# A Journey of Discovery

## Facilitating the Initiation and Application of Schooling Research

Edited by Mary Sinclair

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Application of Schooling Research

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction:
## Cognition and thought leadership –
## What and what next?

*Mary Sinclair and Stewart Germann*
COGNITION EDUCATION RESEARCH TRUST

### Cognition and thought leadership – what?

This is the first ever formal publication from Cognition Education Research Trust (CERT). It has been designed, and is intended, as a publication which will appeal to those working in homes, communities, schools, sector groups, universities, research organisations, government agencies and government to achieve better outcomes for learners, and particularly those learners in the schooling context. It has also been designed to be the first of two publications which CERT will be launching on 31 October 2009, at a celebration of its twentieth birthday.

> " *This first publication is not a research journal, nor is it a policy statement or a compilation of stories written by practitioners.* "

The second publication comprises twelve chapters, authored by twelve well known New Zealanders, reflecting on and challenging aspects of 'Tomorrow's Schools – Twenty Years On'. Together both publications are intended to influence schooling policy, research and practice in New Zealand, as well as inform the next programme of research for CERT.

This first publication is not a research journal, nor is it a policy statement or a compilation of stories written by practitioners. The authors of each of the chapters are all committed educators, focused on using evidence to find out what does make a significant difference to learning outcomes; how those findings can best be published and disseminated; and finally, how they can be used effectively in the increasingly diverse context of New Zealand schooling.

This is the first ever formal publication from **Cognition Education Research Trust (CERT)**. It has been designed to appeal to those working in homes, communities, schools, sector groups, universities, research organisations, Government agencies and Government to **achieve better outcomes for learners**.

They also represent a cross section of New Zealand's credible and emerging base of practitioners, researchers and policy makers. These are mostly not national policy or decision makers; they are applicants for, and recipients of, a research grant from CERT.

CERT was established in 2005 and launched in February 2006 as the Multi Serve Education Trust's the primary source for distributing surplus revenue to support its beneficiaries – New Zealand schools. That revenue has been hard earned within New Zealand, and in a range of international jurisdictions, through a diverse range of school reform, school effectiveness and school improvement services.

Although the outputs and outcomes for each contract have been different, the people facilitating the work are all dedicated professionals, committed to working through strong and effective relationships with the client to build knowledge, understanding, capacity and capability for sustained improvement and/or change. Experience, credibility, co-operation, application, innovation, capacity building, and commitment to the task are all terms that can be used to characterise what and how these people deliver.

The CERT grant recipients have similar characteristics. They have been chosen by the CERT Trustees for their intention and capability to:

- Undertake research which is focused on improving learner outcomes, through significantly improved student participation and engagement in schooling, or improving the effectiveness of teachers and/or school leaders

- Work collaboratively with CERT and with other researchers, policy makers and practitioners to scope and undertake the research

- Build applied education research capacity and capability in New Zealand

- Share and make best use of their research findings to ultimately benefit learners.

CERT is proud to be associated with each of the researchers and authors in this publication. We are confident that their accounts of their research projects will engage the reader, provide more depth and breadth of understanding on key issues facing educators, provoke further thinking and dialogue, generate more questions to be answered, and challenge people to introduce new policy, research and practices to benefit learners.

## Outlining the chapters
### Chapter 2

Robyn Dixon and her colleagues, Deborah Widdowson, Elizabeth Peterson and Christine Rubie-Davies, all of the University of Auckland, examine the critical relationship between expectations and achievement, and in so doing highlight the dearth of research about the expectations of two of the key players in the education system: students, and their parents.

What is already known is that the self-concept of students alters according to whether teachers have high or low expectations. The power of individual teachers to create extraordinary progress within whole classes of students cannot be ignored.

Robyn describes the Beliefs and Expectations about Learning and Achievement (BELA) project, funded by CERT. She asks why it is that, especially in the current climate where the need for high expectations is commonly heard, we have ignored important questions about expectations, including whose expectations are studied. Whose are missing? What difference might it make if we find out?

The focus of the BELA project is to consider whether we can empower students to ameliorate the impact of negative expectations of their teachers and students, and whether the asTTLe system might have a significant new role in doing so.

### Chapter 3

New Zealand's education system, like that of many other countries, is constantly changing, and new features such as a new curriculum, and the five key competencies, provide fertile ground for new research.

Taking a 'blue skies' approach, Rosemary Hipkins and Juliet Twist have asked deceptively simple questions, such as: might the integration of key competencies change the way students learn fundamentals like reading, and if so, how?

In order to help teachers see the new possibilities afforded by these changes, Hipkins and Twist have taken the least understood competency of 'using language, symbols and text' and explored its broader and deeper potential to foster 'lifelong learning in increasingly diverse societies'.

The research methodology positions the team of researchers as 'critical friends', who have conducted most of the fieldwork, minimising the burden of research on the teachers and maximising their time for reflection, analysis and development. This chapter illustrates how the researchers' expertise and regular meetings with teachers supported every step of the project: planning, discussions, evaluation of progress, and next steps.

The overarching finding is that 'literary engagements which foreground key competencies have the potential to …enable readers to expand their imagined world of possibilities'. A subsequent area of enquiry, how students perceive themselves as researchers, saw students 'speaking, interacting, behaving, valuing, believing, reading and writing as literary critics do'.

## Chapter 4

Janinka Greenwood and her colleagues Jo Fletcher and Faye Parkhill, together with Sue Bridges and Mick Grimley, consider the vexed question of why there appears to be little or no improvement statistically in reading achievement, despite extensive funding of professional development in recent years. It reports research focusing on the teaching of reading in Years 7 and 8, discusses the nature and causes of the dip which occurs at that level, and considers factors that lead to successful reading development, including school leadership and the role of teachers as classroom leaders.

The study showed that schools which could give evidence of improving their students' literary achievements also had clear and rich instructional reading programmes and strong leadership within the field. Common features included extensive professional development; principals and teachers with a strong passion for raising literacy achievement; and analysis of achievement data on a whole school basis.

In the classroom, successful teachers shared common behaviours, including specific times of the day when reading was actively taught, having a rich range of instructional processes and a wide range of reading resources, and providing regular and timely feedback and reinforcement.

The chapter concludes by considering possible research sparked by these findings: distinguishing between the plateau in reading achievement across the age group as a whole, and the increased visibility of particular learners who are struggling with reading, as well as a plethora of questions that might lead to deeper understandings of what motivates – or fails to motivate – students to read and the extent to which this impacts on their relationships with peers and their community.

## Chapter 5

Peter Verstappen's research initiative was sparked by a startling remark alerting him to the role schools have in shaping students whose lives will be lived in a different era. The result was the creation of a 2020 vision that redefined a school's relationship with its community.

Many readers will be familiar with both the opportunity and the threat afforded by the freedom to design a local curriculum, and the fresh questions it causes us to consider: how can teachers deconstruct aspects of schooling that stand in the way of change? How can schools help all those with a stake in education to form meaningful partnerships that expand and enrich children's education?

Existing research provided only scant guidance on how to sustain and deepen the change process. The door was open for a longitudinal study of transformational change driven by the new curriculum, which might be sustained amid the competing demands of many stakeholders.

This research had two broad aims: to provide a model for other schools of how to conduct community consultation; and to provide information for those leading the system about the challenges and opportunities this presented to schools.

The project modelled a closely collaborative way for researchers to work with schools, even attending the school picnic! At staff development meetings, researchers promoted reflection among staff, rather than offering advice of challenging teacher perceptions.

This approach resulted in several benefits to the school: enhanced motivation and commitment; access to relevant ideas and wider research; a sense of greater efficacy among staff; and critical reflection and status.

Peter Verstappen concludes by considering the benefits of this researched approach to change alongside a framework of devolved educational management and policy development.

