievement, their family backgrounds and expectations, what they have been exposed to, they will be better able to refine processes, systems and curriculum.

The need for schools within specific educational communities to work together to develop curriculum focus and consistency has been noted for at least twenty five years as indicated by Roderick and Camburn (1999, p.5). They recommended the following four strategies for the management of transition:

- a package of ideas for principals on how linkages could be established between themselves and the principals of transition schools;
- time to be made available to primary and secondary teachers to meet for curriculum co-ordination;
- organisational changes to advisory services and other agencies divided along primary or secondary lines; and
- research projects to look at linkage schemes and perceptions of students and school communities about transition. (p.19)

Improving the transition processes and ultimately the achievement outcomes for those students most at risk involves teachers examining the student achievement data. Timperley (cited in Limbrick, Kirton, Knight, McCaulay, Funaki, and Evans, 2004) suggests, "Practice is improved when teachers focus on student achievement, test the effectiveness of their teaching against student achievement data and modify their practice accordingly" (p.9). Hattie (2009) identifies that this analysis of effectiveness can only be investigated through

the gathering of students' achievement data. However there are risks associated with the increased focus on attainment and performance, particularly for adolescents.

Supporting student achievement, according to Givens Rolland (2012) is fundamentally supported by what teachers do with and for students in classes. Through a meta-synthesis of literature, Givens Rolland (2012) discovered that there is a difference in the affects between performance-based student achievement goals and those that focus on mastery, "Research has frequently related performance-orientated structures to negative outcomes, for example, cheating... avoidance of help-seeking" (p.410). She goes on to identify that "Pintrich found... that students having low mastery and high performance goals showed decreased in self-efficacy and other affective outcomes of and increases in self-handicapping over time" (pp. 410-411). She further suggests;

More recent research has found positive relationships with both mastery and performance approach structures and students' feelings of belonging (Walker, 2012), suggesting that performance avoidance goals may be in part responsible for the negative student outcomes previously found. (p.411)

The desire to develop 'relevant' curricula is also an international phenomenon, identified by Yates (2008) and has become one of the catch-words of education. It can however be applied by students to the curricula developed in their new Year 7 classes, "Issues might be seen as relevant as outsiders, but dismissed by students on the grounds that they were learning nothing they did not already know" (p.33).

Transition and student perceptions of the Year 7 curriculum, however are not all negative. Ganeson and Ehrich (2009) quote Giorgi (1985a) in a longitudinal study which indicated that: "transition yields more positive experiences for some students than negative" (p.62). Indeed, Yates (2008) identifies that student's voice excitement and anticipation at the prospect of having many teachers, lots of subjects and new areas of learning and ways of learning.

Nor did students talk as if the change to a new environment was negative; both prospectively (in the year 6 interviews) and retrospectively (in the second round of Year 7 interviews) they liked the idea of doing new subjects, of making new friends (p32)

These differences are linked to the maturation and milestones linked with the transition itself as identified by Yates (2008);

Year 7, probably more than any other stage of the school curriculum, represents an attempt to give students a broad range of subjects; to give students a taste of mental and manual, technical and humanities, languages and the arts, and personal (p.32)

Yates continues, “On the other hand, it reports the enthusiasm of students for many new subjects they do encounter in Year 7, particularly where they have a sense that they are learning new skills” (p.38).

### **CHALLENGES OF DIVERSITY**

Diversity, within these intermediate school contexts, predominates in the variety of ethnic backgrounds from which the students come. New Zealand has a wide immigrant population. Considerations of diversity should form the basis of the ways schools interact with their students and their communities (Riehl, 2000). The Race Relations Office (1988) identifies that the complexities for inner city schools are exacerbated by comparatively high numbers of immigrant families. This includes refugee families as well as ‘short term’ international students, “the movement towards multi-cultural politics and cultural involvement – namely the sharing of power and decision making among neighbourhood groups which compose a school’s catchment population is a curriculum in itself” (p.34).

The need for principals and school leaders to understand their community is, according to Robinson and Hohepa (2008), fundamental to establishing making decisions, developing beliefs and understandings and building successful systems and processes to support children transitioning between school settings within the community. They state that “When the community engages with the work of the school, the positive spin-offs invariably benefit both teaching and learning” (p.14). The issues that accompany the wide variety of cultural, ethnic and immigrant groups and the understandings they bring to the educational setting are particularly open to the concepts of transition and construction of a “sense of well-being in a new place” (Wyn & Dwyer, 2000). Developing an inclusive school culture that supports this sense of well-being for all students from these diverse contexts is fundamental to positively supporting transition.

The indigenous people, Maori, hold “specific and exclusive consideration as partners in our national founding document ‘The Treaty of Waitangi’” (Bishop, 2003). School leaders are required to consider and uphold the rights and needs of these people as a paramount consideration (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh & Terry, 2007). Schools in low-socio economic areas tend to have a higher representative proportion of Maori students. According to Thrupp (2006);

Despite the economic recovery, the proportion of children experiencing significant or severe hardship has increased from 18 to 26%. The children experiencing the worst decline in living standards over this time were mainly in families supported by benefits, with an over representation of Maori and Pasifika families (p.262)

‘Ka Hikitia - managing for success’ The Maori Educational Strategy (2008) provides school leaders and schools guidance on how to “support Maori students to enjoy success as Maori”.

McNaughton and Gluckman (2011) particularly identify the exaggerated negative effect and educational risks transition poses for Pacifica students. They go on to challenge schools and their leaders to consider how schools will “increase the effectiveness of their development at school; and policy options for increasing school effectiveness” (p.97). Schools in low socio-economic areas also tend to have higher proportions of Pacifica and new immigrant student populations. The Pacifica Education Plan (2009) also supports schools as they work with Pacifica students. The mid-term Review of the Pacifica Education Plan, 2009-2012 provides evidence regarding the risks to students from Pacifica backgrounds noting; “significant disparities remain evident in literacy and numeracy achievement for Pasifika students at age 10” (p.1). Transition between school settings is known to interrupt academic achievement. For low-achieving students, this interruption has even more serious implications.

It is evident that these disparities and difficulties during transition may not be related simply to culture or immigration status but more affected by socio economic status (SES) as identified by Bloyce and Frederickson (2012) who note:

It can be hard to separate the impact of ethnicity from SES (Anderson et al., 2000; West et al., 2010) Galton and Morrison (2000) found that children from certain

ethnic backgrounds encountered greater difficulties than average at transition, and Graham and Hill (2003) found that a disproportionately higher number of children from minority ethnic backgrounds found the transition experience negative or disappointing. (p.3)

Ethnic or cultural diversities are not the only considerations. School leaders, according to Tilleczek and Ferguson (2007), must remain mindful of *all* the various groups of students who face increased risk from transition from primary school for the following reasons:

It makes good sense for educators, policy makers, and researchers to focus on these cultural shifts, and the effects they have for different groups of students. All students find some difficulty in negotiating this tipping point along their journey. However, students most at-risk are those with multiple risk factors working at multiple levels since risk can tend to compound if unchecked. (p.2)

There is also strong evidence that emerging adolescence is the major factor for risk on transition, evidenced in various papers on this topic. McGee et al. (2003) also identifies that; “The decline in academic achievement has often been associated with the onset of adolescence” (p.3). In addition there are differences in the ways different gender groups approach the transition experience. However the research is inconclusive as noted by Bloyce and Frederickson (2012) who state that, “In relation to gender the research presents a mixed picture” (p.2). They go on to note that “Research by McGee et al., (2003) also suggested that at the time of transition girls’ attitudes towards their teachers and learning were different from those of boys” (p.3). This is further investigated by Ganeson and Ehrich (2008) who identified that, “Girls worried about being bullied by older and bigger students more than boys did, whereas boys found peer relationships, conflict with authority and academic pressures as equal stressors” (pp.63-64).

Internationally there are, without doubt, groups of students who are less likely to manage the transition as well as their peers. As indicated by Bloyce and Frederickson (2012) these children can be identified as having one or more risk factors, and the higher number of risk factors indicating higher probable levels of negative effects of transition. These negative effects are identified by Bru, Stornes, Munthe and Thuen (2010) in the following ways:

- ... the consensus from international research being that youth from lower socio economic status communities experience more transition problems (p.26)
- ... pupils of lower ability experience more transitional stress and anxiety than their more able peers (p.27)
- Low self-image or self-esteem which has been linked to low preparedness for transfer and subsequent poorer transitions (p.27)
- ... problem behaviour, disruptive or aggressive students having greater problems adjusting to junior high school (p.28)

Bloyce and Frederikson (2012) also note that early identification and higher levels of intervention, especially for those children most at risk, do indeed minimise the negative effects of the transition from one setting to another. Although pre-transition strategies are commonly employed in schools Bloyce and Frederickson (2012) show that a measureable affect is experienced after only six post-transition 'circle- time' intervention sessions. Intermediate school leaders are advised to develop systems that support early identification of high risk students and provide additional support for these students as they undertake the transition into their schools. The development of these systems is also fundamental to supporting effective transition.

## **SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT**

The Education Review Office: Transitions Report (2012) identifies six common attributes that students who effectively or successfully manage their transitions demonstrate and twelve things which students identify as supporting the transition process:

### **Understanding the features and importance of education transition**

1. preparing well for successful transitions
2. providing additional support for vulnerable students
3. using effective transition processes
4. introducing a curriculum that responds to the
5. diversity of the students
6. on-going monitoring and review of transition processes.

### **What do successful transitions look like for students?**

When a transition is successful, students feel that:

1. they belong in their new school, and are well included in school activities and programmes
2. they are positively connected to their peers, other students in the school, and to their teachers
3. their teachers know them, including their strengths, interests and learning needs, and show they are interested in them
4. their teachers understand the importance of their language, culture and identity
5. they have a sense of purpose in being at school
6. they have an understanding and commitment to their learning pathway through their schooling and beyond
7. they are making progress
8. their current learning follows on from their previous learning (the curriculum is connected and continuous) and is appropriately challenging
9. learning is interesting, relevant and fun
10. their families have been included in decisions
11. they are physically and emotionally safe
12. they have opportunities to try new, exciting things and/or extend their particular skills/ interests (e.g. through extra-curricular activities) (pp. 22 -23)

The report contains clear, researched-based strategies and implications for students, their families and the school. The report also provides support for school leaders, in both primary schools (as they prepare students for transition) and for intermediate school leaders as they prepare their teachers and their schools for their new students. This report is written specifically for the New Zealand educational context; for the principals, the teachers, the community and the students.

Blackmore and Blackwell (2006) suggest that leaders need to deeply understand the complexities of the concepts of difference and diversity in order to ensure equitable education for all students. The ways that school leaders work in their organisations reflects the ways leadership is defined (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001). It is accepted that this requires both leadership and follower-ship (Zhu, Avolio & Walumbwa, 2009). Robinson (2006) suggests that effective schools leaders motivate and work with their teachers and

that these leaders establish their own beliefs and understandings (Robinson, 2010). Therefore effective intermediate school leaders should do this to ensure effective transition in their own school setting and this is supported by Gronn (2003) who suggests that school leaders “establish, distribute and maintain responsibility” (p.11).

McGee (2004) suggests that messages regarding transition from all the schools and their leaders to students and their families should be positive, factual and non-emotive. Hawk and Hill (2004) have identified some strategies to support student transitions and recommend deliberate focus on continuity and cohesion of programmes, attitudes to student ability and expectation and school-specific curriculum. Bishop (2001) echoes this recommending that schools, which groups of students commonly transition between, should ensure they have positive and productive professional relationships that focus on cohesion in learning programmes and supporting students and families through the transition. Bishop (2001) also indicates that parents and families should be included in the transition processes and encouraged to visit and participate in shared events.

Furthermore Hertzog and Morgan (1998) suggest that students at risk should be identified and information shared between schools in order to support the student and their family through the transition. Hawk and Hill (2001) suggest that despite these understandings being held in common that “efforts to help students prepare and adjust to transition tend mostly to be behavioural, social and emotional rather than learning related” (p24). They go on to say that:

Teachers need to accept they have a responsibility to actively support students through a learning transition... to understand what is happening in their contributing/receiving school(s)... to provide support, through time allocations, for strategies to be trialled (p.26).

Data from the Ministry of Education’s website ‘Education Counts’ indicates that significant numbers of students in these low-decile schools have achievement levels lower than those in less diverse and more wealthy, higher decile communities. This is echoed by Gluckman (2010) who states that students from these ‘catchments’ are most at risk during transition and face a number of barriers that must be overcome in order to quickly engage them and



their families in their learning. This author signals that school leaders and their teaching teams have a moral imperative to particularly note and develop systems for students from these communities.

According to Leithwood (2005) effective leaders motivate and inspire their staff members and develop an imperative (Robinson, Irving & Eddey, 2012) inspiring their teachers to extraordinary commitment and performance (Southworth, 1993). Whereas Leithwood and Reihl (2003) state that effective leaders develop and espouse a shared vision that pulls together the school community to improve practices by every teacher in every classroom. This is supported by Harris (2010) and Spillane, Camburn, and Pareja (2009) who indicate that effective leaders need to establish collaborative accountability, by distributing and maintaining responsibility in cooperative communities.

The revised New Zealand Curriculum (2010) instructs school leaders to establish systems which ensure that teachers implement the required practices to ensure a continuous learning pathway for students. Furthermore leaders are required to ensure that teachers are provided with professional development and learning thus assuring the required knowledge and cohesion in applied practice (Education Workforce Advisory Group, 2010). Bishop (2008) suggests that this should be community-specific. While Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007), echo that school leaders need to ensure that teachers in their schools have the required knowledge and are empowered to implement best practices.

## **SUMMARY**

The literature reviewed indicates that schools, their leaders and teachers, must focus primarily on developing consistent beliefs and understandings about how best to support the children in their communities through the transition process. In addition leadership for transition is a critical factor in the development, and implementation of effective strategies. The literature indicates there are five significant areas in which these intermediate school leaders and Year 7 teachers should focus. These are as follows:

### **1) Decision making for transition – pre-transition, during transition and post-transition:**

The literature reviewed is clear that school leaders must make decisions based on their

beliefs and understandings they hold, regarding what is best for the children in their schools. In the context of transition this includes making decisions regarding personnel allocated to lead transition processes and to be the Year 7 teachers. It also includes decisions about student placement, documentation and systems. Most importantly decisions about the programmes for transition and the ways intermediate schools and Year 7 teachers will develop curricula which support continuous learning pathways.

- 2) **Systems development:** the literature is clear that intermediate school leaders must develop systems that are easily understood and managed by the communities in which intermediate schools are situated. These systems need to provide information about students, particularly those needing additional support. School systems and teachers' practices must reflect the communities in which they are situated.
- 3) **Influencing practices:** the literature identifies a range of strategies that support transitions. The literature is clear that research, theory and community specific understandings and beliefs must influence the practices of all intermediate school staff members, particularly the Year 7 teachers. The literature also strongly recommends that practices should also be influenced by those most affected by them; the students. In addition school specific beliefs and understandings must be clearly espoused by the school leaders responsible for transition. School leaders must also develop a school culture and imperative for continual improvement of transition processes in order to cater for the changing needs of their transitioning student cohorts and their diverse communities.
- 4) **Challenges of diversity:** The literature is clear that the students most adversely affected by any transitions, including those from one school setting to another, are those from inner-city, low socio-economic communities. In New Zealand, these communities also contain the highest numbers of Maori, Pacifica and new immigrant families. These communities are diverse and hold differing ethnicities, cultures, languages, religious beliefs, family structures and understandings about education and schooling. The literature strongly indicates that as school leaders and Year 7 teachers work to develop beliefs and understandings, systems and processes, curricula and work to support the transition process they must develop high quality relationships with students, families and community leaders in order to inform the improvement of the transition processes developed.

**5) Critical relationships:** The literature consistently identifies that the development of positive and supportive relationships particularly between the newly enrolled Year 7 students and their Year 7 teachers is fundamental to successful transition. It indicates that the development of positive student and teacher relationships begins prior to the transition and should be part of the planning regarding the ways intermediate schools support the transition process. The literature also identifies the development of positive relationships with parents and families as well as the local educational community (particularly contributing primary schools) as fundamental to the on-going academic success of students as they transition between school settings (especially from Year 6, primary school, to Year 7, intermediate school).

## **CONCLUSION**

In intermediate schools in New Zealand every year is begun with half of the student body being transitioned into the school at Year 7 and finishes each year with half being prepared to transition to secondary school to Year 9. The leaders and teachers in intermediate schools must understand the risks for vulnerable students that are exacerbated by transition. Based on these understandings and the beliefs school leaders have, as to how to support the students and minimise the increased risks, intermediate schools must develop systems and strategies to manage the transition processes. The Education Review Office in its report on 'Transitions' (2012) states that this process;

Involves leaders working with staff to decide on, and implement practices that support students when they come into the school, *and* as they move through the school. To increase the likelihood that policies and practices serve students well, they should be developed, and reviewed, with appropriate input from those most affected by the transition process –students and their parents. (p.11)

School leaders must make decisions regarding the best strategies to use to support students and minimise the risks in their school. These principals and school leaders must understand their school community and context. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) indicate that, "Principals must respond to increasing diversity in student characteristics, including cultural background and immigration status, income disparities and physical and mental disabilities and variation in learning capacities" (p.1).

It is evident that transition of students into an intermediate school is better facilitated by a staff member who is an identifiable 'transition coordinator' who liaises with primary schools, parents, students and their teachers to ensure communication and systems are clear. However the pivotal relationships in the support of students as they transition into a new school setting are those that students have with their new teachers.

As identified by Coffey (2008), "Teachers are pivotal in helping students settle into their new environment" (p.267) Teachers must be kind, caring and supportive; smoothing the way for students (and their parents) to understand the new rules and expectations. In addition they must develop classes that provide student's opportunities to develop friendships and encourage their students to participate in extracurricular activities as this assists students to make new peer relationships. In addition teachers must set realistic expectations for learning, based on mastery goals, and provide praise and high quality feedback. They themselves must be skilled and knowledgeable in their subject areas and yet establish classroom autonomy and facilitate students to provide input into what the students learn and how they learn it. (Coffey, 2013; Yates, 2008; Givens Rolland, 2012; Ganeson & Erich, 2008; West, Sweeting & Young, 2010).

This review of literature confirmed the relevance of the three research questions that focus on the beliefs and understandings of school leaders and teachers, the challenges they identify during transition and the strategies they develop for transition within their respective schools.

## **Chapter Three**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter begins with the rationale for choosing a qualitative approach for this research project regarding the challenges faced by three intermediate school leaders as they transition students from Year 6 primary school to Year 7 intermediate school. The two data collection methods, interviews and focus groups, are discussed in relation to relevant literature. The key issues associated with sample selection are explained and strategies for data analysis are identified and discussed. Triangulation in terms of reliability and validity is discussed within the context of the methods selected. Lastly, ethical issues are considered in regard to the cultural contexts of the three specific schools involved in this research.

#### **OVERVIEW**

New Zealand schools are self-managing and autonomous and, via the National Curriculum (2010), are encouraged to provide an adapted curriculum that is school-specific; “Schools can design their curriculum so that students find the transitions positive and have a clear sense of continuity and direction” (p.37). According to Timperley (2006) schools must aim to put educational theory into action. She concurs with Bishop (2001) who indicates this must also include developing positive relationships with students and their families and work towards ‘cohesion’ of programmes that support continuous learning.

The ‘fundamental phenomena’ as defined by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007, p.39) within this investigation is the development of cohesion between settings, consultation with the school community and understanding of the needs and expectations of the students and their families. This consultation provides intermediate school leaders’ with an imperative to establish a variety of processes; for the consultation, the required communication for developing understandings, for making decisions and for working with their Year 7 teachers in order to support effective transitions between the local primary schools and their intermediate school setting.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Rationale**

According to Davidson and Tolich (2003) the methodological approach to be adopted by any research project must, reflect the epistemological and ontological understandings that underpin the context for the research. This research fits within the discipline of social research as defined by Cohen et.al, (2007) and investigates the knowledge and assumptions held by intermediate school leaders and their respective communication to the Year 7 teachers in their schools.

This research is situated within a social paradigm, as defined by Bryman (2008) who indicates the corresponding required techniques supporting such investigations must also be constructivist and based on postmodern methodology. In addition it tends towards that of a 'deductive study' as defined in Bryman (2008) due to the lack of literature regarding effective strategies for transition for students belonging to the communities described by Gluckman (2010). Bryman (2008) suggests that within qualitative research "the emphasis is placed on the generation of theories" (p.22) that is by nature, hypothesis free. A qualitative methodology has been adopted for this project due to the identified gap in the literature about transition, as identified by McGhee et.al., (2004).

An 'interpretative' stance was considered more appropriate for this research project within a social scientific framework (Bryman, 2008). This was in order to investigate the understandings and beliefs espoused by the intermediate school leaders and the leader-teacher shared and co-constructed understandings and processes. Therefore in accordance with Davidson and Tolich (2003) this research took an 'interpretative approach' wherein findings are constructed with school leaders as they worked in their schools.

### **RESEARCH METHODS**

This project fell within the area of qualitative research because it centred on the subjective perspectives of school leaders and teachers. Due to the lack of researched information available to intermediate school leaders regarding effective transition, Mertens (1998) indicates that this requires a choice of methods which are 'socially constructed'. This is echoed by Creswell (2003) who notes the need to allow the information to emerge from the

participants of the project. Bryman (2008) describes the process whereby the researcher and the interviewee engaged in co-constructing the understandings as the 'semi-formal interview'.

The researcher conducted semi-formal interviews with intermediate school leaders and then repeated the interview process in a focus group in two schools with the Year 7 teachers of newly enrolled Year 7 students. A project within this type of bounded context is described by Merriam (1998) as, "An inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within a real life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident" (p.27).

The interview and data gathering process related to 'the interview' as defined by Bryman (2008) was chosen as an investigation into the constructivist approach school leaders and teachers used with the stakeholders (students, their families and the school community) as they established, reviewed and maintained the processes and systems to support transition into their respective schools. This research, throughout the interviews, further considered the relationships that the intermediate school had with contributing primary schools, with the families represented in those diverse communities and the students themselves.

This research investigated the relationship between what the interviewed intermediate school leaders believed, understood and espoused as good practice in regards to the transition of the Year 6 primary students into their schools to Year 7 and what the Year 7 teachers from their schools knew and did to minimise the negative effects of that transition.

## **SAMPLE SELECTION**

### **School selection**

The selection of three intermediate schools to participate in this study was manageable within the expectations of this Master's thesis. This research entailed interviewing school leaders, conducting focus group interviews, transcribing, annotating and collating the qualitative data and reviewing documentation supporting transition in the three schools.

This research limited investigations to three 'medium sized' intermediate schools (with a student roll of 250-500), in low socio-economic urban areas. All of these schools had a higher than New Zealand average of Maori, Pacifica, and new immigrant student populations; identified by Gluckman (2010) as being most at risk from the adverse effects of transition. It was limited to medium sized intermediate schools in order to more consistently investigate what steps these particular school leaders used to establish, distribute and maintain responsibility for effective transition practices.

### **Interview Sample**

The researcher approached a collective group of intermediate school principals in one region in Auckland. From that meeting, interest was expressed and those principals were contacted individually. Three of the principals met with the researcher to discuss the scope and form of this research project. From that meeting a written letter of invitation was sent, along with the outline of the research (Appendix A), the ethics approval and the invitations for the school leaders (Appendix B) and the teachers (Appendix C) to participate in the interviews and focus groups. The major participants in the leader interviews were three school leaders who were identified as being responsible for transition into Year 7 within those schools.

### **Focus Group Sample**

The selection of the teachers for the Focus Group interviews was on a 'self-selection' basis. The principals were provided with information packs and letters of invitation for the teachers of Year 7 classes. The teachers, who completed and returned the consent forms and volunteered to participate, were contacted, prior to the focus group interviews, and individual confirmation of participation was made. The school leaders and Year 7 teachers were asked to complete individual consent forms in order to participate.

The focus group interviews (45-60 minutes) with teachers took place at the beginning of 2013, as they settled new students into their classes and into their schools. A total of nine Year 7 teachers who this year worked with newly enrolled students attended the two focus group interviews. The principal of School C was interviewed but teachers from that school were unable to participate in a focus group interview.



## **Semi-Formal Interviews**

The most appropriate methods were therefore those where information gathering was conducted using constructivist paradigms in accordance with Bryman (2008) who describes the process as allowing theories to be generated from the research rather than testing preconceived theories. The specific methodology adopted *interview methods* as defined in Fontana and Frey (2005), "Interviewing is not merely the neutral exchange of asking questions and getting answers. Two (or more) people, are involved in this process and their exchanges lead to the creation of a collaborative effort called *the interview*" (p.696).

A semi-formal interview technique is best used, according to Bryman (2008), with some set questions to collect some qualitative data and others set in order to gain a deeper understanding. In these interviews Bryman (2008) recommends the whole interview be transcribed for analysis. Scheurich (1995) further suggests that the "paradigms surrounding the interview are not an exact science and are vastly complex" (p.241). They were reliant on the personality, individual abilities, even school history and leaders' experiences.

The semi-formal interview was selected as an appropriate method for this research and was used to gather specific data on four defined areas. This technique was developed with some set questions to collect some qualitative data and others developed, indeed co-constructed during the interview, in order to gain a deeper understanding. In these interviews the whole interview was transcribed for analysis. The research aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the beliefs and understanding you hold regarding effective primary student transitions in your educational community?
2. What challenges do you identify as the school leader for primary students transitioning into your school?
3. What strategies have been developed in your school to minimise transition challenges for Year 6 students transitioning into your school at Year 7?

The interviews with the school leaders took place in November and December 2012. Data collected from these interviews was transcribed and transcripts of each of the school leader's interviews were made available to the respective principals for verification. Once

verified the transcripts were numerically coded according to common themes and those relating to the literature. An analysis was undertaken, by the researcher, using a thematic approach to identify common themes or issues. This data was used to understand the challenges leaders faced as they transitioned primary students into their intermediate schools. It also identified the understandings and beliefs that these leaders held as they implemented strategies around transition for the students in their school communities.

The principals were provided with the questions prior to their interviews. The interviews transcribed, data coded and reviewed prior to confirming interview times with the Year 7 focus groups from the corresponding schools. The teachers were also provided with the questions prior to the interviews and they were conducted at a place and time that suited the participants and supported an effective collection of data.

### **Focus Groups**

The previously described semi-formal interview method was used in order to investigate what school leaders understood and did to minimise the effect of interruption caused by transition. A complementary method was needed to elicit data from the teachers working in the same schools. The teachers were not the primary participants in this research but rather contributed, through the data collected from them, to 'triangulation', as understood within the post-positivist paradigm as defined by Bryman (2008).

This research chose to extend the interview methodology used for the school leaders, to include a second method of semi-formal structured *focus group interviews* as defined in Hinds (2000 p.49). According to Fontana and Frey (2005) the focus group interview is; "Essentially, a qualitative data-gathering technique that relies on systematic questioning of several individuals simultaneously in a formal or informal setting" (p.703).

This method facilitated ideas and theories generated by a school leader to be examined, developed and confirmed by teacher groups from the same school. Whilst the advantages of this method included efficiency of time and effort it also provided challenges in recording the voices of many participants simultaneously. The data collection required skilled and

focussed facilitation of the interview and management of the group. Analysis of the responses and reporting of the collected data was also problematic and needed careful management and considerations of many facets, including ethical considerations. Therefore planning needed to be exact and thorough in order to ensure the ethical and validity requirements.

Year 7 teachers were invited by their principals to participate and then details were given to the researcher. The principals arranged a time when they were all free, or released them to attend the interview. At no time were they under any duress to be involved. Findings from the school leader interviews were reviewed prior to undertaking the teacher focus group interviews. The information uncovered necessitated some minor changes to the interview questions prepared for the respective teacher groups.

It was important that the focus group interviews with the teachers were completed as early in the year as possible so that the data collected reflected the actual and current practice for the students' teachers who were in the processes of inducting. It was also important to ensure that confidentiality was maintained for both the school leader and the teachers involved in the interviewing processes. One school chose not to have teachers participate in the focus group interviews and in another school, one teacher withdrew from the focus group.

### **Supporting Documentation**

The schools offered to provide documentation that related to their transition processes. They made available to the researcher documentation including brochures, enrolment packs and prospectuses. This was useful in supporting the findings from the study.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

The researcher transcribed the data collected from the school leader interviews and the teacher focus groups interviews. The transcripts were made available to all of the participants to check and correct, if necessary, to ensure accuracy and validity of the transcripts.

The transcripts were analysed and re-occurring themes were numerically and colour-coded (Bryman, 2008) to identify the issues and concerns in regards to the transition process. The qualitative data from both the interviews and the focus groups was also cross-referenced with supporting documentation provided by the selected schools.

## **VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY**

Cohen et.al, (2007) indicate that it is important in the construction of any research methodology based on 'social reality' to ensure that assumptions are not made prior to investigation. They caution that other paradigms may arise that may be identified through the differences, between understandings and beliefs and which can be related specifically to definite groups. They further indicate that within a post-positivist research model the need is to replace the notion of 'validity' with that of 'authenticity'. This research falls within the 'social reality' paradigm described by Cohen et.al, (2007) therefore case validity is attached to the accounts, rather than to the data or methods, "It is the meaning that subjects give to the data and inferences drawn from the data that are important" (p.134).