## Chapter 6

Fiona Ell reports on how a voluntary cluster of mathematics teachers formalised their activity to jointly 'raise achievement for all students in Kaikohe'. It tells how, in their need to collaborate on shared problems, they turned to research to inform their choices and drive the process. Those in the cluster worked as a local community for the benefit of local students.

It examines the multiple roles of teachers as learners, as researchers, and as experts on what students need. It details how data was gathered and used as a basis of regular shared discussions to create better programmes and better results for students.

Fiona Ell reports that the most significant aspect of the cluster is that it originated with, and is driven by, teachers. Its agenda is one of self-determination. The cluster has sought and used outside resources to serve its ends, rather than having people or methodologies imposed upon it. She asks how we can make best use of the expertise that resides in teachers and communities.

Researchers, facilitators, teachers and parents all have a valuable perspective on student achievement. In this case, very little outside input was necessary to make a difference to student achievement in Basic Facts. The knowledge and power already resided in the teachers, who were able to make a difference when they were given the time and space to collaborate and share their knowledge.

## Chapter 7

Jannie van Hees provides evidence that the quality and quantity of a child's capacity to express themselves orally at 5 years of age is a strong predictor of their general learning pathway, and in particular, their transition into print.

In low socio-economic schools in particular, many teachers are concerned that a majority of the children entering school at age 5 are under-resourced in overall communicative competency. This limits their capacity to fully engage in learning processes and contexts, and presents considerable challenges in terms of literacy acquisition.

This research study investigates current environmental conditions and pedagogy operating in four Year 1–2 classrooms in four low socio-economic schools; how closely these align with principles and understandings about language acquisition; and whether, by teachers changing some fundamental practices, the language and cognitive acquisition trajectories of these children also fundamentally change.

Although the study is still in its early stages, the results foreground significant patterns and issues about the quality and quantity of each child's oral expression and interactions, including:

- Teachers tend to dominate what gets expressed, by whom, and when
- When child utterances do occur, they are largely syntactically and lexically simple and short, no matter whether the context is curriculum-based or social-communicative based
- Responses by the teacher to child utterances tend to be minimally linguistically and cognitively expanding, and so are not providing the child with effectively scaffolded, rich potential input.

The research study is also showing that if we are to gain informed insights into the expressive capacities of Year 1-2 students in low socio-economic schools, we need to go well beyond the limited oral text assessment information that is currently being gathered on entry and at age 6. More extensive information and analysis will provide timely and needed information about each child's expressive resources, and support a platform on which teaching and learning can be built.

## Chapter 8

Cherie Taylor-Patel's research study focuses on exploring the extent to which conferences run by students for their parents can be considered effective as an alternative reporting method. Traditionally, there has been a lack of clarity in what gets reported, at what standard, and whose job it is to guide schools on reporting procedures.

The most effective influences on student achievement show that student self-reporting is a significant indicator in raising student achievement. The process of students reflecting on their learning, through effective questioning that promotes the articulation of student thinking, is integral to classroom assessment practices that enhance student learning.

During student-led conferences with their parents, students present portfolios of their work in different curriculum areas, engage their parents in interactive activities, and discuss the process of their learning and the progress they have made in relation to their goals and set criteria. Both students and parents are provided with the opportunity to celebrate successes and explore specific difficulties in learning.

Significantly, this reporting method demonstrates a means by which the roles and therefore the power relationships between teachers, students and parents are redefined and clarified.

This research shows that student-led conferences mean a change of roles and focus for teachers, students and their parents. Students themselves enjoyed conducting these conferences and reported understanding more about their learning.

## Chapter 9

Wendy Kofoed's research study examines how the nature of information in written reports strengthens learning partnerships between school and home. She observes that the multiple purposes of reporting have remained remarkably constant over recent decades.

Considering the changing landscape for education and the world students are living in, Wendy Kofoed asked a central question: Is current reporting perceived as purposeful for 21st century learners' parents and teachers?

She created a hierarchy of purposes of reporting, which has led to a framework and model for written reporting. The framework and model not only provides an indication of relative importance and makes purposes explicit, it also emphasises the relationship between levels of purpose.

By examining simple questions such as why, what and how schools report, Wendy Kofoed has gathered information about the purposes of reporting that is important for school leaders and teachers. The research highlights three key principles supporting the purpose of making information trustworthy and meaningful: the use of a key or guidelines to clarify the information presented, the use of common information, and the stylistic features that may enhance clarity of meaning.

## Chapter 10

Pamela Higgins' research examines the elusive ideal for some students and their families of a positive transition to secondary school. It focuses on students who have faced learning challenges at primary school, and identifies factors perceived by them, their parents and teachers as facilitating positive transitions.

This research project is exploring the transition from Year 8 to Year 9 of children who have learning support needs and/or are considered to be vulnerable for social, cultural or emotional reasons.

There is a recurring pattern of incidental findings with regard to the poorer transition of children with learning or other difficulties which has not been adequately addressed in research or practice.

Yet early transition experiences and school practices at secondary school are critical to long-term successful outcomes. The length of time a student takes to settle into secondary school is negatively associated with a student's attitude to learning. Interestingly, a link can be discerned between late enrolments in the first year of secondary schooling, and subsequent student stand-downs and suspensions.

## Chapter 11

Sue Jury's research examines disparity of achievement across similar schools in one community. Against the backdrop of multiple school mergers, the community formed a cluster to enhance educational outcomes for all its students, focusing on setting goals for improved levels of literacy, increasing teacher content knowledge, supporting the transfer of literacy pedagogy to practice, and developing and supporting the implementation of professional learning communities. After four years' work, results showed that while the mean levels of achievement had improved, not all schools had achieved the same degree of improvement.

This context set the frame for Sue Jury's recently started doctoral research, focused on why this variation occurs, what factors impact on sustained student achievement, and how improvement projects can enhance outcomes for students within and across schools.

## Chapter 12

Jenny Horsley, our first Fulbright (NZ) and CERT Research Scholar, considers the applicability of acceleration for high ability students in New Zealand and identifies some of the provisions already in place. She is particularly interested in a group of students who have demonstrated high academic ability, are Māori, and are attending low decile schools.

She considers the model of the Centre for Talented Youth at John Hopkins University alongside recent reports on New Zealand's inconsistent approaches to teaching gifted and talented students. While acceleration of students to higher levels is common practice overseas, New Zealand takes a more cautious approach, preferring enrichment by adding more material at the level at which the student is currently working.

International literature shows that, for the most able students, the more radical their acceleration, the greater their overall satisfaction with life. They like the opportunities acceleration provides to work with their intellectual peers, and to experience 'heightened interest' in their fields of study.

New Zealand's qualification system has provision to recognise students who perform 'exceptionally well'. The data shows that Year 11 students gaining NCEA Level 3 are more likely to be Māori than any other ethnicity, and to come from lower decile schools.

Jenny Horsley urges our system to continue to support students with high academic ability, to understand more about the factors used to identify them, and to foster broader discussions about what works best for these students, and what outcomes for them are expected and acceptable.

> *International literature shows that, for the most able students, the more radical their acceleration, the greater their overall satisfaction with life.*

# Cognition and thought leadership –
## what next?

So, what next, and what would the CERT Trustees like you to do with this publication, and the second one reflecting on and challenging aspects of Tomorrow's Schools?

It seems to us that the content of the publications is just the start of a sustained and exciting journey. The resource CERT has distributed since January 2007 has 'kick started' the establishment and growth of a network of people and organisations whose innovation, commitment and research has the potential to have a significant positive impact and influence on student learning outcomes. These are people and organisations that mostly do not have formal roles in government or in the Ministry of Education. Rather they are 'on the ground', and they have had the courage to 'put up their hands' and verify their beliefs and understandings through robust investigation and research.