### **Reliability**

Cohen et.al, (2007) notes a research project's strength is founded on the cornerstones of reliability and validity. The reliability is developed with the assurance that results from one setting can be replicated in another. The methodology must ensure that results are credible and dependable. Ensuring reliability required an establishment of consistency across the three settings in which this research project was conducted. A generalised consistency was also provided between the three school leader interviews and those of the two Year 7 teacher focus group interviews through the organisation of the various interviews, the consistent questioning and the similar school contexts. This assured meaningful and comparable data. Davidson and Tollich (2003) define this accordingly, "A measure is 'reliable' if it produces the same results when repeated at a different time, in a different place, even when used by other researchers" (p.32).

The data collected from the interviews was reviewed throughout the research process and used to test and retest perceptions and assumptions. Data collected from the school leaders was used as the basis for the questions for the teachers and for cross-checking for the

analysis of transcribed data and the documentation. The same four questions formed the basis of all the semi-formal interviews with the school leaders. These same questions again, with minor adjustments based on the information collected from the school leader interviews within specific school settings, were used for the focus group interviews with the Year 7 teachers.

### **Validity**

The selection of schools in which to conduct this research project was a primary consideration. The researcher invited the school leaders in schools that catered for communities where students are most at risk. It was therefore important to select schools located in lower socio-economic community with high numbers of Maori, Pacifica and immigrant students.

The next consideration was to identify the school leader who was to take part in the research interview. In the schools where the research was conducted, two of the principals identified themselves as being the pivotal person whilst in another the principal deferred to another senior leader, an Associate Principal, who had delegated responsibilities to work across the school and between settings to support transition.

It was important to check this as those principals who saw themselves as the pivotal person were knowledgeable about how the systems for transition worked, whereas the one principal who deferred to another allowed that person to lead and described themselves as a 'follower'. The defining of the person 'responsible for transition' was fundamental to ensuring the validity of the school leader interviews. Further validation was assured by the voluntary nature for participation and the opportunity for interviewees to check their transcripts. Additions and deletions were easily accommodated. Finally was the selection of the Year 7 teachers who wanted to be involved; who were supported by their principal to be released, allocated a place to meet and were not disadvantaged by being involved.

Validity was also increased by the researcher typing the transcripts. [The researcher understood who was speaking and the intent of the conversation]. The teachers were happy

to provide further information to clarify inconsistencies. The provision of the supporting documentation from the three schools enabled the researcher to triangulate the findings.

The documentation provided included enrolment packs, prospectus and information given to primary schools and parents wanting to enrol their year six students for the following year to the intermediate school. It was considered alongside the findings of the interviews with school leaders and teacher focus groups and uncovered only supporting information with no conflicts being highlighted.

This project focused on working with principals and school leaders as they examined, through the vehicle of this research project, their understandings and knowledge regarding the risks and the interruptions posed by the transition of students from Year 6 primary school into their intermediate schools at Year 7.

[The researcher has experience and knowledge, as a principal of an intermediate school, within the research area and needed at all times to set aside her own thoughts and feelings regarding this investigation.]

### **Triangulation**

Due to this being a qualitative research project it did not seek to generalise findings across the whole population (Denzin, 1982) or even across intermediate schools per se. The focus, in ensuring validity and reliability, was to triangulate data (Hill et.al., 1997). This triangulation was achieved through consistency of questions between the school leader interviews and the Year 7 focus group interviews and the resulting comparative data collected.

Triangulation of method was achieved by using three types of data collection: school leader interviews, focus group interviews and the provision of supporting school documentation. The school leader interviews, transcription and analysis of the data collected, was undertaken before the teacher focus group interviews. This provided information to inform and review the focus group questions. The data was gathered, transcribed and analysed from the focus group interviews and cross referenced with the school leader interviews.

Finally with all the data collected, analysed and referenced the school documentation was used to cross-check the findings.

### **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

This research was designed to uncover the beliefs, understandings and assumptions held by school leaders and how they are enacted in their schools. In establishing the ethical considerations the researcher considered the wellbeing of the participants; the good name of the schools participating in this research, school leaders involved in the research, the teachers who implement decisions and particularly the students affected by transition practices used in these schools. According to Wilkinson (2001), a researcher, “Cannot justify imposing burdens on subjects simply by appealing either to gains to others or to the service of some abstract goal, like the promotion of knowledge” (p.14).

The investigative processes needed to be sufficiently flexible to be able to adjust to the possibility of various cultural and ethical considerations, divergent ways of sharing, collecting and constructing understandings. In order for this to happen, the researcher needed to ensure that participants provided what Wilkinson (2001) referred to as ‘informed consent’. This maintenance of balance needed to take into consideration aspects of research validity and reliability as defined by Bryman (2008).

There was a limited selection pool and as most intermediate principals attend professional support meetings and professional development together it was very likely that these principals knew each other well. Further to this, the researcher is a practising intermediate school principal in a different geographic location. It was essential that the researcher made all efforts to ensure that professional relationships were maintained. A conscious effort was also made to ensure that the selection and acceptance of involvement in this research project remained confidential.

This need to maintain confidentiality was also extended to the teachers invited to participate. Principals were provided with all the relevant information about this research project and were asked to share that with their Boards of Trustees and teachers. Principals were approached in person and provided with a letter describing the research and inviting

them to participate. They were provided with an information sheet and a consent form that they passed on to the Year 7 teachers in their schools regarding participation in the focus group interviews.

No participant was recruited under duress, or pressure of any sort. Participation was completely voluntary and participants were informed in writing of their role in this research and the use that will be made of their information and data. Information sheets were distributed and consent forms collected for any people contributing to the interviews (principals and teachers). This form described the interview and focus group process and the process for collection and checking of information and data. Participants were advised of their right to withdraw from the research project at any stage up until the analysis began. Participants were advised of their rights to review the information gathered throughout the interview process. They were also invited to check the transcripts and make additions or corrections if that was required and this was done within a 'reasonable' limited two week period. They were advised that after this time their information and data would be used in the research. It was made clear to all participants that the researcher is not the owner of the data, merely the custodian and that all narratives will be closely guarded. No inducements were made to participants other than the fact that their data may help to facilitate better resourcing provision and assist in decision-making regarding enrolment and transition decisions in their own schools. No attempts were made to convince or coerce principals or teachers to participate.

Throughout the process care was taken to ensure that specific schools or individuals are not able to be identified. No names, of schools or participants are specifically mentioned in the research results or collated data. Whilst locations are limited to a specific area all efforts have been made to ensure that confidentiality is maintained and identifiable information is minimised. The use of pseudonyms for individuals and schools as well as the opportunity for participants to withdraw has been maintained. The only people who had access to the transcripts and data were the researcher and the supervisor.



This information and data is stored in a secure storage place and will be kept for five years. Electronic data and transcripts have been stored on a private password secured computer and are not accessible to anyone else and will be deleted after five years.

The researcher made an effort to ensure no harm could be caused through negative perceptions, loss of 'face' and emotional harm due to the protection of identification not being adequately addressed. It has remained of great importance that rigour in confidentiality is maintained to ensure protection for all participants and participating schools. Initial meetings with school leaders and teachers the discussion centred on 'confidentiality' and how that was to be maintained throughout the data collection, analysis and presentation of findings in this research project.

The respectful research-based relationships between the researcher and the participants (both school leaders and teachers) were fundamental to the success of the data gathering process, the maintenance of confidentiality and the assurance of validity and rigour. It was vital that the participants were able to exert their rights and have open communication with them in every step of the data gathering process. They were given the researchers contact details and encouraged to question, add and comment on the information and data as it was gathered and processed and indeed some did do this.

It was important to maintain openness to an investigation of the different perspectives that arose from the information gathered from the various interviews. There was also a need to remain sensitive to culturally appropriate processes throughout the interview and discussion, data review and confirmation processes. This area was one of the most likely areas of the research where misunderstandings may have arisen and care and sensitivity throughout the research project needed to be kept to the fore. Ensuring that there was no perception of 'conflict' between the school leaders and the teacher participants due to the interview processes, the collected data and information gathered was also another area of vigilance.

## **CATERING FOR DIVERSITY**

Ensuring cultural validity considerations according to Cohen et.al, (2007), takes into consideration the various school contexts, the participants in the interview processes. They emphasise that assurance of appropriate questions and interview methods; data management should be developed in accordance with the cultural understandings of that group and individual participants.

### **Considerations for Maori**

Maori participation was a dimension of this research but did not emerge as one of the major areas of focus. Bishop (2001) indicates that this has specific considerations in any research context in New Zealand. Prior to undertaking this research the researcher met with local kaumatua who work in the communities from which the schools were selected, to discuss various considerations and the necessary protocol to follow.

### **Considerations for Pacifica and other immigrant groups**

The advice of a variety of cultural and ethnic group leaders was also sought prior to this research being undertaken. The researcher met with Pacifica representatives within the school community and their collective advice was:

- to treat each group separately
- to ensure that no one strategy or understanding was attributed generally but rather as working for the groups specified
- to consider that 'at risk' students should not by necessity be identified by cultural groupings as there are other factors that must also be investigated

Care was taken to ensure that information and data is presented in a respectful way (from individuals, schools and different groups), acknowledging intellectual or cultural property, as requested. Care was also taken in order to ensure no group was identified in a way that could be perceived as negative.

It was important, throughout this research process to minimise the possibilities of negative perceptions, loss of 'face' and emotional harm. The rigour in confidentiality was maintained to ensure protection for all participants and participating schools.

The researcher also considered the benefit arising from the research findings. The hope is that the research findings will inform principals and teachers towards improving and strengthening productive strategies for transition and ultimately it is the students who benefit. The researcher will now consider the findings from the research in the following chapter.

## Chapter Four

### FINDINGS

*One of the things that we want to get into, as quickly as possible, is the actual learning and the grouping of students and accurate data is a challenge at the start.*

(Teacher comment)

#### INTRODUCTION

The schools involved in this research project were all 'medium sized' (between 250 -550 students) catering for low socio-economic, inner-city communities. Whilst they had similar contexts, the schools each employ a range of strategies based on a variety of understandings to support the transition of the Year 6 students transitioning into their schools. The interviews in these schools were initially with 'the school leaders responsible for transition' and in one school the Principal delegated the interview to the Associate Principal. The three schools are listed as 1, 2 and 3. The corresponding notations refer to either the Principal (P) or Associate Principal (AP) who were interviewed.

The school leaders were interviewed individually in the last term of 2012 in order to investigate their beliefs prior to the new students actually starting in their schools. The teachers of newly enrolled Year 7 students, on the other hand, were interviewed in Focus Groups, at the end of Term 1 or the start of Term 2, just after they settled students into their schools. There were three Focus Group Interviews with eleven teachers, in total, being interviewed.

These two sets of interviews focused on the same four questions, designed to elicit school-specific information about transition from Year 6 to Year 7 in these low socio-economic inner-city intermediate schools. The research centred on three key research questions:

- What are the beliefs and understanding you hold regarding effective primary student transitions in your educational community?
- What challenges do you identify, as the school leader, as primary students transition into your school?

- What strategies have been developed in your school to minimise challenges for Year 6 students transitioning into your school at Year 7?

The contextual information about the schools involved in this research has not been added to this chapter in order to protect the identity of the participating schools within a very small community of Auckland intermediate schools.

These findings are now presented under the following headings to show the challenges for these school leaders as they develop strategies to minimise the negative effects of transition;

- 1) Decision making
- 2) Systems development
- 3) Influencing practices
- 4) Challenges of diversity
- 5) Critical relationships

There were some immediately identified differences between the schools. Some of the Principals identified themselves as the leaders responsible for transition and one deferred to an Associate Principal as the leader in their school in the area of 'Transitions'. Another of the differences was that two of the schools were managing leadership changes and the other school had a well-established processes and an experienced leadership team.

## **FINDINGS**

The interview of the school leaders was to investigate the beliefs and understanding around effective transition and to examine the links between what the leaders believe and understand and what is enacted and shared by the teachers in their schools. It sought to uncover the impact and effectiveness of systems used; the shared beliefs and understandings between the school leaders and staff and the methods and successes of relationship-building with students and their families. It particularly sought to investigate any proven strategies that diminish the interruption to learning caused by the transition. All principals were able to clearly state what their foundational belief was in the establishment of any systems or processes;

*I just try and make people feel good because it's not really what happens in the place, it's how people feel at the end of the day that counts... also to have clear expectations is really important. So in this school... we have clear expectations... of what we expect of our children... and of our teachers and it is all set out in writing. (P2)*

This fundamental basis of belief was also apparent from all of the Year 7 teachers who indicated that the most important considerations were initially about safety, security and meeting basic emotional needs of the students. They agreed that the initial actions they take are mainly to do with establishing familiarity with the new school environment and the people therein. In addition, all of the teachers agreed that the challenge of addressing the interruption to learning, from the transition between settings, is difficult to overcome.

*... they have six years within the same environment and they have become familiar with the set routines and the expectations of the primaries – which are still obviously high, but it's just that it's a complete new environment and its getting them used to it and to settle into that. ... I think the big shift is coming into the new environment. (T7)*

The School Leader and Teacher interviews followed the same basic formats and were recorded with the recordings then transcribed. The data collected through the School Leader interviews and the Teacher Focus Group Interviews was analysed into the six categories defined earlier.

## **BELIEFS AND SHARED UNDERSTANDINGS**

### **The school leaders' perspectives**

All three of the intermediate school leaders interviewed had well-established beliefs about what makes for 'effective transition'. All identified systems within their schools that upheld and supported those beliefs. These systems were based on personal and shared understandings and experiences about what made for effective transition within their communities. These intermediate school leaders spent a considerable amount of time developing the systems with their teachers and communities, reflecting on them, updating the information held within them and reviewing them each year. These systems also reflected these school leaders beliefs about 'the purpose of intermediate schools' and there was noticeable differences between the actions of the teachers in schools where school

leaders articulated clear 'secondary' focus' and those schools where leaders articulated more of a paradigm indicating a 'primary school focus'.

*What I think we need to do to is prepare children for secondary school... Intermediate was the best years of my school life and I just find it so exciting. I also have the belief that Year 7 and 8 students are too young to have the junior high school model. They need a homeroom teacher and go to specialists so that they have a gradual increase in the number of teachers that they have but they still have, while they are here, a teacher looking after them. (P2)*

These leaders understood the need to minimise the academic interruption that the students from their communities faced on transition into their school. They worked within their schools to develop systems to try to minimise and address that interruption. In all three schools the systems used had the following similarities:

- a) they provided extensive and specifically tailored enrolment information to the parents and school community
- b) they collected achievement data from local primary schools
- c) they met with people in the contributing schools to identify students who needed extra help
- d) They used the data collected to inform class make up and organisation for the incoming student cohort
- e) they shared the information with teachers

These systems, although similar, did differ from school to school and needed each year to be checked and reviewed. All leaders talked about this on-going need to 'check and review' due to a continual sense that the process 'could be better'. There was shared a sense of frustration, urgency and even of judgement and external pressure to somehow 'make it right', to fix the problems and eliminate the interruption and risk for the students. School leaders wanted to do everything they could to support students, their parents, teachers and other staff members to improve their practices and reflected on the successes of the transitions in their schools. The school leaders interviewed clearly identified that it was not just about 'academic achievement' but also about 'engagement', behaviour, socialisation and building friendships, communication with whanau and community involvement in their

schools. Their processes for review of the systems they used were extensive and complex and all focused on the desire to have no interruption to learning at all:

*...not spending half a term getting to know the kids, getting them warmed up, so they can speak. We would like to hit the ground running... Surveying, questioning, the kids, talking with them, having the student counsellors' feedback about their experiences, school leaders and so on and simple conversations with the kids as you're walking around the playground...the lack of disciplinary things that occur. Often that's one of the best indicators that our kids are engaged. (P3)*

One of the challenges identified by two of the intermediate school leaders was the lack of information, training and support they had in regards to 'transition'. They noted that 'leadership training for transition' is not commonly a formal process in New Zealand and that most had learned about it 'on the job' or informally, with colleagues, teachers, students and their communities.