*Imagine a critical mass of peoples and organisations in New Zealand, and internationally, networking in a similar way. What more might we achieve by having networks of people on the ground, working collaboratively with those in formal policy and/or decision making roles?*

On 31 October 2009, the Trustees will re-launch CERT as a policy and research institute, to be named the Cognition Institute. The overriding reasons for rebranding and renaming CERT are to secure grants for research projects such as those featured in this publication, as well as to provide further opportunity for:

- providing 'thought leadership' in New Zealand to identify, scope and commission research and policy which is proven to be needed and which is not being led by other agencies, such as the Ministry of Education

- developing and implementing innovative strategies for publishing and disseminating research and policy findings

- establishing, initiating and evaluating strategies to make best use of sponsored research and policy

- fostering an increasing diversity of 'ground up' networks, people and organisations to actively contribute to education research and policy identification, scoping, implementation, publication, dissemination and use.

Apart from your initial reading of both publications, we therefore hope that you will keep them handy and in doing so, reread those chapters you are particularly interested in, share them with those whom you talk to regularly, and contact the Cognition Institute and the authors to give us feedback, find out more about our work, and talk about how you can be involved.

We are vitally interested in your views on our 'what next?' question, and about how thought leadership and practice associated with schooling can be led from the 'ground up', in collaboration with those in 'top down' roles.

Our Cognition Institute vision as a 'ground up' organisation is to be a primary thought leader in education. Our mission is to: 'Inform and influence discussion, discourse, policy and practice in education based on high quality research and evidence'.

If you haven't already done so, please consider joining our network and exploring how you can participate in and actively contribute to the Cognition Institute. Contact Mary Sinclair at msinclair@cognition.co.nz, mobile (027) 296 8151.

We look forward to hearing from you.

**Stewart Germann**
Chairman
Cognition Education
Research Trust
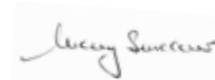
*Mary Sinclair*
Executive Trustee
Cognition Education
Research Trust

**Stewart Germann** was appointed Chairman of Multi Serve Education Trust in October 1989. It is now known as Cognition Education Trust, and Stewart has been its chairman for the whole 20 years.

A former lecturer at the University of Auckland Law School, he holds the degrees of BCom and LLB from the University of Auckland and is a Notary Public. He is a past president of Chartered Secretaries New Zealand Inc and a past chairman of the Franchise Association of New Zealand. In 1993 he founded Stewart Germann Law Office, the pre-eminent law firm in New Zealand in relation to franchising and licensing, undertaking work in New Zealand, Australia, the UK, Canada and the USA.

Stewart is very proud of the achievements of Cognition, which employs many talented people. He is married to Janice, a former primary school teacher, has four children, and is passionate about education.

**Mary Sinclair** is the Executive Trustee for Cognition Education Research Trust (CERT). In this role, she has responsibility for leading Cognition Education Trust's philanthropic contribution to the New Zealand schooling community through high quality applied research. Mary also contributes to Cognition Education services, and has spent much of the last two years leading the policy and establishment of the Qatar Office for Registration, Licencing and Accreditation for teachers and school leaders.

In the early part of her career, Mary worked as a teacher, middle and senior manager in New Zealand secondary schools. With the launch of Tomorrow's Schools in October 1989, Mary moved to the Ministry of Education, working first in the Whangarei regional office and, from 1994 to 2004, in the National Office in Wellington. While there, she was appointed as Senior Manager Schools Monitoring and Support to develop and initiate New Zealand's policy on school support and school improvement.

Mary is a board member of several organisations, including the International Congress of School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI), a position she has held since managing the congress's annual meeting in New Zealand in 2008.

# Chapter 2

## Expectations:
## Raising achievement

*Robyn Dixon, Deborah Widdowson,*
*Elizabeth Peterson and Christine Rubie-Davies*
UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND

### Introduction:
### Teacher expectations

> " *It has been shown that if, when students first enter primary school, teacher expectations are either too high or too low in relation to student potential, student achievement will align with teacher expectations.* "

The influence of **teacher expectations** on students has long been recognised. Expectations have been shown to have a **measurable effect** on outcomes, particularly for **vulnerable students**.

The influence of teacher expectations on students has long been recognised. Expectations have been shown to have a measurable effect on outcomes, and while some research has shown these effects to be small, effects for vulnerable students have been found to be large. Such findings would seem particularly important given that in New Zealand, large numbers of students appear to underachieve, leaving school as soon as they are able and without any formal qualifications. As recently as 2007, 35 percent of Māori and 26 percent of Pasifika school leavers left school without completing Level 1 NCEA. It has been shown that if, when students first enter primary school, teacher expectations are either too high or too low in relation to student potential, student achievement will align with teacher expectations. Thus, it would appear that students internalise teachers' expectations and begin to behave accordingly. When this occurs, it can have a sustained effect on expectations, with teachers failing to challenge students and students feeling under–challenged or inappropriately challenged, ultimately leading to under–achievement.

To date, the emphasis of research designed to enhance academic achievement has almost exclusively focused on academic variables and instructional practices, with varying levels of success. Yet the teacher expectation research suggests that the socioemotional variables, including the role of teacher expectations, which are at play in the classroom can have as much, if not more, effect on student outcomes. High teacher expectations are associated with specific teacher beliefs and practices, which lead to significantly enhanced outcomes for students (Rubie-Davies, 2007).
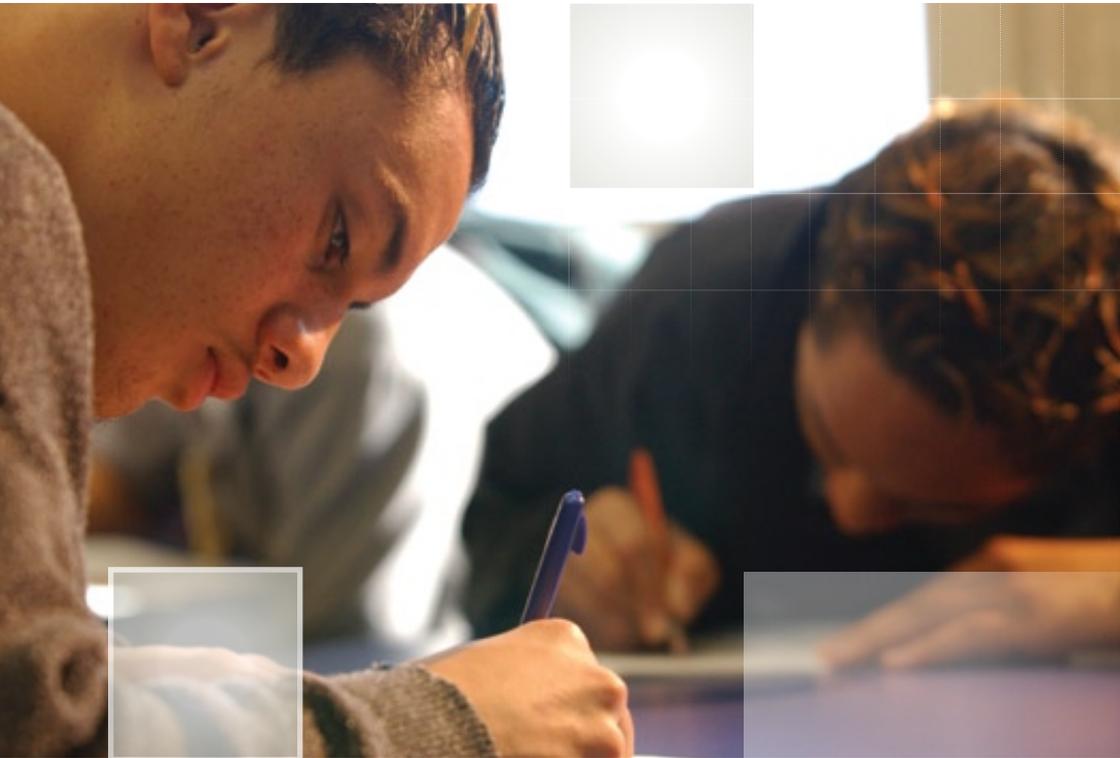
Here in New Zealand, Professor Russell Bishop and colleagues (Bishop et al., 2003) have shown that Māori secondary school students attribute their lack of success at school in large part to poor relationships with their teachers, coupled with teachers' low expectations of Māori. A key component of the Te Kotahitanga programme, which these researchers have developed, has been to focus on changing teacher expectations for Māori students, and to enhance the socioemotional environment by introducing cooperative grouping and greater student autonomy. These factors have been identified by leading expectation researchers as practices used by teachers with high expectations. To date, the results achieved by Te Kotahitanga have been impressive, with greater numbers of Māori and Pasifika students in schools where the programme has been introduced achieving a greater number of NCEA standards than had done so prior to its introduction.

Interestingly, the early teacher expectation research was almost exclusively conducted in primary schools; it suggested that girls were more susceptible than boys to teacher expectations, as were younger relative to older students. Given such findings, it was assumed that middle school (intermediate) and secondary school students would be less vulnerable to teacher expectations, and so this phenomenon was rarely investigated in these contexts. However, relatively recently, the belief that teacher expectations do not affect the outcomes of older students has been questioned, and a number of researchers have begun exploring expectations beyond the primary level.

Such studies have suggested that, while the effect of expectations may level out across the primary school years, their impact increases at points of transition. For example, in one study, teacher expectations were found to significantly impact on student motivation and academic outcomes when students moved from primary to middle school. Similarly, other researchers have shown that teacher expectations affect student achievement on standardised tests at Grades 9 and 10, the point at which students are transitioning from middle to high school, or, in New Zealand, from intermediate to secondary school. Further, when students move to secondary school, teacher expectations suddenly become more important than students' own expectations in predicting student achievement.

## Student expectations

While teacher expectations of students have been extensively studied, students' expectations for their own academic outcomes have received little attention. Certainly, the research does suggest that teacher expectations have more effect on student outcomes than student outcomes have on teacher expectations (Rubie-Davies, 2008), but this is a different question. We could locate only one study which examined secondary school students' expectations of themselves. The researchers (Tavani & Losh, 2003) found strong correlations between student expectations and motivation, and similarly strong correlations between student expectations and self-confidence. Tavani and Losh argued that the power of self-belief should not be underestimated, and that they had shown strong relationships between student beliefs and academic performance.

The fact that we could locate only this one study examining student self-expectations points to the general lack of attention in research paid to the student voice. While it is clear that teacher expectations have effects on students, asking students about their own expectations, particularly if these could be aligned to their teachers' expectations, would provide useful information. It could create a complete picture of the pathway of expectations from teacher to student, to student outcomes, to student self-expectations. Such a study has not, however, been conducted. The only study that approximates such a proposal is one completed by Rubie-Davies (2006), in primary rather than secondary school. She showed that student self-concept, rather than students' expectations of themselves, in maths and reading altered considerably over one year when students were in classes with teachers who either had very high, or very low, expectations for all their students (high and low expectation teachers). Predictably, the self-concept of students with high expectation teachers was enhanced, while that of students with low expectation teachers declined considerably. Similarly, students whose teachers had high expectations made significant academic gains over one year, while those students whose teachers had low expectations often regressed.

## Parent expectations

Another group whose expectations have been little investigated is parents. It is accepted that parents can have large effects on their children's schooling outcomes. Indeed, some teachers attribute students' poor performance to their home background (i.e. they see parents, rather than teachers, as needing to take responsibility for students' lack of success). It therefore seems surprising that the effect of parent expectations on their adolescent children has received little attention.

Ma (2001) has contended that parent expectations have a far greater effect on student university aspirations than teacher expectations. Other research (van der Hoeven-van Doornum et al., 1993) has found a relationship between parent expectations and young adolescents' mathematics achievement, particularly for girls. However, this study did not control for prior achievement or teacher expectations, so the results may simply reflect teacher attitudes or expectations that align with previous student results. This is because it is difficult to unravel the effect of previous performance on subsequent achievement (known to be highly correlated) from parents' expectations. Hence, although there are widely held beliefs that parent expectations influence student expectations and outcomes, the evidence appears sketchy, suggesting this is an area worthy of further research.

## Looking more closely at expectations

It is interesting that in the current climate, we hear a great deal, particularly from government agencies, about the need for high expectations (generally meaning high teacher expectations); yet the number of researchers working in this interesting area has been steadily dwindling. There is an assumption that there is nothing new to find. However, the overview above has identified several areas in which there are important questions still to be answered.

Further, given the more recent focus on the importance of teacher attitudes (of which expectations are but one aspect) for student learning, it appears timely to look more closely

*While it is true that developing students' abilities to self-regulate and to set themselves high expectations offers exciting possibilities in terms of promoting student achievement, the power of the individual teacher to create extraordinary progress within whole classes of students cannot be ignored.*

at the relationship between teacher expectations and the socioemotional environment of classrooms, and what effects this has on student outcomes. We know a lot about what constitutes the effective teacher in an instructional sense, and about practices associated with high expectation teachers; but we know very little about teacher attitudes, characteristics and beliefs that can significantly moderate achievement outcomes for students.

Clearly, effective and non-effective instructional practices have large effects on student achievement. However, when teacher characteristics, such as teacher expectations, have been considered in research, the resulting outcomes for students have been quite startling. For example, McKown and Weinstein (2008) explored the role of classroom context in moderating the relationship between child ethnicity and teacher expectations. They found that in classes where students reported high levels of differential treatment by teachers towards high and low achieving students, teacher expectations for White and Asian-American students were between .75 and 1.00 standard deviations higher than they were for African-American and Latino students, despite similar achievement. In other classes where the differentiation by teachers was not obvious, teacher expectations were based on achievement, not ethnicity. In the high differentiation classes, teacher expectations accounted for up to .38 standard deviations of the end of year ethnic achievement gap.

Clearly, not all teachers are the same. Just as effective instructional practices have been extensively investigated, it seems clear that teacher attitudes, beliefs and expectations, and how these then frame the socioemotional environment of the classroom, are worthy of far more attention and investigation than they have received so far. While it is true that developing students' abilities to self-regulate and to set themselves high expectations offers exciting possibilities in terms of promoting student achievement, the power of the individual teacher to create extraordinary progress within whole classes of students cannot be ignored. The clear need for additional research into individual teacher beliefs, attitudes and characteristics that promote student learning offers many exciting possibilities.

# The BELA project

The Beliefs and Expectations about Learning and Achievement (BELA) project, which is funded by the Cognition Education Research Trust, has enabled the research team (led by Associate Professor and Director of the Centre for Child and Family Research, Dr Robyn Dixon; Associate Director, Dr Deborah Widdowson; Dr Elizabeth Peterson, Department of Psychology and Dr Christine Rubie-Davies, Faculty of Education) to explore some of the ideas presented above. During the initial phase of the project, the team conducted focus groups with teachers, parents and students in Years 9 and 10 from three secondary schools (one low, one middle and one high decile) from across Auckland, to determine each group's beliefs and expectations about schooling. We were also interested in the expectations each group had of the others in the triangle: teachers, parents and students. One exciting finding from the study was the importance teachers, parents and students all placed on the teacher-student relationship as being critical to student success. A further finding was the positivity expressed by students and parents about schooling, and its potential to enhance the future of students.