*I did a paper on transition in England [20 years ago] while I was in the middle school and the kids from my middle school went to one high school that was it! (P1)*

*... that was the first PD.... I've been doing this job for 6-7 years now.... It was 2 maybe 3 years ago...As a result of that PD I added more into the processes. Not major things because we haven't got time to do 'major'...Apart from that PD there has not really been anything else. I've done a little bit of reading around it, but No! You do it and you hope to be doing it right. (AP1)*

These two leaders also believed that the enrolment and induction processes and systems are completely different in each intermediate school.

It is worth noting that none of the leaders mentioned any recent publications or Ministry of Education information about transition and resource materials they provide supporting transition. It was evident that the leaders worked within their own paradigms of experience and understanding and 'do the best they can' with little or no real support or guidance. These school leaders did not generally base their decision-making on specific theory, literature or publicised effective methodology. None of them mentioned the Education



Review Office National Report on Transition that had been delivered to schools the year prior to this research taking place.

*[if learning about transition in a new school]...I would have to talk very, very fully with the person who was responsible for transition and perhaps observe...I would need to do some talking to the people at the contributing schools who have had experience on what had happened before to find out. I would ask what information has been collected in the past, how it [was] collected. I would ask about the needs of this particular community of children. What they need to feel comfortable and safe about their transition. I would ask 'what does the parent need and how was that supported prior to my being here?' and perhaps talk about the successes and what needed to be improved and get some ideas from them... (AP1)*

After analysing the intermediate school leaders' interview data this was then compared to the teacher focus group interview data in order to identify consistent and contrasting findings between the two data sets.

### **The teachers' perspectives**

When considering the systems and process for transition used in their schools it was apparent that all the teachers interviewed had generally focussed on the organisation for the initial days and weeks as they settled students into their school. In School 2, where the principal had articulated his own beliefs about the 'purposes for intermediate schools', those teachers reflected their leaders' beliefs, particularly in regards to the need for an intermediate 'interruption' from a 'primary paradigm' in preparation for that of a 'secondary paradigm'. All teachers mentioned the need for 'homerooms' and a more 'primary focussed' organisation in their schools as they believed this better supported the students from their communities in the transition process.

*We are a 'bridge' to secondary, we don't quite have the 'soft touch' that a primary school has nor the 'cold hard facts' of a secondary school. We are somewhere in between hopefully bridging them so that they are competent by the time that they reach year 9. (T8)*

The same teachers identified also the 'points of differences' between primary school and intermediate school pedagogy as a starting point for their own transition decision-making in

their classes. They had previously identified the 'new or increased expectations' but when pressed about this they went on to include significant differences in curriculum and curriculum delivery at the intermediate level. These identified differences included an increased demand to provide a range of Technology teaching and learning options, Careers, Health and Languages etc. All of which are relatively new demands on intermediate schools and their teachers in respect to curriculum development. The teachers felt a responsibility to provide the increased curriculum demands 'because that is what is exciting about intermediate school' as well as helping their students to be successful in trying new things within a new environment.

*...I certainly look to... think of those things that will be different for [the students] for example the Tech and the fact that they have to move to other classrooms for their Technology and so it's important that you take some steps to know that they are secure and confident in what they have to do in those situations... (T5)*

When considering the strategies that supported transition for students this year, some teachers mentioned some national educational initiatives such as 'Positive Behaviour for Learning'. These projects provided definable links and commonalities between schools. This project in particular, explicitly taught expectations and provided students with knowledge about their new school. It also gave the intermediate school teachers some assurance that their new students had some consistent behaviour management processes in their primary schools that would be familiar in their new school. The 'language' with the project, although it may have been different, was similar enough for students to have been able to transfer knowledge about behaviour and behavioural expectations from the primary setting to that of their new intermediate school.

*... as well as having clear expectations with our behaviour management plans ... with our 'Positive Behaviour for Learning' training... one of the things it talks about is explicitly teaching the students the expectations and what that looks like, so there's no 'guess work' and they become familiar with what is and what isn't allowed in terms of behaviour and work. So they know where they stand and how to work and what to work towards... (T8)*

It is significant that all of the teachers, like their leaders, made considerable efforts to reflect on the successes of the transition systems. They understood that the best feedback on what does and does not work comes from those people most affected by the strategies used – the students. They wanted students to be able to influence their practices in order to make transitions more effective. They asked students, as they were undergoing transition and as they settled into their classes, and made adjustments on the spot.

The teachers from School 2 asked Year 9 students (who had left their school) for feedback on how the school could better manage the transitions in and out of their intermediate school and how well prepared they were for secondary school. Furthermore they asked their local primary schools about what had been reported to them by ex-pupils and their families about what the intermediate schools and their teachers could do better. It was apparent that there was a sense of frustration. This frustration seemed to centre on the fact that communication was sought by the intermediate school but both primary and secondary schools seemed to lay all the responsibility for effective transition with the intermediate school. All of the teachers said they were very willing to adjust their practices to become more effective in the area of supporting transition.

*What [the students] liked and what they didn't like... things like name games, like going around and making a million lists and descriptions of themselves or other students... they don't enjoy that stuff... so its feedback from the students... We contact [the local] College as well, trying to figure out, with our students who have been there a year by asking them to tell us what they wish we had done so they would have been more successful at College. We are also starting to do that with some of our primaries so when they ask their old students what they could have done... I think that communication needs to go in both directions and I think that in some ways we are struggling to do that here (T7)*

All of the Year 7 teachers understood that they needed support to learn strategies to improve transition and to settle their new students. They did not identify any ways they could formally get that support (i.e. none mentioned reading, courses, or professional development opportunities). Some identified some well-established systems within some schools that promoted consistency in practice for effective transitions.

*That's where our syndicate meetings come in handy because that's the time for sharing; where you discuss things. You might suggest 'This works really well in my classroom' (T6)*

All of these teachers closely reflected their leaders' comments regarding the lack of actual specific training and professional development about and promoting strategies for effective transition.

All of them agreed that no formal professional development had been provided by their schools or any other agencies. The systems they used in their own classes had been developed through personal experience and on-going development of beliefs and understanding's regarding 'effective transition'.

*For someone like me who's been teaching for 36 years and always in low decile schools I think I have learned a great deal along the way ... learned a huge amount from being at that school and it's really helped me, having moved myself, to an intermediate school it was really one of the most important teaching experiences of my career. It taught me so much about what you need to do to make children feel at ease and be part of the establishment you are in. (T2)*

This was particularly a challenge for newly appointed and beginning teachers who relied heavily on the guidance of senior and mentor teachers, who in turn had gathered their information 'on the job' rather than through tested research, reading or professional development. It was apparent from the following comments about how teachers came to the beliefs and understandings about effective transitions that the development of systems and processes were left to teachers to develop individually and within schools with little external information and guidance:

*We learn about it through experience I guess... you try things out with students and if it doesn't work then you don't do it again, and if you try other things and it works you do it again. Obviously for BT's... one of the things I talked about a lot with my Senior Teacher and Tutor Teacher was ways that I integrated and got kids to work in my class and how to get them to settle and how to build that relationship. (T7)*

## CRITICAL RELATIONSHIPS

### The school leaders' perspectives

All three school leaders knew that the focus on building positive relationships was fundamental to student success throughout the processes of transition:

*All of the key things to transition are the parents.... [we have to develop a] bond between the school and the parent. (P1)*

The development of high quality 'learning focussed' and 'trust-based' relationships were fundamental. School leaders agreed that these relationships need to be developed between:

- a) the new students and their teachers
- b) with the contributing schools
- c) with other students, both their new peers (other Year 7 students) and with Year 8 students
- d) the student and the school leaders themselves
- e) with the parents and families – with teachers and school leaders

*I am passionate about kids enjoying school so my office is hopefully a place of inspiration rather than of discipline and I really try and keep that and I try hard to have a positive environment because everyone's got feelings, every child comes from a different background, every culture should be important and I really try and do that and I just try and make people feel good because it's not really what happens in the place, it's how people feel at the end of the day that counts. (P2)*

These school leaders had developed strategies to establish these relationships throughout the transition process and described their desire to make 'genuine connections'. The depth of the connection was necessary partly because of the need to ensure that parents understood and supported the intermediate school paradigm, so that staff were able to work with parents to ensure students were indeed 'engaged' and well supported throughout the two transitions; as they moved from primary to intermediate and then again later as they moved from intermediate to secondary school in rapid succession. The school leaders interviewed went to great efforts to 'connect with parents' long before they began

the transition process into their schools and they identified a wide range of different parents groups that they had endeavoured to connect with.

*We are in regular contact with our children right from beginning of Year 6. We work with all the Primary Year 6 schools very closely, some with Te Kauhua, some with our Chinese Cluster. Ah, we are in and out of these schools all the time. (P1)*

This commitment to the wider parent and indeed wider educational community represented a large portion of the work these intermediate school leaders did that year. It represented time, effort and commitment to; the local schools, the parents and particularly the students in their schools, long before the transition actually began (indeed many of the parents and students did not enrol at their intermediate school). They all identified that the most pivotal relationships to be formed were those with parents and whanau; before and during the transition process.

*I think our greatest, well my greatest challenge, is getting the parents to actually come and talk to us because they don't. They see us, I think as the experts. In low decile schools this tends to be what happens. They see us as the experts therefore we will look after all that. Often their only question to us at an interview time is "Does my child behave well?" They expect the other things we will deal with because we're the experts. Getting them to understand, actually they know their child better than we do and they can help us is a huge challenge. Part of that is actually getting [parents] to the school. (AP1)*

The three school leaders built relationships with parents, families and students in differing ways. One principal (P2) had made time to meet with every student and their family as they enrolled at their school. Another principal (P1) provided opportunities for every group of students from the different local primary schools to spend a day at their school as well as opportunities to visit to try out Technology classes. He also met with parents groups in primary schools. In one of the intermediate schools (School 2) the principal had made enormous efforts to learn every student's name. Others (AP1) were very involved in the transition processes of students with high learning and behavioural needs and the decision-making processes for supporting those students and their programmes.

All the intermediate school leaders identified that there were risks posed to students on transition which were compounded by the reluctance of some parties to engage with the school or transition process or develop any relationships at all. This reluctance included parents and whanau, support agencies (Child Youth and Family, Social Workers etc.) and local primary schools. School leaders believed this reluctance created huge challenges and exacerbated the risks to students.

*I guess still the lack of willingness for some of the parties to be involved. You know, they have already made their mind up, so to speak, and that can be very frustrating. You know, it's literally like talking to a brick wall. (P3)*

In addition these leaders reported that the current rates of change and demand in education, generally, posed challenges to their involvement in successful transition processes. One leader (P3) especially noted that it was difficult to concentrate on their 'core business' and to have the time to develop the necessary relationships. In addition this encroachment ate into the energies and time the school had; for working with local schools, working collaboratively on assessment and transition; working with the parents and local parent groups, working with their Year 7 teachers and for working in their own schools with their teachers and students:

*The challenges the Ministry consistently throws at us around the programming, the management and the level of administration, things that they're giving schools now. [That does] take very important people from the school; away from dedicating themselves to the management of their students and their kids...which I think every principal is experiencing... that's really frustrating. (P3)*

### **The teachers' perspectives**

All of the Year 7 teachers were easily able to talk about their beliefs and understandings in regards to what contributes to effective transition. These teachers reflected their leaders' beliefs in the need to quickly and effectively establish positive relationships between students, their families and the schools and the personnel therein. Furthermore they identified building these relationships with parents, caregivers and families were fundamental to the success of the students in their class and that this relationship-building was part of the transition and settling into the new school. They talked about the length of

this relationship-building process, that it started before students were enrolled, and the efforts that their schools put into developing these relationships:

*I think transition is something that goes way back before the child comes to school. For instance the choir festivals; a lot of the children have an understanding of the school that they are coming to when they are still at the primary school, through being involved in the combined Music Festival and that often familiarises themselves with the setting and helps them to adjust. The same as sporting events; sometimes the children are involved with sports, after school, from the primary schools and they get to know our school, from their older brothers and sisters, because they are also in attendance. I think the relationship for transition starts way before they actually come to the new school.*  
(T3)

In fact all of the teachers possibly placed even greater importance on this aspect of the transition process. These teachers stated that these relationships were more important than anything else, including student achievement or establishing routines and expectations. Most said that this was the priority in the first few weeks of the new school year and this relationship-building was not confined to the student but also to their parents or even their family:

*[its] your whole job – if you don't have a relationship with your child how are you going to reach them.* (T8)

*I believe that they need to feel that they are valued and that they need to get to know everybody as well as they can in the first few weeks.* (T1)

*You want to make them feel relaxed and comfortable and not be a cold stone wall.* (T7)

*Knowing the community, whanau, being connected to the community and knowing some of the whanau members... that helps with effective transition.* (T6)

However all the teachers interviewed noted that they had been involved in transition processes in the last term of the previous year. They had attended school events to which Year 6 primary students and their families had been invited:



*We organise with the RTLB to do some visits. To wander around our school and talk about what happens in [various] places and they meet the important people; the Reading Room staff, they know where the toilets are, the Library is, the Computer Suite, the Tech Rooms. They know where the Canteen is. (AP1)*

*A programme that we do with the year sixes coming to see what our school is like and most of us try to make the children feel warm and welcome and I don't think it's just to get 'bums on seats' I believe it because we all want them to feel it's not going to be a scary place and that we are pretty human as well. (T3)*

The events had varied from school to school and it was apparent the intentions of these events also varied. All the teachers understood the need to 'attract' enrolments and that in one case (School 1) their on-going employment did depend on that aspect of the success of these events. All of the teachers interviewed focussed primarily on their desire to make these 'positive connections' with students and their families. They all talked about events such as 'Open Days' and concerts, 'Technology Tasters' and visits.