The collective perceptions of teachers, parents and students enabled us to create questionnaires for each group which were then distributed to a representative national sample of New Zealand secondary schools. We are currently analysing these results, which will provide extremely rich data about the beliefs and expectations of the three groups, and enable us to identify similarities and differences within and across the groups.

Since we know that expectations and achievement are interdependent, we turned our attention this year towards the question of whether we can empower students to ameliorate the impact of negative expectations, and/or the possibly conflicting expectations, of their teachers and parents. One potential means of achieving this might be to teach students to monitor their own expectations and achievement, and thus regulate their own learning. We believe this should be possible if students are given the opportunity to set achievable goals in line with their prior

*" Since we know that expectations and achievement are interdependent, we turned our attention this year towards the question of whether we can empower students to ameliorate the impact of negative expectations, and/or the possibly conflicting expectations, of their teachers and parents. "*

achievement, and to self-evaluate their progress using objective data. The asTTle system provides a means by which this might happen: students sit an asTTle test, and the Individual Learning Pathway that results from the test provides clearly stated learning outcomes that can be used to assist students to understand what they need to do to enhance their learning.

Currently, most schools either have not seen the potential of asTTle to become a self-regulatory tool for students, or have chosen not to allow students access to their own achievement data. Yet it offers the potential for students to diagnose their weaknesses and select goals to achieve, based on the learning outcomes stated in the Individual Learning Pathway report. Students can then monitor their progress towards their goals, and set and sit further tests.

To this end, we are currently conducting an intervention study in three Auckland secondary schools. In the first instance, students and teachers in two Year 10 classes (an intervention class and a comparison class) at each school, as well as the students' parents, are completing the questionnaire used in the national study. This will allow us to match teacher and parent data to that of specific students, something we were unable to do in the national survey. Students then sit an asTTle test. Those in the intervention class are then invited to set their own goals, using the information provided in the Individual Learning Pathway report. Subsequent tests result in the generation of new Individual Learning Pathway reports, which are used by the students to monitor their outcomes in relation to goals set, and then set new goals for the next unit of study. To date, students appear to appreciate the opportunity to engage with this information.

Finally, there are already plans afoot for a further project involving a teacher expectation intervention designed to raise teachers' expectations, while teaching them about the beliefs and characteristics of high expectation teachers. The possibilities in this stimulating area are endless.

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## CERT Comment

The research by Robyn Dixon and her colleagues is a good example of the intent of the Cognition Education Research Trust. It shows where new knowledge can be explored, the relevant importance of that knowledge, and its potential to quickly influence student outcomes. It also alerts us to new questions such as: 'If students whose teachers have high expectations make significant academic gains, what might this mean for pre-service training programmes, for registered teacher criteria, for the rewards that teachers might receive?' The CERT Trustees are committed to working with the University of Auckland team to interrogate, share and encourage use of the research findings and products, as well as explore new research that may need to be undertaken to deepen and broaden New Zealand understanding of the topic.



*Associate Professor Robyn Dixon*

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# Chapter 3

## Children's literary engagements with texts:
Preliminary findings from the
Lifelong Literacy research project

*Rosemary Hipkins and Juliet Twist*
NZ COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

### Introduction

The Lifelong Literacy project, funded by the Cognition Trust, asked a deceptively simple 'blue skies' question: might the teaching of reading be changed by the integration of key competencies into the reading programmes of primary schools, and if so, how and to what effect? This paper begins by briefly outlining the context in which this question was framed. It then outlines how a New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) team investigated the potential of the key competencies to change the ways reading is taught. The third and longest section describes one thread of the multiply-stranded findings that emerged. The final section discusses the implications of these findings, both for classroom practice and for further research.

### Reading key competencies in a complex frame

The recently released New Zealand Curriculum framework (NZC) includes a set of five key competencies that could potentially stimulate innovation and change in teaching and learning. They are: thinking; using language, symbols and texts; managing self; relating to others; and participating and contributing (Ministry of Education, 2007:12-13). The idea of key competencies originated in an OECD project which had its roots in 1990s advocacy for a focus on outcomes related to employment skills (Reid, 2006). In New Zealand, key competencies were initially described as a replacement for the 'essential skills' of the 1990s curriculum documents, with the following important proviso:

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*More complex than skills, the competencies draw also on knowledge, attitudes and values in ways that lead to action. They are not separate and stand-alone. They are key to learning in every learning area.* (Ministry of Education, 2007:12, emphasis added)

This more complex reading is apparent both in the OECD work (e.g. Rychen, 2004), and in the commissioned research that shaped the adaptation of the OECD competencies for the New Zealand context. For example, initial scoping explicitly linked the competencies to the imperative for fostering lifelong learning in increasingly diverse societies, where the rapid spread of new technologies leads to constant change (Brewerton, 2004). In such contexts, elementary reading skills can be seen as 'old basics', a necessary but not sufficient foundation for participation in community life (Education Queensland, 2000).

Despite these clear signals, early indications were that a skills–based reading of key competencies was likely to be perpetuated unless new possibilities were made explicit to teachers. For example, after the draft curriculum document was released for consultation, using language, symbols and texts appeared to be the least easily understood key competency; it was often initially interpreted as the 'literacy and numeracy' competency with an old-basics framing (Boyd and Watson, 2006). By contrast, our early explorations began to point to a much broader and deeper potential, such as knowing when and how to use all the communication tools and conventions of any one discipline area, or any other culturally constructed 'way of knowing', and understanding how aspects of the ways people see and interpret the world are shaped by the tools and ideas they know how to access and use (Hipkins, 2006).

Recent research suggests that the transformative potential intended for new curriculum components such as key competencies is more likely to be achieved if they are read as just one element in a complex curriculum, where the interactions between all the parts determine the learning opportunities that emerge (Cowie, Hipkins et al., in press). In the context of learning literacy skills, relevant elements of NZC could include: the English learning area, where literary success is seen as 'fundamental to success across the curriculum' (p.18); all five key competencies, separately and in combination

"*Complex systems are more than the sum of their parts, and the interactions between the various parts are the drivers that allow the whole system to learn and adapt to change.*"

(pp.12–13); the vision statement, where lifelong learners are described as 'literate and numerate' as well as 'active seekers, users and creators of knowledge' (p.8); 'learning to learn' as one of eight principles that are foundational to all curriculum decisions (p.9); and the value of 'excellence, by aiming high and by persevering in the face of difficulties' (p.10).

Finding ways to bring these many elements into alignment could be seen as a daunting and complicated planning exercise. We think it is more helpfully interpreted by thinking about classrooms as complex systems in which learning can emerge, given favourable conditions. Complex systems are more than the sum of their parts, and the interactions between the various parts are the drivers that allow the whole system to learn and adapt to change. (For an extended discussion of learning and emergence in both physical and social systems contexts, see Capra, 2002.) We wanted to see what learning could emerge from a dynamic integration of key competencies into the classroom interactions that take place during reading instruction in primary classrooms.

## Establishing researcher–teacher partnerships

The researchers worked with Year 3-6 teachers from four different schools in the Wellington area. These teachers had been nominated by their schools as practitioners who could bring new understandings back to the other staff, and lead ongoing professional learning during and after the project completion. All four school principals attended the initial workshop. Our aim was to build collective project ownership, working in a learning partnership with different but complementary roles. In some action research projects, the external researchers are positioned as resource people who act as facilitators and critical friends, supporting practitioner-researchers to carry out fieldwork and analysis (Community Economic Development Action Research Project, 2004). In this project, NZCER researchers were positioned as critical friends who would also conduct most of the fieldwork, minimising the burden of the research on the teachers involved, and maximising their time for reflection, analysis and development.