The teachers all talked about these events as being 'very important' in helping parents and students 'get to know' the school and possibly some of the staff that they would be working with the next year. These teachers considered it important that new students perceived them as 'welcoming' before families made the decision to enrol:

*The Open Nights, when we show the school to the parents and they have a chance to bring the enrolling pupils and take them around the classes and show them and they get a chance to talk about any issues they have and we can answer any questions they might ask and we get a chance to make things clear for them, and hopefully encourage them to make the decisions to bring their children to this school. (T3)*

The teachers in Schools 1 and 2 talked about their appreciation of the efforts that their leaders made to establish these relationships, knowing that this made their jobs easier in the long run. They described it as developing positive relationships with 'the school'. These teachers knew that everyone that the students and their families met in the enrolment and transition process had an impact on how the students felt. Some of these teachers were

able to identify just what their school leaders did and how they were involved in the welcoming and enrolment process.

*The Principal has an 'Open Door Policy' with enrolments so often when parents come in they can pop in and meet the Principal, they can be introduced to [him] as well as to Head Students who show them around the place so obviously the school is open to parents when they come in. (T6)*

All of the teachers wanted to develop a productive relationship with parents as quickly as possible. They talked about that first day and the parents who had brought the children to school and stayed with them, 'checking out' the teacher, the other students in the class and where the classroom is situated in the school. Most of the schools reported having a welcoming ceremony, or powhiri, and encouraging parents and whanau to attend. They spoke about having all of those parents and family go with the students to their new classes. Most teachers were very accommodating and inclusive of these additional visitors to their classes:

*The first day you usually find a lot of parents have come with their children and I encourage them to come down to the classroom and encourage them to sit in, and tell them they can stay for as long as they like and when they leave I always make sure that I know who they are and assure them that I am a phone call away at any time and of course we do have those 'meet the teacher evenings.' (T5)*

This relationship-building was common in all Year 7 classes and in all of the schools in which this research was conducted. These teachers went further than their own classrooms in the wider need to develop positive relationships with the families in their school community. They put a considerable amount of effort into developing these relationships but often the effort is not reciprocated. Meetings were held, newsletters sent home, emails and 'blogs links' sent in the hope that parents would support and encourage their children to participate in 'learning programmes' and understand the school and what they are trying to do with their children:

*I email a lot of my parents and give them access to the blog, they don't necessarily take part, I've tried that before but it means they have got a window into the learning in the classroom as well. When they know what's happening they become a little bit more*

*comfortable and happy with that as well and it takes the guess work away... it means when it comes to talking about the children's work they know what you are talking about... they are not surprised all of a sudden. (T7)*

However not all of the Year 7 teachers had the same 'Open Door Policy' in their approach to developing productive relationships and one actively discouraged parents to come into the class by greeting parents then asking them to simply 'drop off' the children and 'trust me to do my job':

*At the first day they can be outside the room, they can come in and talk to me but they have to drop their kid off and walk away. (T8)*

All of the teachers agreed it was very important to do everything in their power to form and maintain these relationships with parents and caregivers and follow their leaders' instructions and meet the expectations in this regard. They relied on parents 'buying into' this relationship with them:

*We get told to ring the parents within the first month or so, to talk with them and see what the children are telling them how it's been since they've been here so we tell them whether they're happy here or not happy. For year 7 I had parents in the back of my class day one, they stayed as long as they needed to and went [when they wanted]...(T6)*

However despite their efforts all teachers, in agreement with all of their leaders, stated that engaging with parents and whanau is an on-going challenge. These challenges included; parents not enrolling their children until the beginning of the year, meaning that little or no preparations had been done for that child; some parents did not bring their children to school on the first day, and these children did not participate in the welcome and initial settling-in processes; some parents had not purchased uniforms and the required stationery; some parents did not respond to efforts to work with the teacher; and did not come to any meetings. Some of the teachers reported that these frustrations and challenges were difficult for them to understand but they all remained committed to the relationships nevertheless:

*I think one of the concerns, and I've heard this from other intermediate schools too, is the amount of parental involvement... I don't know if it's because the parents have the view 'they're only there for two years' or whether they think it's just a period of*

*transition between primary and secondary... I'm not sure what the rationale is... but certainly we've noticed, and I'm not sure we understand completely, that the parental involvement has been exceptionally improved this year and if we could bottle that and if we could find out why then we could solve what's a bit of a problem for us. (T5)*

All of the Year 7 teachers indicated that the relationships-building process also demanded a great deal of effort from the students too. They talked about the new students fears and insecurities and the measures they took to reassure them and support them to meet the new expectations. Intermediate school teachers talked about 'little fish in big ponds' as they described the differences between primary; where the students had been 'big fish in little ponds', and the intermediate school. They also compared this experience to that of the one students experience as they transition into secondary school:

*They are so scared often, or so nervous, they have to feel relaxed; they have to understand this is a new thing and then it's about those expectations. (T5)*

Within all three of the intermediate schools the new students had to make new relationships, not only with their new teacher but also with other teachers and staff members in the school. These included specialist teachers, release and relieving teachers, school leaders and support staff. School 1 had specifically developed transition processes that supported the establishment of relationships outside of their own classroom. These extended the teacher and staff relationships to support students to seek help if the need arose:

*On the first day... the classes stay with us for the first half of the day then they go off to a year 8 teacher so that they have met a few of the staff other than just their own classroom teacher... for safety in playground, so there are some other people that they know. (T1)*

All of the Year 7 Teachers showed insight into this transition process that goes far beyond the intermediate school gates. They said that it is about the relationships within the local 'educational community'. They knew that without a productive relationship between their school and the local primary schools, and secondary schools, the transitions between the local schools were more difficult for students. All these Year 7 teachers, like their leaders,

wanted these relationships to improve, to be based on professional trust and for these relationships to support cohesion and consistency between the school settings.

The 'learning focus' was also very important for these teachers. They wanted to 'get to know' the students as learners. They identified a variety of ways that they did this; some (in School 1), by getting students to write essays about themselves and their families, or getting them to write descriptive poetry for display in classes; some (School 1) tested; some established groups (in School 2) according to primary school achievement levels and checked as the learning programmes continued; some (in School 2) gave projects to identify *how* their students best learned. Teachers in School 2 talked about using humour; about talking to and with the students. In School 1 they talked about themselves and creating 'commonalities'; about using sporting activities to create the relationships. They all identified a sense of responsibility and urgency they felt for the students and the need to 'raise their levels of achievement':

*I find a couple of reasonably sized projects helps because then you can see who works well in a group, who's a good leader, who's kind of quiet, who's shy, who withdraws completely and has a hard time connecting, so you can get a sense of how they may operate when they finally settle down... just with those couple of first projects. (T7)*

As well as this all the teachers commonly talked about the need to have 'high academic expectations'. School 2 had decided not to do any assessments in the first weeks of school and had made this decision based on research advocating against early assessments. School 1 continued to assess, checking the information from primary schools, and worked to ensure that 'students took ownership of their learning pathways'. Based within these two transition contexts the beliefs all of these Year 7 teachers were focussed on getting on with the learning programmes. In getting on with the learning, all the teachers talked about 'building classes that work as teams' and building relationships between students. They all provided opportunities for students to make friends in their new classes and in their new school:

*I find work routines are basic, I want to them to start work straight away and getting the routines started from the start... they need to know what it's going to look like so establishing the routines and standards and getting things started... because the time*

*when they're working is when they start talking to one another, finding out what these people are about, and by doing that we can just start sitting down and getting things sorted, and start developing the rapport as well... just straight into the work. (T7)*

## **FOCUS ON DATA AND ITS VALIDITY**

### **The school leaders' perspectives**

All of the three intermediate school leaders had developed ways to assist (and try to influence) parents, as they made decisions about where their children would attend intermediate school the next year. These strategies included visiting local primary schools, inviting parents in, website promotions and sending out prospectuses to local primary schools. School leaders know that for their schools this is important as they directly compete with higher decile schools (those situated in more affluent communities) for students. Some school leaders spent a considerable amount of time and money on this aspect of enrolment and the very first step of transition; choosing the intermediate school.

They also had developed ways of gathering information about the students who had enrolled – from parents, students and the schools from which the children came. These strategies for gathering information ranged from form filling to interviews.

*We send out the 'blue forms'... that asks for various bits of information...What I do is that I go around to schools; I get information about each child. I then abbreviate that information and when I get class lists, I then make a class list of all the students in that class and any information that I got about them goes on that list. (AP1)*

However these intermediate school leaders indicated that some data provided by primary schools was incomplete. They all added that the data collected was often not reliable especially the academic data.

*We are finding a huge disparity in assessment levels or the validity of assessments. So the kids will come in, [the two Associate Principals] will do transition meetings with the teachers with the schools so that we have that liaison between the teachers and feed it back to our teachers and it will show us certain people at certain levels... but when they get here and we put them in the classrooms and we do our best testing to get our best line... We find it very rarely matters what we have been told from the previous school,*

*from their testing and probably what needs to be done is all of West Auckland, the intermediate schools and the contributing schools need to have one set per process that we all understand. (P1)*

This discrepancy of recorded levels of achievement was not just a problem for the school it created problems for the students and their families too.

*Sometimes we are told that the child is reading at a certain reading age and we actually find when we do the PROBE testing, [as it should be done] that they need to be on the reading support programme because they are reading 2 years below their chronological age! Then we have a problem with the parent... (AP1)*

They gathered this information to ensure that the Year 7 teachers had as much information as possible about their new students at the very start of the year. They also used the data collected to make decisions about individual students, about student groups and the whole year group. Especially they took it into consideration, when making decisions about class make-up and regarding the special needs of some of their newly enrolled students. In summary the information was used to make decisions such as;

- a) Class placement and class make up
- b) Staffing allocations
- c) Curriculum delivery and planning

One principal stated:

*...the next challenge is putting them into various classes and we do that by the local testing. ... we do tests for our accelerate class up here at this school because we find that there's too many kids nominated for that class. Another challenge for us is that we've got a large number of out-of-zoners and we have a huge challenge trying to balance numbers. (P2)*

Whilst the moderation of assessment data and shared consistency of achievement levels between primary and intermediate school settings was a challenge, these intermediate school leaders understand that continuity of curriculum delivery is best for students. Some

school leaders worked closely with local primary schools to establish curriculum links and consistency between their schools. They all know the value of these types of shared understandings and there is clear indication that long serving staff, in both the primary and intermediate schools, facilitates this sharing more effectively.

*We share our curriculum mapping with... a local primary school and our planning, so we know what they're learning and they know what we are doing. They meet with our Year 8 students every year to see what they have missed from their perspective. (P2)*

Even more challenging were the differences in the assessment tools used and the ways that they were used in the different settings. School leaders talked about the need to 'prepare students for secondary school' and feel a sense of urgency to adhere to a more demanding learning paradigm. They expressed frustration that primary schools may administer assessments and assist students to complete the assessments and therefore not accurately assess 'independent achievement'. Furthermore the need to have students 'working across the curriculum' at a particular level created another area for inconsistent assessment between school settings.

*We do P.A.Tests for Maths and I don't know how relevant it is to the children who have done the Numeracy Project because they have done only Numeracy. They haven't done geometry or algebra or the other strands and so I think it puts them in a really poor position. There's a sense of frustration. (AP1)*

These leaders knew that academic and curriculum interruptions were particularly difficult for students who are not progressing well academically. The challenges for these students included over-inflated achievement levels, lack of on-going support for students who speak English as their second language, behavioural difficulties that had developed due to poor achievement levels or that were exacerbated by the transition. School leaders relied on Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo), Resource Teachers; Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) to support the transition process for those students.

*I'm hoping for some really good information from the RTLB itinerant, who is working with those children, so that we can place them with the right type of person, male teacher or female teacher, and put them with peers that will support them. (AP1)*



One of the greatest challenges intermediate school leaders identified was the unpredictability of their student roll at the start of the year. This was a barrier to effective decision-making. They identified particularly, those students who had not come from local and 'known' contributing primary schools, who had not participated in activities designed to familiarise new students and their families with the school and school personnel and those students whose parents had not enrolled them, possibly due to indecision or lack of understanding or even desire to have the transition take place.

*Our failures are often around when we don't do our transition well and our biggest failure is out-of-zone kids because we can't do what we should do for them. So they don't get the nurturing that our in-zone children do and the reality is more and more children in this school is out-of-zone and that's problematic. (P2)*

However the impact on intermediate schools was greater than deciding which class students would be allocated to. The numbers of students affects the numbers of teachers a Principal can employ. The variable nature of enrolments and numbers of students created staffing, financial, employment stressors for some of these school leaders and their staff. Some schools which had to cater for more children than they expected had to find space for unexpected classes, while others who attracted less enrolments than expected were forced to review staffing and tentatively identify the teachers and support staff members to leave.

*It's very difficult to formulate your classes and the Ministry is predicting that our numbers will be down so I've got to lose 1.4 teachers, how is that going to affect us? How does that affect the numbers in the classes?... but you've ... got to be prepared to act on the spot because everything may be totally different coming to the first day of the term... What happens if an extra 50 turn up? Not so bad if an extra 50 doesn't turn up because you got your guaranteed staffing but again, the idea, the situation is...where the extra 50 turn up and then we have to get emergency staffing... (P1)*

### **The teachers' perspectives**

All of the teachers knew of the data collected by their school leaders but used the data in different ways. Teachers understood the need to collect data from the primary schools in order to inform school organisation, teacher allocation and class placements for students. Teachers also noted the need for information that could inform class placements. They also

indicated that students were selected for specific support classes through the pre-entry data gathering processes employed at their schools. All felt this was a useful process for the students and their families as well as for teachers and the school.

*The Deputy Principal as well as a few of the senior teachers go to the contributing primary schools and will chat to the teachers of the year 6 students and they get to collect any data as well as description of the students... so that from there they can put them into appropriate classes with the teachers they think the students would best fit with. (T7)*

All teachers admitted that although they checked the information generally they took little 'real' notice of it. The reason for this was that all the teachers interviewed reflected their leaders' perception of inaccurate, inconsistent or varying academic results provided by primary schools. Most teachers did agree however that they did take some notice of the data but would prefer not to have the anecdotal information about the students in their classes.

*At the beginning of the year we get our class lists... we also get a report, some information from primary schools... as was mentioned before... and I have a look over it and put it aside because... and I make it clear to the kids... that whatever happened at primary school has happened, it's in the past, so if you didn't get on particularly well with your teacher at primary school there is no reason that should follow on... that you start with a blank slate and they are aware of that right at the start of the year... (T4)*

Despite some reported difficulties in the reliability of the data provided about student achievement levels, teachers identified some areas of success in the sharing of achievement data. These included the projects that the school leaders mentioned. Teachers from Schools 1 and 2 also appreciated the use of the same assessment tools such as 'AsTTLe' (reading, writing and maths) 'PROBE' (reading) and 'NUMPA' or 'GLOSS' (mathematics) being used by their primary school colleagues. They appreciated being able to work with the teachers in local primary schools to discuss and 'moderate' (agree) on the outcomes of the assessments. They also appreciated having shared professional development with their primary colleagues in the administration and analysis of the assessment tools.