We designed the research to proceed in a manner that we hoped would be 'psychologically spacious' for all participants (Garvey Berger, 2004). In an initial workshop, researchers and teachers shared their respective understandings of key competencies and literacy practices, and raised questions for further probing. With the support of the NZCER team, the teachers designed and implemented a programme/approach that they had co-constructed during and after the workshop. Each school's research question was refined after the first workshop, as might be expected once specific contexts were examined further.

A pair of researchers worked with a pair of teachers in each school. They visited several times in the first year of the project to: plan together; observe in each teacher's classroom as ideas were enacted; discuss the events that unfolded with the teachers; informally evaluate progress; and plan next steps in the light of the questions raised. The whole group came back together at the end of the first year to share what had been learned. Where possible, the process was repeated in the second year. (As can happen in longer running projects, some teachers moved on from their schools at the end of the first year.) The next section illustrates the process in action, and discusses one thread of the learning that emerged.

## Opening up interpretive spaces as children learn to read

*[L]iterary engagements, and the practices of interpretation that are conditioned by those engagements, can become useful ways for people not only to maintain a sense of personal coherence but, as well, to expand their imagined world of possibilities.*
(Sumara, 2002: xiii)

At first, most of the teachers did not think that key competencies would impact on ways they taught reading; but this view gradually changed, as the transformative potential of the key competencies became more apparent to them. The overarching finding of the project is that literary engagements which foreground key competencies have the potential to open up interpretive space, and so enable readers to expand their imagined world of possibilities.

" *Making personal connections to a text is an important enabler of engagement in reading; this in turn could be key to helping beginning readers 'persevere in face of difficulties'.* "

Interpretation occurs when the world announced by the text connects with the world of the reader. Text details that do not have an explicitly stated meaning open up a space where the reader's unique history of experiences within the world can be brought to the text, and a site for interpretation can be created. For example, the text 'when house prices went up, the area became colonised by arty types' might be interpreted differently according to whether the reader has had a mortgage application turned down by the bank, or works in the film industry, or is concerned about the possibility of the area they live in becoming increasingly affluent. Making personal connections to a text is an important enabler of engagement in reading; this in turn could be key to helping beginning readers 'persevere in face of difficulties' (which is, as outlined above, part of the NZC definition of excellence as a value to be fostered).

Not every form of literary engagement opens up interpretive space – some forms close it down. Our baseline data suggested that classroom literary engagement was not necessarily conducive to students making use of their unique history of experiences within the world in order to interpret what they were reading. Instead, in general both students and teachers adopted passive roles as discoverers of the author's prescribed meaning. Indeed, the term 'background knowledge' did not usually refer to what readers bring to a text – their remembered, current, and imagined experiences – but rather to information provided by the teacher prior to reading, where the text about to be read included an unfamiliar context and/ or vocabulary. However, when teachers began to use key competencies to explore the idea that readers should use their experiences to interpret text, a gradual opening up of interpretive space occurred.

In one school, the key competency 'participating and contributing' was foregrounded as the means of exploration. Over a period of weeks, our conversations with the teachers had led to a focus on what reading group conversations might look like when students made use of their background knowledge to interpret text – that is, what participating and contributing as a member of a reading group looks like. Our initial observations in this school revealed classes where student

background was valued; we had no doubt this was a school where diversity was encouraged, and concluded that it was an environment where students could safely express diverse views. So the general classroom environment was conducive to using background knowledge. Yet during group reading conversations, students did not bring their background to their work – at least, not explicitly.

There was one notable example, very early on in the research, of a student using her background knowledge to interpret text, but not verbalising her interpretation. During the reading of a text about dogs working in airports to detect quarantine goods, a girl sat throughout the session with her hands over the lower part of her face in what appeared to be disbelief. Although she occasionally contributed to the conversation, nothing she said related to her apparent disbelief. It was only after the session that the teacher explained that the girl's culture considers dogs unclean – they are scavengers and would certainly never work with people in a role considered as important as that implied by the text. Here we had an instance where the student was most definitely using her background to interpret, and her teacher was well aware of her particular interpretation; but neither seemed to appreciate that participating and contributing as part of a reading group necessarily involves expressing diverse interpretations, and that without that diversity, students' 'imagined worlds of possibilities' are constrained.

As a result of our analysis of instances such as this, we began to explore the idea of the classroom as a literary environment. We wanted to know what kind of environment helped students to appreciate that using background knowledge to interpret is precisely what participating and contributing as a member of a reading group is all about. We decided that work needed to be done on how the students perceived themselves as readers.

In general, their conversations around texts were characterised by their uncovering of the author's meaning. We worked with the teachers to change this, so that the students could come to see themselves as having agency and authority as readers. One teacher saw it in terms of the students needing to think of themselves as 'the boss of the text'.

> *Our aim was to make each classroom literary environment a place where students not only believe in the beauty of literature, but also believe in its potential to illuminate their understanding of what goes on in the social sphere, and to change lives and even societies.*

We then experimented with the setting up of classroom environments where the students saw themselves as part of a literary community, mirroring literary communities outside the classroom. We wondered if, through immersion in this environment, students would come to see themselves as part of an authentic and credible community, and would begin to take on more active reading roles as a result. The teachers began immersing their students in the discourse of literature, with the students speaking, interacting, behaving, valuing, believing, reading and writing as literary critics do.

Our aim was to make each classroom literary environment a place where students not only believe in the beauty of literature, but also believe in its potential to illuminate their understanding of what goes on in the social sphere, and to change lives and even societies. Such a classroom would be a place where students believe in the capacity of literature to develop intellectual rigour, while also seeing it as a place to read for pleasure and to relax. This classroom would have space for group discussion and more private spaces for individuals, and the timetable would reflect a belief in the value of literature. We wanted the literary classroom to be a place where students understand that their interpretations are the result of their experiences within the world, and a place where they relate what they read to their lives, to the lives of others, and to other texts. Such a classroom would also be a place where students expect to have informed debates with other readers about the merits of works of literature, and to modify their interpretations in response to the interpretations of others.

In essence, we had constructed a definition of what it means to participate and contribute as a member of a reading group. Teachers began to establish environments which experienced literary critics would recognise – literary classrooms that had an authentic 'feel' to them. However, our assertion that a literary environment would be a place where students expect to have informed debates with other readers about the merits of works of literature highlighted a gap in classroom practice. Students were not yet able to have particularly well informed debates about the merits of a work of literature, because they were not well informed about text construction.

The right environment might increase a sense of agency, and so make students more disposed towards using background knowledge to interpret; but students who do not understand how texts are constructed do not actually have anything to interpret. Accordingly, teachers began to explicitly instruct students in text construction.

To assist the teachers in the explicit instruction of text construction, resources from the Assessment Resources Bank (ARBs) were used, not to assess, but as guides for the teachers on teaching the construction of character. The teachers were also given a resource developed especially for them, called *How much is Cinderella's father to blame for her situation?* In this resource teachers are given an analysis of all the evidence from a version of the Cinderella story which has been written in a way that could lead to multiple readings of the father's blameworthiness. Evidence relates to the father's appearance, what he says, what he does, what he thinks. The written text explicitly tells readers some things that are contradicted by the visual text, thereby inviting active interpretation of possible meanings, and creating a space for readers to bring their life experiences to the text. Illustrating the productivity of the collaboration, one teacher, for example, whose first observed lesson had been an exploration of the author's meaning, could see exactly what to do with the Cinderella resource once it had been developed, and she proceeded to use it in the manner intended.