It was evident that all teachers believed that this sharing and collaboration was beneficial in addressing the inconsistencies for students in regards to their achievement levels. It was also apparent that this took a considerable amount of time and commitment by the teachers and the school leaders to make it work – and that it required ‘buy in’ from primary schools which teachers and their leaders indicated was not always forthcoming.

*Something that we do as a school is we do ‘moderation’ with the primary schools so that we get to know what standards are like in the local school... for instance with the marking of AsTTLe [writing] compositions and writing in different genre so that when the children come to our school we are more familiar with some of the standards that they are presenting. (T3)*

*We have talked about that [moderation of assessments] especially with the PROBES, we found the information we were getting from the primaries ... we put the kids back by a number of years... so one of the things we have suggested to primary schools was maybe doing training with PROBE... we’ve had training with PROBE, we’ve had the facilitators in and we’ve suggested that the primaries do that as well. (T7)*

All of the Year 7 teachers felt a sense of frustration in the inaccuracies and inconsistencies of the data they were provided. It was apparent that what the school leaders believed was important data to collect, was not generally considered to be useful to Year 7 teachers, although they understood why the information had been collected (i.e. to inform class make-up).

*Achievement levels are not consistent with the academic levels the primary school gave our school (T7 and 8)... We gather it all but it is often incomplete... and I don’t use any of the personal notes or behaviour. I don’t want to know about what the comments are from prior schools. (General comment and agreement in the group) ... But I do look at the academic information that they do send. (T8)*

*There was a big difference – a wider range of results – the primary school gave them one level and, after we had tested them, they were much further away... lower. We don’t know why... maybe different testing strategies... a different test... we don’t know... (T6)*

The 'data' gathered was not only academic, but also about social maturity, behavioural information (concerns and social needs) and, for some students, if they have had social, behavioural or welfare support. Some teachers did see the value in having this information, as they settled their new students into their classes, and others would rather not have had it. They did know however, it was important for their school leaders to have the information; to minimise negative social impact for their classes; to ensure referrals to social workers and support agencies were maintained throughout the transition process.

*... the reason they collect it is because it's important to know, especially from primary schools, if you've got students who have clashed, we can make sure they are not put together as well. It's mainly for the placement (general agreement again)... (T7)*

The majority of these intermediate school teachers articulated a sense of responsibility and urgency for their students' academic attainment levels and progress. They understood that many of their students were achieving below and well below national expectations. They also stated that this information was not in keeping with what primary schools had told them and that students and their families had not had this reported to them prior to their transition to intermediate school. They also talked about this being a 'big problem'; for the students and their families; in regards to their relationships with local primary schools and for the challenge they had as they tried to accelerate students to the expected levels before their students transitioned to secondary schools.

*... I have found is that it is really dangerous to make assumptions on the basis of family background or the information that you get from primary schools... children of this age are undergoing HUGE changes... the child that you get after six weeks of holidays, and with them undergoing change, with them undergoing transition to a new environment, sometimes that information that you get from primary schools, while it's really important to get it, so that you are fore-armed about a few things... I always found that it was wise to read it and put it to the back of your mind and wait until you've established a relationship with those children and you've found out a little bit yourself. I guess some of the academic information... says that they are at a particular standard... you find that they are well above that standard or well below... so you've just got to start from where you find them to be. (T4)*

The student achievement levels drove the curriculum and its delivery, the learning environments and opportunities, as these teachers worked to 'fill the gaps' for the students in their classes. The teachers interviewed were all very concerned about the academic needs of these students. They talked about the need to 'get students moving' as early in their Year 7 year as possible.

*... at intermediate there is a strong focus on that accelerated progress over the two years to get them transitioned from primary school to secondary.. so WE focus on filling the gaps and trying to move them along. So the 'high' expectations come with the increased expectations on students... and on us as well- to show 'evidence' of that movement. (T7)*

All of the teachers also identified one of the greatest challenges being the wide and sometimes unpredictable intake from a range of primary schools. This created additional problems in regards to the consistency of reported academic achievement levels; the range of behavioural and social expectations from differing school contexts and the need to quickly build relationships between the students in their classes.

*As an intermediate school we don't get students from one primary school. We them from four, five, six or more primary (contributing) schools and each school has its own flavour, its own set of standards and expectations and in these terms they are all unique and different and so trying to get them all from those points to mesh with our expectations for behaviour... and in work... it's what makes the difference... it makes it more of a challenge. (T8)*

The teachers in School 1 reported spending considerable amounts of time, with carefully developed, often repeated, sometimes lengthy (up to a term) and intensive processes for 'settling the students in', teaching them their schools expectations and 'starting school' programmes. These teachers generally checked the reported levels of assessment prior to beginning intensive and targeted learning programmes. In contrast some teachers indicated they did none of this but rather 'started work immediately' based on accepted (though possibly inaccurate reported achievement levels) and students got to know the expectations, one another and their teacher as they 'worked together'. These teachers

checked levels of achievement as they worked with students and adjusted grouping and programmes to suit their students' needs as they came to know them better.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF SYSTEMS, PROCESSES AND ROUTINES**

### **The school leaders' perspectives**

All three intermediate school leaders understood that the families of students in their communities needed additional support as they made decisions regarding which intermediate schools they wanted their children to attend. They also understood that systems that may work with other communities may not work for their families and the systems their schools used needed to respond to their communities and cater for their needs. This included translating letters for enrolment, prospectus and enrolment forms into a variety of languages. Some schools indicated that they encouraged the use of translators so that communication between the school and family is clear. These intermediate school leaders all took steps to ensure that transition processes met the diverse needs of the Year 6 students and their families who were enrolling at their school. They did this by continually reflecting on what they did and adjusting their enrolment processes for the varying needs.

*If we continuously just expect them to 'step up' to our system and [say] 'that's how we do things here'. We could be in danger of doing things just for the sake of doing things. If we keep reflecting on why we are here and the pedagogies around that... then the students should be at the top of that list.... But the key element to all of it is the integrity behind the systems. (P3)*

All of the school leaders expressed frustrations with lack of support from local primary schools in getting families to actually enrol students ahead of the start of the new school year. Two also talked about their efforts to get the enrolment packs delivered to families and then again to try to get them back, completed. The development of these processes was, for all of those school leaders, a 'reflective process', embedded in checking on what does and does not work. School leaders identified a variety of ways that they did this, and a range of people they did this with.

*... Offering transition concepts or ideas... that didn't work... by reflecting on the needs of the kids coming into your school... Well you need to talk to the staff, the main*

*stakeholders within the school and talk to the Board ... [also]... talking with the primary schools... (P3)*

*We put up parent surveys, we have one in the beginning – first newsletter goes the survey; What they find good? What did they find bad? My appraisal last year... not so much this year... went out to a lot of parents to talk about that side of things and to some of the teachers as well. So we also have an afternoon tea for Year 6 teachers to talk to them and see how we can do things better. I talk to the Principals about our school visits to see whether they are successful or not... some of the things we do. (P2)*

The processes for transition were lengthy taking about 6 to 8 months. Starting before parents chose intermediate schools for their children to attend (around July) and finishing with the same students being 'settled' into their new Year 7 classes the following February. There were some crucial milestones that school leaders identified; the decision-making process, the actual enrolment, the first day and week at the new school, in the new class. School leaders responsible for transitions, commonly the Principal, facilitated all of these processes and had established and maintained the effectiveness of all the surrounding systems; making all of the decisions about what information parents and students needed, how to gather the important and required information and all the while working to 'engage' with parents in a process that they may not understand.

Throughout this the school leaders were always checking and reviewing the process and its effectiveness. They were united in their desire to 'support students and meeting their needs'. Leaders identified that, for the students, the first day and initial weeks in the new intermediate school was pivotal but despite all the work, there was no guarantee that school leaders would get it right every time.

*That first day is for getting to know your teacher, getting to know your school and 'orientation'. They get a map and find certain things on that map so they know where they are going basically and feel a little bit more comfortable... We place children in a class that we think will be right for them and we give six weeks to ascertain whether we were right or whether we were wrong. (AP1)*

## **The teachers' perspectives**

All of the Year 7 teachers talked about this same continually-developing transition process based on experience and reflective practices. They acknowledged that it is an inexact process with systems being developed specifically for and within the intermediate school and community within which they are situated. These teachers also indicated an ownership of the development and maintenance of the systems and processes. Teachers from two of the schools said that these systems had become ingrained into the culture of the school. All teachers also reflected on transition practices by using a variety of methods. They especially included information gathered from students as the children reflected on their own transition into intermediate school.

*... a lot of it is trial and error over a number of years and each year you say 'OK this didn't work' and you hold onto the things that do work. Its experience and you build up your knowledge over time. It's not something that you do the same every year and it differs slightly every year. (T1)*

*I don't know so much that it is particularly talked about as so much as a 'transition'... its more the way things happen in THIS school when they come here and that we are preparing them to go to high school in two years. (T4)*

The teachers identified a range of things that the children needed to 'learn' in order to settle into their new school settings. Many of these focussed on emotionally reassuring the new students, which Year 7 teachers generally believed was fundamental to successful transition. Teachers from School 1 talked about students being afraid of getting lost and so they spent time making sure children were familiar with the school grounds and layout. All of the teachers also identified what they believed were the basic differences between a primary and intermediate school setting;

- a) increased 'expectations'
- b) the time schedule
- c) homework
- d) the level of work
- e) the quality of work



f) the amount of the work students are to complete on a regular basis

As the teachers themselves had not generally visited the local primary schools to check these specific items it was apparent that this list of 'needs' was perceptual, based on what the majority of teachers say they observed in their newly enrolled Year 7 students.

These teachers also indicated that the biggest differences for students were the opportunities to attend 'specialist classes', generally technology classes such as Foods, Physical Education, Hard Materials, Art, Music etc although the range varied from intermediate school to intermediate school. These classes require students move between classrooms and the Year 7 teachers believed that their new students were not used to doing this and had not had chances to learn how to do this in their primary schools. Intermediate teachers indicated that this ability to 'move from class to class' is an essential skill, necessary for students to be successful secondary school students, and identified other requirements that were 'basic' such as being in correct uniform, and having stationery. It was interesting that all the teachers interviewed believed that they needed to make sure that their newly enrolled students were supported to learn these skills with some even calling them 'intermediate routines':

*... setting them up with intermediate routines ... knowing that intermediate school has very different expectations to those that they are used to... We have a timetable that we have to go by. They have Technology classes, PE classes- that require them changing into their PE gear... They have to adjust to the different routines and the... 'strictness' is a lot different... we are much more firm, we say 'You must line up', 'you come to school in the correct uniform' and 'you should have all your stationary' we expect the students to become more organised at intermediate school because they are becoming more mature. (T6)*

The teachers in School 1 added that new students needed support to join and participate in activities outside of their classrooms because in doing these students developed confidence and a greater sense of 'belonging' to the school as a whole. It was again apparent that the Year 7 teachers interviewed believed that this was a new experience for students:

*I encourage my kids to join as many sports team or cultural teams as possible because that helps them part of the school and part of a bigger group than just the classroom and their class. And with the things like dance and JRock and things like that that they can join in the cultural groups its wonderful for the children because they are moving into other areas of Auckland to perform in sports teams they are going to other schools*  
(T2)

## **CHALLENGES OF DIVERSITY**

### **The school leaders' perspectives**

The schools knew that they faced particular challenges. They understood that the transition process must be developed *with the community* to meet the needs of that particular community. They also knew they had to keep in mind that their students come from a range of socio-economic areas and different primary schools. The challenges of on-going, continued reflection, effective dialogue and improvement of transition processes and systems was made even more difficult in these communities due to the enormous 'turn-over' of students in their schools and the fact that they cater for these very diverse populations.

*Intermediates have to really invent their own uniqueness around developing a transition programme that works for them and their community.... Looking at the cultural and social and academic practices within the school and giving them of all equal Mana<sup>1</sup>.... Every year half your school has a turnover and it can be a very different school from one year to the next. (P3)*

Two of the school leaders (P2 and 3) indicated that they made particular efforts to develop relationships with local Maori and reported some 'success' in this, although this was not commonly reported. Most schools reported a sense of frustration in establishing this positive community-based relationship. The barriers to forming this relationship were put down to the relatively short time students stay in intermediate schools, just two years, and others indicated that it may be the nature of low socio-economic areas and the lack of housing stability, with students and their families moving on as soon as they can afford a

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<sup>1</sup> Mana – 'power', standing and essence

better house. Success in working with Maori families was generally measured in the numbers of families attending 'hui'. It was noticeable that schools that do indicate 'success' have leaders who speak Te Reo<sup>2</sup> Maori fluently.

*Also I think to make parents feel comfortable and particularly with Maoris we have been successful that way. Coming [to our school having had] Hui's; Huis within their community Hui<sup>3</sup> and combined Huis. (P1)*

These leaders also identified challenges in catering especially for students, and their families who did not speak English fluently. Schools identified usually one particular predominant Pacifica group within their school. They also identified Pacifica groups in schools which included; Samoan, Tongan, Fijian, Fijian-Indian, Niuean, Tokelauan, Cook Island Maori, Kiribati and Soloman Islanders. There were also other new immigrant groups; from African, Indian, and Asian communities. Many of the students and their families held short term visas; some were in New Zealand to study and others for work. The predominant group were the long term New Zealand residents with students being third or fourth generation of Pacifica immigrants. Within these groups there was a range of cultural understandings and structures; from families that were strong in their mother tongue to those who had neither English nor their mother tongue mastered by the children, and those that speak almost none of their mother tongue and predominantly speak English. In all cases these children needed specific support settling into their new school environments.

*This is a particular kind of community, you've got different ethnicities; Pasifika predominate in low decile schools... Samoan kids, they need to know that you're with them. That helps them. (AP1)*

As previously mentioned, intermediate school leaders identified that the unpredictability of the make-up of the student cohort is a barrier to effective transition. This created a challenge for leaders, who know it is good to have staff members who reflect the diversity of their school community. This helps with communication and building positive relationships and a sense of belonging for students and their families:

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<sup>2</sup> Te Reo – the language

<sup>3</sup> Hui – meeting, gathering, discussion

*The biggest challenge is...you don't know who you're getting, you don't know the break down, you don't know the ethnicity, and you don't know how many boys, how many girls, how many kids? (P1)*

These school leaders all agreed that effective and highly developed transition processes were particularly important for the families and students who had special needs; behavioural, physical, medical, emotional and learning needs. The transition processes started early, were personnel intensive and were more difficult to manage if the family did not speak English fluently. These families often came from a differing educational paradigm and the need to make sure that everyone was alerted to the needs and risks and were committed to the support of those children was what drove those processes.

*Sometimes, because there is difficulty with the child we're invited to I.E.P (Individual Educational Planning) meetings, which is always good because then we meet the parents and they get to meet us too... It's very complex... We do have a school counsellor but she's not normally involved unless there is a special need or unless the child is in different care situation which could be risky... Health needs obviously are made public right away for every teacher... that's down to the caretaker and to the office staff as well. (AP1)*

### **The teachers' perspectives**

All of these teachers, like their leaders, understood that catering for their student's diverse needs was very complex. The range of differences was enormous. In these schools cultural diversity included a range of ethnicities – with various languages, customs and educational understandings. It also included a range of abilities and especially a common predominance of students with high educational needs and low student achievement levels.

*Children have to believe that they are all as important as everyone else and that all cultures are valued. So we start of by getting to know each other and looking at ourselves in particular first and foremost, to become acquainted by the different cultures within the class. (T1)*

They all identified diverse groups including Maori and Pacifica (and often clearly identified up to 8 different Pacifica groups within their classes) along with new immigrant, Indian,

Asian, Middle Eastern, African and latterly South American. Most of these students did not speak English as their first language or at home and most parents had limited understanding in English and about how the New Zealand education system works and what the curriculum provides. All teachers talked about how difficult it was to engage with some of these parents. They talked about the concerns parents had about inconsistencies in achievement levels reported between primary and intermediate schools and how this diminished trust in the 'system' and its ability to meet and support the needs of their children. These teachers also understood the need to use a variety of strategies, specifically tailored for their students and their families in order to rapidly build common understandings about education, their specific schools and their own class:

*I've asked them about their backgrounds to make them feel comfortable; asked them about their place in their family; asked them about their sports they liked at primary school; the primary school they in fact came from; and why they chose to come to [this school]. I want to try to 'bridge the gap' between the old and the new. (T3)*

All of the teachers identified ways they worked with community groups and students to develop these understandings. Most schools celebrated their diverse populations and provided forums for students from the various groups to gather, celebrate and participate in educationally-related activities for their own cultural groups. These teachers encouraged their students to 'get involved' and often participated themselves in order for them to have a place they too can be the learners.

*The students can join [the cultural groups], so they can celebrate their own cultures and find familiarity in those as well. (T7)*

Most teachers spoke about the need to know if they had children in their classes who had high or specific learning, social or behavioural needs. They appreciated the lengths their leaders went to in order get this information about their students.

*They do inform us of the children we need to be aware of, if there's a child coming into your class that has 'history', then we are informed. (T6)*

## **SUMMARY**

All of the data collected through the interviews and focus groups was generated from the perceptions of School Leaders and Year 7 teachers in three intermediate schools. From the data, five central themes emerged: Decision making, Systems development, Influencing practices, Challenges of diversity, Critical relationships.

Within each theme a number of challenges were identified by the School Leaders and Year 7 Teachers. These included: intake from a range of different primary schools and cultural diversity.

The following chapter will discuss these findings with reference to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two and make recommendations for future practice and research on the transition from Year 6 primary to Year 7 intermediate school.

## Chapter Five

### DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This concluding chapter links the key findings from the research interviews with intermediate school leaders and teachers, to the literature reviewed. It also seeks to build on the literature about transition, particularly in respect to intermediate school leadership and the roles and actions of the teachers. The research was undertaken in schools that cater for students from low socio-economic inner-city areas where there is a predominance of new immigrant and a high number of Maori and Pacifica families.

The focus in this chapter is on major and consistent findings that are 'common' amongst the three schools and between individuals and groups. It also seeks to focus on 'significant' deviations or anomalies in comparison to the literature on transition. Furthermore, it seeks to develop a constructive focus to support intermediate school leaders and Year 7 teachers as they make decisions in their classes, schools and communities to support the transition of Year 6 primary students, into their schools.

It should be noted that many of the findings provide strongly identifiable cohesion between the views of school leaders and the teachers; both in what they believed and understood and what they did. There were however some findings that highlighted a dissonance between what is espoused in Education Review Office and Ministry of Education documents and the practice within the schools.

#### **Leadership for transition**

The three school leaders within this intermediate school context and in keeping with Starratt (2003) reported that they embrace the management of the transition as one of the challenges of leadership within their context. They generally describe themselves as transition experts; transitioning children into their schools from primary school Year 6 to Year 7 and then out again from Year 8 to secondary school Year 9.

All of the intermediate school leaders interviewed understood the importance and risks posed by the transition from primary school to intermediate school. At the same time these leaders reported that they understood the challenges as an inevitable and predictable part of a child's educational journey reflecting Yates (2008) and Coffey (2013).

These school leaders also reported working with and for the people in their schools to develop understandings specific and relevant to their own contexts. A clear cohesion was found between what school leaders believe and understand and what the teachers in each of the respective schools believe, understand and indeed what they say happens in their classes.

Through the interview process there were also differences identified in the management of the transition processes between the three schools, reflecting the suggestions made in Gluckman (2010) and specifically the New Zealand Curriculum (2010) to build community understandings and a 'school specific curriculum'. All of the intermediate school leaders interviewed, reflecting Ogbu (2009), identified the importance of collecting information about individuals and groups of students from the contributing primary schools.

### **Shared understandings and beliefs**

School leaders and teachers, in accordance with Starratt (2003), were all able to articulate a range of beliefs about transition and how it affects the children that they teach. Some specific beliefs and understandings about transition were commonly voiced by the participants in this research. All of those interviewed stated that the development of their own beliefs and understandings about effective transition processes was context specific. However the findings showed that this teacher learning was all done 'on the job', through participation, mentoring by teacher peers, and student feedback after transitions had taken place, rather than based on research and theoretical perspectives recommended by Timperley (2008).

The majority of the intermediate school leaders and the Year 7 teachers interviewed voiced a common concern for those students who transitioned from schools outside of their contributing primary schools. The comments made indicated that these students arrived at



the intermediate school at the start of the year having had none of the transition processes smoothing the way for them. They indicated that they believed that these students, in particular, had few or no social relationships and had little information about their new school and they were not able to have the careful consideration for class placements, due to limited time frames and the lack of information about their needs. These concerns align with Tilleczeck and Ferguson (2007) who indicate that schools must be mindful of *all* the student groups transitioning into their schools and develop strategies to support them.

All of the school leaders interviewed indicated frustration that these students potentially affected the numbers of classes needing to be available, the make-up of the classes, and provision for these students' special needs. They also indicated that these were the students most at risk and most likely to suffer from the pressures of settling into the new intermediate school setting. However none mentioned specific transition strategies for these students which could have occurred post-transition despite the circulation of The Education Review Office National Report: Transition (2012) indicating "Schools can support students to make successful transitions, by helping them to develop a sense of themselves; as competent and capable beings" (p.9-10).

All of the intermediate schools identified one school leader responsible for transition and in one school this person was not the principal. This person could be described as the 'transition facilitator' as identified by Coffey (2009). It was clear that these school leaders, sometimes in conjunction with primary schools and the Year 7 teachers, took responsibility for all of the decisions for the transition processes within their school.

### **Critical Relationships**

All the leaders and teachers indicated that building relationships was pivotal to the success of the transition in accordance with The Education Review Office National Report: Transitions (2012). There was a consensus by all school leaders who all established priorities for relationship building with students and their families. They all described a range of strategies 'ensuring that students and their families felt good about the transition and the school'.

All of the school leaders emphasised the need to develop and maintain positive and productive, trusting relationships with their respective local primary schools reflecting Marzano, Pickering and Pollock (2001). They all also identified the need to know the similarities and differences between school settings and to develop a continuity of curriculum and school-based understandings as highlighted by Roderick and Camburn (1999). However, significantly, two of the leaders also indicated that this is an on-going challenge regardless of the actions they take.

All of the interviewees collectively indicated a range of strategies that developed positive and productive relationships in their Year 7 classes. The strategies varied from school to school and from class to class within schools. Strategies mentioned included the following but were not all practised in all of the schools:

#### **Before the transition**

- Year 6 ‘tasters’ and ‘open day’ visits to the intermediate school
- Visits by intermediate school leaders to Year 6 students in their primary schools to provide information and to introduce them to some of the key school personnel
- Information nights and school visits for enrolling parents
- Maori community ‘hui’<sup>4</sup>, before, during and after transition

#### **During the transition and soon after**

- Powhiri<sup>5</sup> and welcoming ceremonies and rituals along with parents being welcomed into classes on the first day of school
- Parent evenings to meet school personnel and classroom teachers in the first week of school and later to share achievement and behavioural information
- Sharing of emails and contact details, class newsletters that assist in the sharing of concerns and information between homes and the school and teachers

#### **Relationships with teachers**

All those interviewed in this research project recognised the importance of the student-teacher relationship. This is in keeping with The Education Review Office National Report:

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<sup>4</sup> Hui: meeting

<sup>5</sup> Powhiri: a welcome ritual steeped in local Maori protocol

Transitions (2012). However the findings of this research have highlighted the disparate ways that schools viewed, and conducted the beguiling of this crucial relationship.

A group of Year 7 teachers indicated a wide range of beliefs about the development of positive and productive relationships with some speaking of intensive, in depth processes whereby students wrote about themselves, their families, their experiences and presented that to their class mates. These teachers, who were predominantly from one school, also talked about the need to build reciprocal relationships; letting their students know about their own lives and for their students to get to know about their school and the school's history. One school leader commented that their school spent six weeks 'getting to know the students'.

In contrast another school leader espoused the premise that 'there is no time to waste' and he clearly stated that the Year 7 teachers in his school focus on 'getting on with the job'. This expectation was reflected by the Year 7 teachers in the same school who identified the same focus of 'accelerating progress', 'transitioning from primary to secondary school', 'filling gaps' and 'setting high expectations'. Staff in this school based the decision to focus on 'academics' based on information from past students, who had contributed to specifically designed surveys about transition. Furthermore, the students in this school fed back to these teachers and school leaders that they did not want to spend weeks getting to know their teachers and classmates. This use of student feedback is recommended by Jelly, Fuller and Byers (2000). These same Year 7 teachers reported that they let children get to know them and each other as they worked together; with school work starting on the first day of school.

This research has shown that the strategies for developing relationships during transition varies from school to school according to the different beliefs and understandings the leaders and teachers held. It also showed that the relationship building was closely linked to the curricula developed within the school and founded on the beliefs schools (including the leaders and teachers) had regarding how to build successful relationships within their school context.

### **Catering for diverse communities**

All of the intermediate school leaders and the Year 7 teachers interviewed clearly identified various considerations (e.g. for Maori and Pacifica and new immigrant families, for students with academic, social and emotional needs, for those who did not speak English as their first language, for those families needing additional support as they grapple with the enrolment documentation and process, for those students who have been identified 'at risk' while prior to the transition process) in working with their diverse communities, as identified by Robinson and Hohepa (2008). They all noted the need to work specifically with, and for, their Maori and Pacifica communities, as echoed by Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh and Terry (2007), and all discussed the wide ranging strategies they used within their school contexts to manage this. It is significant that the leaders and teachers acknowledged the limited success of the strategies they used to connect and communicate with their respective Maori and Pacifica communities. They all expressed a desire to enhance these community relationships.

The interviewees indicated that diversity was not confined to various ethnic groups and cultures but also catered for the diverse academic and social needs of students, regardless of their backgrounds in keeping with Bloyce and Frederickson (2012). They identified students who had very low achievement levels, behavioural and social needs and those students who enrolled from schools outside of their areas. The findings supported the literature reviewed which identified the students most at risk. The teachers collectively identified the need to support students who came from homes where English was not spoken or who had English as their second (or third) language. They identified these students as at high risk of interruption to learning resulting from the transition also identified by Bru, Stornes, Munthe and Thuen (2010).

It is apparent, from the information gathered from the research, that all the intermediate school leaders and Year 7 teachers were in agreement with Graham and Hill (2003); that these additional challenges increase the risk for students and their families and the challenges for schools, school leaders and classroom teachers. The findings from this research also indicate that despite the challenges, intermediate school leaders are aware that they are charged with developing effective transition practices that cater for the needs

of their communities and specifically for the diverse groups. The research also shows that there is a voiced agreement that strategies should be developed particularly for Maori and also for Pacifica communities. All of the school leaders expressed concern as to the difficulties they had in making these effective, particularly in getting these students pre-enrolled and to participate in the strategies these schools had developed to support these students and their families.

### **Supporting Learning**

While the New Zealand Curriculum (2010) states an expectation of a seamless curriculum provision, all of the intermediate school leaders and the Year 7 teachers identified serious concerns in regards to the validity of the student achievement information they received from primary schools. In keeping with world-wide research and identified in West, Sweeting and Young (2010) the majority noted that the academic achievement information was unreliable and over-stated the achievement levels of students.

School leaders collectively said that they also needed the information so that teachers could use it to develop appropriate programmes. Robinson and Lai (2006) support this information-gathering and identify that school leaders should ensure that teachers have the required knowledge in order to teach effectively.

It is significant that there was a discrepancy between the views of the senior leaders and most of the Year 7 teachers interviewed. While the school leaders stated they collected the information for Year 7 teachers' use, the latter indicated that they did not use the information the leaders collected from the primary schools. Indeed the majority of the Year 7 teachers did not have confidence in the data provided and preferred to make independent judgements on the academic and social capabilities of their newly enrolled Year 7 students. This means that the 'continuous learning pathway' must be interrupted in order to gather 'reliable' data to inform learning programmes. A significant majority of the teachers interviewed stated that they preferred to 'get to know the children themselves' rather than relying on information given by the teachers in the primary schools.

All of the intermediate school leaders and the teachers aired their frustrations regarding the pressure, from the Ministry of Education, to report on, prove and improve the student achievement data in their respective school. External imperatives also affect the exercising of relational co-construction of strategies for improvement.

The requirement to perform to certain standards and in certain ways does make a difference to both the effectiveness of school leadership and the sharing of strategies that improve overall school effectiveness. The literature reviewed supports the concept that effective teaching practice and school leadership is developed through the teachers (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1990). In order to facilitate efficient and effective student transitions into their schools, intermediate school leaders must develop a repertoire of strategies and ensure that their teachers employ those strategies.

### **Decision making**

All of the school leaders interviewed agreed that student achievement data was needed to decide the types of classes needed for Year 7 placements. This reflects Starratt (2003) who identifies that effective school leadership requires the orchestration of teacher practices while Leithwood (2010) suggests that school leaders are charged with establishing systems and processes that ensure high quality learning experiences for all students.

All of the school leaders agreed, as echoed by Yates (2008), that they wanted to know about the educational and behavioural needs of students, particularly if the students' needs fell outside of the expected norms. They collectively believed that this information was important for the Year 7 teachers to know as confirmed by Duchesne, Ratelle and Roy (2011). According to Blackmore (2006) leaders need to deeply understand the complexities, differences and diversity of their students in order to ensure an equitable education.

While there was some consistency in the strategies to support transition employed between school leaders and the Year 7 teachers within their specific school contexts, the findings showed a lack of consistency between the three intermediate school leaders. Two leaders identified a range of review and feedback strategies which included asking for feedback from the contributing primary schools, from the Year 6 teachers and from the students

themselves. The leaders using these review strategies said that all of these groups were asked about the effectiveness of the transition processes. This research also identified that while a range of review and feedback strategies are in place in some schools it is evident that there is a lack of a literature and research base to assist with decision-making.