## Literacy as a participatory competency:
what emerges at the intersection of knowledge, skills, and life experiences

The discussion above focuses on 'participating and contributing' as the key competency that comes to the fore when teachers work with students to open up engaging spaces for literary interpretation of texts. This does not mean that the other key competencies are not in play, but simply reflects that within the linear constraints of a written text, only one element of a complex whole can be addressed at a time. As shown by the following quotes from some of the children engaged in a literary reading of the Cinderella story, they actively brought their own life experiences (relating to others) to the act of

interpretation (thinking), stimulated by the mismatch between the verbal and visual clues (using language, symbols and texts). As the examples of the children's comments below show, what emerges is a sense of active engagement in reading that is likely to be key to persevering with further, increasingly demanding, encounters with written text (managing self). This engagement helps to foster the lifelong learning dispositions that NZC signals as being central to the vision of who we want our young people to be and become.

*He's an in-between parent. He's flawed – he's an adult. [laughs]*

*I think he's forgetful and he lives in a bubble, but there's goodness in him. [At the end] I think he sort of popped out of his bubble and realised what had happened… because, look, on this page he's making sure Cinderella tries on the slipper.*

*His decision to marry the stepmother was hasty.
He had only known her for two weeks!*

*He was probably lonely and wanted a new wife.
It's like [name]'s mum, she took her boyfriend back because she was lonely – he'd had an affair.*

*Maybe he thought marrying someone with two daughters would make life better for Cinderella?*

We began this chapter by describing the complex construction of key competencies as drawing on 'knowledge, attitudes and values in ways that lead to action' (NZC, 2007: 12). We have illustrated that complexity by highlighting: the understandings of text features that need to be developed (an academic knowledge component); the importance of drawing on children's life experiences (a contextual knowledge component, with associated dimensions of attitudes and values brought from home life to school); and the action involved, as entailing both individual and collaborative interpretation of the text.

The skills of reading as text decoding, while necessary, are by no means sufficient here. This paper gives one small snapshot of what can emerge at the intersection of multiple dimensions of competency, as children learn to become literate. Many more such examples, robustly underpinned by relevant research, will be needed if teachers are to understand, value, and actively foster the key competencies as 'key to learning in every learning area'.

## Acknowledgements

The NZCER team thanks the Cognition Trust for affording us the rare opportunity to conduct a 'blue skies' project. We are especially grateful to the teachers from our four research schools. All of them put their teaching of reading on the line, so they could contribute their knowledge and skills to a project whose directions none of us could fully anticipate at the outset.

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## CERT Comment

This project, based at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, has the potential to influence policy, research and practice related to New Zealand curriculum provision, now and well into the future. It is a truly exciting piece of applied research which cannot help but inspire all those involved in the profession who aim to make the classroom environment a place where students 'not only believe in the beauty of literature, but also believe in its potential to... change lives, and even societies'. The research team approach has helped professionals in the schools participating in the research to notice and understand things they might otherwise be too occupied to notice. At the same time, the research team has clearly learned much from working closely in the schools with the professionals. This approach is fundamental to what CERT is all about – building understanding, knowledge, capacity and interdependencies in and between researchers and professional practitioners, in order to enhance learning outcomes for students.



*Dr. Rosemary Hipkins and Juliet Twist*

**Rosemary Hipkins** is Chief Researcher for the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), with specific responsibilities for building links between research and practice. She is interested in how the OECD key competencies (as described in the revised national curriculum) might help transform teaching and assessment practice and support developments in learning for the 21st century. Her current work includes ongoing research in a range of aspects of curriculum implementation, including implications for alignment of the NCEA standards to the senior secondary school curriculum.

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# Chapter 4

## What happens to reading progress in New Zealand Year 7-8 classes?
The plateau, literacy leadership and the remaining tail

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## Introduction:
### Focus and context of the research

A dip or plateau in students' literacy learning progress is reported internationally to occur between the ages of 9 and 13. In New Zealand, concerns are raised in the media and in political debate about the underachievement of children in terms of literacy. In particular, it is frequently cited that 20 percent are failing in reading. The most recent NEMP Report (Crooks, Smith & Flockton, 2009) indicates little or no improvement statistically in reading achievement, despite extensive funding of professional development during the last four years in many schools.

This discussion is grounded in a research study, funded by the Cognition Education Research Trust, which examined school practice in teaching reading in Years 7 and 8. It briefly reports the findings, discusses the nature and causes of the dip, and offers an emerging theorisation of factors that lead to successful reading development.

There is a growing body of research evidence internationally (Brozo, Shiel & Topping, 2007; Farstrup, 2005; Hattie, 2007) to support the proposition that reading progress drops off as students move through the schooling system and that reading is often not effectively taught at the 9- to 13–year–old age level. For example, recent research in New Zealand (Hattie, 2007; McNaughton, Amituanai–Toloa & Lei, 2007) indicates that there appears to be a 'tapering off' or 'plateauing' of progress in reading for a significant number of students in low socio–economic schools, despite successful interventions at an earlier level.

## Methodological approach

Our project reviewed the analysis of reading development and the factors that impact on it in national and international literature. Developing a questionnaire based on the core concepts within the literature, we then surveyed teachers and leaders in the schools of the upper South Island. This yielded quantitative results about classroom teaching assessment practices, choice of instructional materials, and teachers' perceptions of their students' progress. Next, drawing again on the conceptual framework developed from the literature and the recommendations of our Advisory Group, we selected five schools that have a reputation for effective teaching of reading, and studied them closely to identity key features of their practice. In these case studies we observed reading classes, examined results obtained through nationally standardised tests, and interviewed teachers, students, principals, syndicate leaders and parents. The case studies gave us rich qualitative data that allowed us to build models of effective practice.

## Short overview of significant literature

Reading theorists focus on a variety of approaches. Some theorists (see, for example, Pressley et al., 2002) variously discuss the need for children to develop phonological awareness, word level strategies, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension strategies. Others (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Leu et al., 2004; New London Group, 2000) argue the importance of critical literacy approaches, especially in terms of the needs of this age group. Numerous researchers (Taleni et al., 2007) emphasise the need for socio-culturally relevant reading resources, contexts and tasks. Alton-Lee (2003) and McNaughton (2002) stress that successful literacy instruction builds on the knowledge and understandings that children bring to the learning environment from their diverse cultural and language backgrounds. Allington (2003), Hattie (1999) and Nuthall (2007) emphasise that all children need explicit instruction about some aspects of literacy processes, and not every child 'gets it' after a single lesson.

A body of literature talks about the importance of the school environment, particularly student-teacher relationships (Barber & Olsen, 2004). The importance of effective leadership, collaborative teams of teachers, a school-wide reading plan, and focused professional development are highlighted (see, for example, Fisher & Frey, 2007; Timperley et al., 2007). Recent studies, particularly, emphasise the social nature of reading (DeZutter, 2007), highlighting the importance of family and community influences and the need for alignment between school and family.

## The regional survey

The survey yielded a range of information. Here we highlight four items. First, it showed a wide spread of practices in reading instruction at Years 7 and 8. These included word level focus, vocabulary awareness, phonological awareness and games, shared reading, guided reading, comprehension activities, independent reading and shared class stories, picture books and novels. It is of note that, across the board, many teachers identified explicit acts of teaching as less important at this age level than at Years 3 and 4. Of particular concern to us was the drop in the use of guided reading approaches.

An inherent part of a guided reading session is the discussion that supports comprehension, critical responses and deeper thinking (Ministry of Education, 2005). Explicit instruction is therefore important for developing reading comprehension; but teacher-led explicit teaching strategies were less frequently identified than independent reading, comprehension activities and shared class story/picture book/novel approaches. Comprehension activities, usually in the form of worksheets, tend to test comprehension, rather than teach it. There appear to be contradictions here between the reported valuation of comprehension assessment and the actual teaching of comprehension strategies.