The findings also showed that there was inadequate reflection on and evaluation of the processes used to support transition and what actually does address the interruption to learning found in most intermediate schools. These evaluation and review inadequacies indicate that the school leaders and Year 7 teachers have a low motivation to change historic teaching practice or to work towards the improvement of transition processes.

### **Systems development**

All of the interviewees, the intermediate school leaders and the Year 7 teachers, indicated that their schools develop transition processes on a 'trial-and-error' basis with many changing from year to year. This reflection, review and state of continuous development is in many respects in keeping with the recommendations of Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) who note the need to build beliefs and understandings about transition within specific schools and community contexts. In addition, information gathered from the interviews and focus groups indicated that there is a great deal of variation in methods used by the three schools to reflect on and to evaluate the improvement process. The on-going reflection of practice and response to student and community needs is strongly advocated by Bishop (2008).

It is significant that none of the school leaders or the Year 7 teachers indicated that they had read available current research or participated in any targeted professional development programmes on transition. This is in contrast to the recommendations from Timperley (2008) who strongly advocates that decision-making should be based on theory and that practice, even if focussed on change, without a thorough understanding of related theory is superficial at the best and usually has very little impact on outcomes for students.

This finding is of concern as The Education Review Office distributed in 2012 to all schools the 'National Report: Transition'. It is significant that there was no reference, made by any

of the interviewees, to any recent research, publications and resources available from the Ministry of Education.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH**

This limited geographical sample in Auckland is not representative of all New Zealand intermediate schools in low socio-economic areas that have high numbers of at risk students as identified by Gluckman (2010).

The research sample was limited to only three intermediate schools which fitted the community descriptors identified in Gluckman (2010). Therefore findings can only be considered as indicators not finite conclusions or necessarily extrapolated between intermediate schools settings across New Zealand.

It was unexpected that one of the planned focus group interviews was unable to take place. Therefore focus group interviews with Year 7 teachers were only completed in two of the three intermediate schools participating in this research.

## **RECOMENDATIONS**

### **Recommendation One**

**Intermediate school leaders need to address the concerns regarding the validity of the student achievement data collected from contributing primary schools.**

It would be useful to work with primary school leaders and their Year 7 teachers to reach agreement about what Year 6 student information is important to gather and how it will be used at the start of the year in Year 7. Intermediate school leaders also need to work with contributing primary school leaders to ensure an explicitly identified 'continuous learning pathway'.

### **Recommendation Two**

**Intermediate school leaders need to develop methods and systems for consistent and reliable review of transition processes.**



This review would be best served if they took into consideration not just how teachers, students and their families 'feel' about the success of the transition processes but also whether the processes were effective in reducing the risk students face as they transition from one setting to another. These would ideally gather data on factors such as; interruption to learning, disengagement from school, numbers of negative behavioural incidents recorded and the attendance of parents attending formal and informal events where student achievement and progress is reported.

### **Recommendation Three**

**School-specific and sector-wide professional development regarding transition needs to be developed for school leaders and teachers.**

Intermediate school leaders need to ensure that this area of professional development is developed within their schools. The Ministry of Education needs to develop and to provide professional development on transition for intermediate school leaders and teachers regarding the risks caused by transition, the indicators that identify the students who are most at risk, the strategies to reduce the risks and best practise to support students and their families through the transition process. These professional development seminars could ideally include primary school leaders and be provided within community contexts, thus facilitating a collective approach to developing effective systems.

### **Recommendation Four**

**Intermediate school leaders need to develop, with their Year 7 teachers, clear expectations and guidelines as to how much time teachers will spend on establishing 'positive student, family and teacher relationships' and how that could be done.**

This will provide clear expectations for teacher, parents and families and create a certainty about their responsibilities for the success of their children. It will ensure that students are treated equitably and with clarity and consistency as they settle into the school. It will also provide schools with information that will quickly identify which families are not 'engaged' and where additional support is required. It would provide the Year 7 teachers with clear

guidelines regarding the actions they will take in their classrooms to support this aspect of transition.

School leaders in intermediate schools need to develop close and productive relationships with local primary school leaders, with the premise that they belong to an 'educational community' that caters for the needs of all the students in all of their schools and collectively on behalf of their local community.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The following are suggestions for further investigations building on this research:

- Increase the scope of this research to all New Zealand intermediate schools serving low-socio economic communities
- Inclusion of parents, caregivers and students in future research
- Investigate systems for gathering data about the effectiveness of the transition process within a variety of indicators for success such as; parental engagement; student attendance; behavioural incidents; student, parent and teacher feedback; as well as student achievement data indicating continued progress
- Investigate the statistical profile of at-risk students and the indicators for improvement created by schools that use support systems in addition to social or cultural transition processes

### **CONCLUDING STATEMENT**

This research was conducted in three medium-sized inner-city Auckland intermediate schools situated in low-socio economic communities where there was a predominance of students from Maori, Pacifica and new immigrant backgrounds. The research interviewed school leaders who were identified as being responsible for the transition of Year 6 primary school students as they transitioned into their schools at Year 7. In addition, Year 7 teachers participated in focus group interviews at the start of the school year.

The research inquired into the beliefs and understandings, regarding this particular student transition, held by these school leaders and the Year 7 teachers in their schools, and how

these were developed. It also sought to investigate the challenges identified by the school leaders responsible for transition and the Year 7 Teachers. In addition the study explored the processes and systems these school leaders had developed in their schools with their Year 7 teachers. Finally the research inquired into the processes that were used to evaluate the decisions school leaders made regarding transition.

It is significant that this research identified that there was a discrepancy between the views of the senior leaders and most of the Year 7 teachers interviewed regarding the use of student data. While the school leaders stated they collected the information to inform class placements and for Year 7 teachers' use, the latter indicated that they did not use the information the leaders collected from the primary schools as it was intended.

School Leaders and Teachers collectively identified difficulties in working with some families and frustrations in the attempts they made to engage these families in the transition processes (i.e. pre-enrolment, attendance at information evenings, visits to the school, purchasing uniforms etc.). They identified that the children from these families are usually those with the greatest risk factors leading to dis-engagement from schooling as a result of this transition. They also indicated that they had made various attempts using various strategies.

School leaders and teachers agreed that there is a risk to students on transition from primary school to intermediate school. The findings of this research show that strategies to support transition need to be enhanced and that despite research and documentation on transition being provided to schools by Ministry of Education and The Education Review Office there was no reference, made by any of the interviewees, to any recent research, publications or resources available. Recent research (Timperley, 2008) regarding the development of an imperative to change or adjust practices indicates that a lack of an internal theory base and low external imperative to change will result in low motivation to improve and change practices in order for them to become more effective.

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## DOCUMENTATION FOR PERMISSIONS



**INFORMATION SHEET: for the School: Principal and/or Board of Trustees.**

**Title of Thesis: The challenges New Zealand intermediate school leaders face as they transition year six primary students into year seven, intermediate schools.**

My name is PAULINE CORNWELL and I am currently enrolled in the Masters of Educational Leadership and Management degree in the Department of Education at Unitec Institute of Technology. I am seeking your help in meeting the requirements of research for a Thesis course which forms a substantial part of this degree.

The aim of my project is to investigate the challenges for intermediate school leaders as primary school students' transition from Year 6, in primary school into their schools at Year 7. It also aims to identify the strategies that these leaders develop to support the transition of these students. Furthermore it aims to investigate how their schools evaluate the effectiveness of those strategies.

I request your participation in the following ways:

1. I would like to conduct one-to-one interviews with the school leader in your school who has been identified as being 'responsible for transition of students from Year 6, primary school to Year 7, into your school. This interview would take place at the end of the school year (November or December) as school leaders are managing the enrolments of Year 6 students.
2. I would also like to conduct focus group interviews with a group of 4 to 6 Year 7 teachers at the beginning of the school year, as Year 7 students are settling into your school.
3. I will also be asking for your school's signed consent, the school leader's signed consent and the Year 7 teachers signed consent. As all participants are voluntary I ask, if your school agrees, for you to distribute the relevant permission sheets and consent sheets. Once they have been returned to me I will directly contact the participants and arrange a time to conduct the relevant interviews at a time and place that suits your school and the participants.

Neither you nor your organisation will be identified in the Thesis. At no time will the raw information or data you provide be made available to any other people in your school. I will be recording your contribution and will provide a transcript (or summary of findings if appropriate) for you to check before data analysis is undertaken. I do hope that you will agree to take part and that you will find this participation of interest. If you have any queries about the project, you may contact my supervisor at Unitec Institute of Technology.

My supervisor is Dr Josephine Howse and she may be contacted by email or phone. Her contact details are as follows. Phone: (09) 8154321 ext. 8348, Email: [jhowse@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:jhowse@unitec.ac.nz)

Yours sincerely

Pauline Cornwell

Cell 021 1151462

Email [paulinec@avondaleint.school.nz](mailto:paulinec@avondaleint.school.nz)

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 1072**

**This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from 1 September 2012 to 1 September 2013.**

**If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162).**

**Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.**

**GAINING PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH WITHIN YOUR ORGANISATION AND ACCESS TO DOCUMENTATION FOR TRANSITION**

**Template for an organisation to provide a letter giving permission to conduct research**

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**[Organisation's letterhead]**

Pauline Cornwell  
59 Linwood Ave  
Mt Albert  
Auckland 1025

**Date**

**RE: Master of Educational Leadership and Management thesis**

**THESIS TITLE: The challenges New Zealand intermediate school leaders face as they transition year six primary students into year seven, intermediate schools.**

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project. I give permission for research to be conducted within this organisation. I understand that the name of this organisation will not be used in any public reports and that all data collected with remain secure. I give permission for relevant documentation in regards to the topic this research to be provided to the researcher.

**Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Name of signatory**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Title of signatory**

\_\_\_\_\_



**INFORMATION SHEET: for School Leader responsible for transition in this school.**

**Title of Thesis: The challenges New Zealand intermediate school leaders face as they transition year six primary students into year seven, intermediate schools.**

My name is PAULINE CORNWELL and I am currently enrolled in the Masters of Educational Leadership and Management degree in the Department of Education at Unitec Institute of Technology. I am seeking your help in meeting the requirements of research for a Thesis course which forms a substantial part of this degree.

The aim of my project is to investigate the challenges for intermediate school leaders as primary school students' transition from Year 6, in primary school into their schools at Year 7. It also aims to identify the strategies that these leaders develop to support the transition of these students. Furthermore it aims to investigate how their schools evaluate the effectiveness of those strategies.

I request your participation in the following way: I will be conducting one-to-one interviews and would appreciate your contribution to this process. I will also be asking you to sign a consent form regarding this event.

Neither you nor your organisation will be identified in the Thesis. At no time will the raw information or data you provide be made available to any other people in your school. I will be recording your contribution and will provide a transcript (or summary of findings if appropriate) for you to check before data analysis is undertaken. I do hope that you will agree to take part and that you will find this participation of interest.

If you have any queries about the project, you may contact my supervisor at Unitec Institute of Technology.

My supervisor is Dr Josephine Howse and she may be contacted by email or phone. Phone: (09) 815 4321 ext. 8348, Email: [jhowse@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:jhowse@unitec.ac.nz)

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**Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.**



**CONSENT FORM – for School Leader responsible for transition in this school.**

**Research event: One-to-one Interview**

**Researcher: PAULINE CORNWELL**

**Programme: Master of Educational Leadership and Management**

**THESIS TITLE: The challenges New Zealand intermediate school leaders face as they transition year six primary students into year seven, intermediate schools.**

I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research and I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered.

- I understand that neither my name nor the name of my organisation will be used in any public reports.
- I understand that the principal at my school will not be provided with any raw data or information provided at the focus group interview that I attend.
- I also understand that I will be provided with a transcript of the information from the focus group interview for checking before data analysis is started.
- I am aware that I may withdraw myself or any information that has been provided for this project up to the stage when analysis of data has been completed.
- **I agree to take part in this project.**

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 1072**

**This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from 1 September 2012 to 1 September 2013.**

**If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcomes**



**INFORMATION SHEET: for Year 7 Teachers**

**Title of Thesis: The challenges New Zealand intermediate school leaders face as they transition year six primary students into year seven, intermediate schools.**

My name is PAULINE CORNWELL and I am currently enrolled in the Masters of Educational Leadership and Management degree in the Department of Education at Unitec Institute of Technology. I am seeking your help in meeting the requirements of research for a Thesis course which forms a substantial part of this degree.

The aim of my project is to investigate the challenges for intermediate school leaders as primary school students' transition from Year 6, in primary school into their schools at Year 7. It also aims to identify the strategies that these leaders develop to support the transition of these students. Furthermore it aims to investigate how their schools evaluate the effectiveness of those strategies.

I request your participation in the following way:

I will be conducting focus group interviews and would appreciate your contribution as a member of the group.

I will also be asking you to sign a consent form regarding this event.

Neither you nor your organisation will be identified in the Thesis. At no time will the raw information or data you provide be made available to anyone else in your school. I will be recording your contribution and will provide a transcript (or summary of findings if appropriate) for you to check before data analysis is undertaken. I do hope that you will agree to take part and that you will find this participation of interest.

If you have any queries about the project, you may contact my supervisor at Unitec Institute of Technology.

My supervisor is Dr Josephine Howse and she may be contacted by email or phone. Phone: (09) 815 4321 ext.

8348, Email: [jhowse@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:jhowse@unitec.ac.nz)

Yours sincerely

Pauline Cornwell

Cell 021 1151462

Email [paulinec@avondaleint.school.nz](mailto:paulinec@avondaleint.school.nz)

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 1072**

**This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from 1 September 2012 to 1 September 2013.**

**If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162).**

**Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.**



**CONSENT FORM – Year 7 Teachers**

**Research event: Focus Group**

**Researcher: PAULINE CORNWELL**

**Programme: eg. Master of Educational Leadership and Management**

**THESIS TITLE: The challenges New Zealand intermediate school leaders face as they transition year six primary students into year seven, intermediate schools.**

- I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research and I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered.
- I understand that neither my name nor the name of my organisation will be used in any public reports.
- I understand that the principal at my school will not be provided with any raw data or information provided at the focus group interview that I attend.
- I also understand that I will be provided with a transcript of the information from the focus group interview for checking before data analysis is started.
- I am aware that I may withdraw myself or any information that has been provided for this project up to the stage when analysis of data has been completed.
- **I agree to take part in this project.**

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 1072**

**This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from 1 September 2012 to 1 September 2013.**

**If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162).**

**Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcomes.**

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the beliefs and understanding you hold regarding effective primary student transitions in your educational community?
2. What challenges do you identify as the school leader for primary students transitioning into your school?
3. What strategies have been developed in your school to minimise transition challenges for Year 6 students transitioning into your school at Year 7?