## Figure 1: Practices in reading instruction
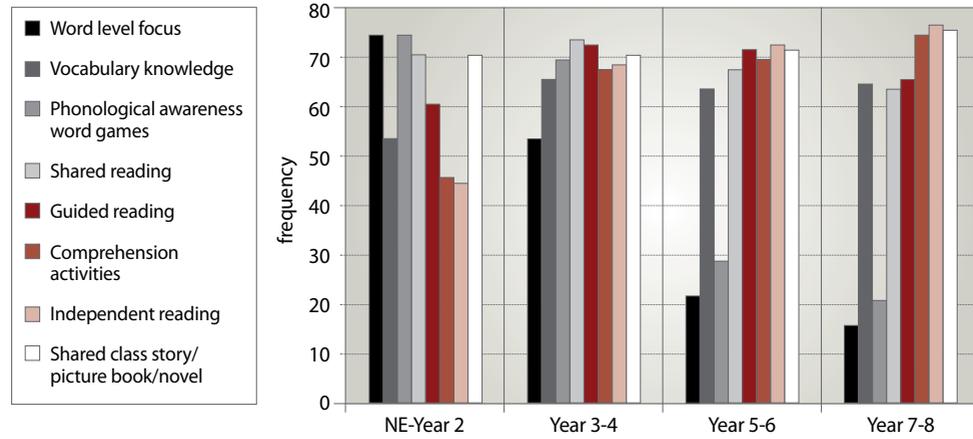


Respondents indicated that they believed that information about children's comprehension strategies, reading age level, and attitude towards reading were essential factors in establishing a Year 7–8 reading programme. Fewer rated the children's interests and hobbies or reading material preferences as essential.

## Figure 2: Information valued by teachers
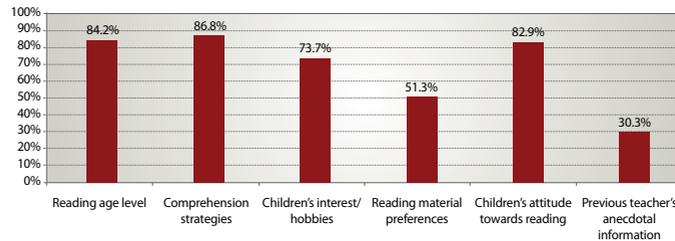


While a majority of teachers indicated that they would rely more on test results than on previous teachers' evaluations, the survey revealed that a wide range of assessment tools are utilised by individual schools. This makes it difficult to track students' progress from one school to another, and compare across schools.

## Figure 3: Use of assessment tools
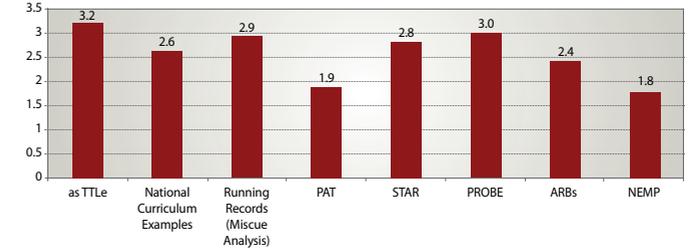


A further significant spread of responses showed that while a majority of teachers said they engaged in informal professional discussions about reading, fewer than half indicated that they took part in formal seminars or professional development (PD) courses. There is, of course, overlap between the choice of responses, as many of the professional discussions might have occurred as a result of sustained school-wide professional development. Overall, a shift from individual or syndicate-based PD to a more integrated whole-school approach was also apparent. Timperley et al. (2007) acknowledge that professional learning and development can have an effect on student learning and outcomes; but the actual conditions for this to occur are more complex than merely providing the time and resources for teachers. Other factors, such as active leadership and engaging in professional communities of practice, impact on students' outcomes.

## Figure 4: Professional development activities
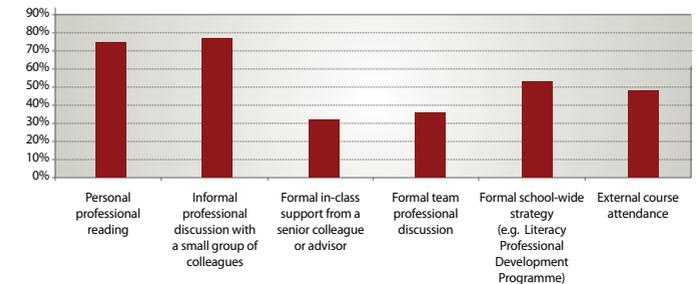
## Case studies of schools with reputedly effective literacy practices

Differences of approach were evident in each of the five case study schools, as were differences in demographics. For example, one West Coast school had a 'boys only' class with a group of boys who had been identified as needing special motivation in learning, particularly reading. The teacher had developed a programme of work with sophisticated text picture books. Nevertheless, some strong common themes emerged across all of the schools. We discuss these in greater depth elsewhere (Fletcher et al., 2009; Greenwood et al., 2009). Here we would like to comment on the impact of leadership, programmes of explicit instruction in reading, professional development, and especially the impact of these factors on the dip reported in the literature.

*We found that literacy learning is strongly impacted on by the leadership demonstrated by teachers and by school organisations.*

A picture emerged in these schools of teachers with knowledge of effective reading instruction, and of whole school leadership focusing on reading literacy and the differing needs of learners. There was consequent improvement of all students' achievement in reading, as measured against nationally standardised test scores, followed by mitigation of the tapering off within the age group that is reported internationally. In other words, we found that literacy learning is strongly impacted on by the leadership demonstrated by teachers and by school organisations. However, it needs to be noted that all students did not progress at equal rates or to equal levels of achievement.

## The impact of leadership in literacy learning

The study showed that schools which could give evidence of improving their students' literacy achievements also had clear and rich instructional reading programmes and strong leadership within the field. Although we are primarily discussing the leadership features within the case study schools, some of these features were reported by other schools in the survey; in those cases, too, there was a match with reported achievement.

All these schools had literacy leaders, and the development of their focus on literacy was supported by the principals.

They all had extensive professional development programmes in literacy, and these were sustained over a period of time. Most of the school literacy leaders were supported by external facilitators of literacy professional development. The schools took an active role in reviewing their external professional development provision, and one of the schools changed to an alternative provider which, they felt, better met their school's specific needs.

All the principals had a strong passion for raising literacy achievement, and worked in a collaborative ongoing manner with their staff. All the teachers in the classes we studied (who were all reported to be effective leaders of literacy) had a strong passion for raising literacy achievement. Some of the principals and literacy leaders were actively and consistently addressing the problem of how to support and shift the teaching attitude of those staff in their school who were perceived to be stuck in outdated practices.

All the schools used norm-referenced assessment of reading achievement to ensure that there was a continuing improvement in achievement. Assessments were analysed on a whole school basis, to ensure that the school as a whole was positioning itself to better meet the needs of all students, with particular attention to gender and ethnic groups.

## Teachers as classroom leaders

Within each of our case study classrooms, the teacher was an overt and strong leader of literacy learning. All of the teachers had specific times in each day when reading was actively taught. All had established a positive classroom environment and developed interactive processes which ensured that disruptions by unacceptable behaviour were kept to a minimum, and quickly dealt with.

All had a rich range of instructional processes that involved students in interpretive and analytical approaches to the text as well as in decoding and comprehending. They drew on a wide range of reading resources, aiming to meet the various interests of students in their class, and they used a range of whole class, group and individual processes.

All the teachers showed evidence of detailed prior planning, which identified not only the key features and possible implications of the texts they brought to the lesson, but also the specific teaching opportunities the texts offered and the deliberate acts of teaching they would engage in.

All the teachers talked about the importance of vocabulary for reading comprehension and had developed strategies for explicit contextualised instruction. Each had developed their own style of questioning, but evident across the group was the strategic use of both closed and open questions, facilitating in turn a focus on particular parts of the text, and an opportunity for students to bring their own understandings and their own questions.

Regular and timely feedback and reinforcement from the teachers we observed were evidenced in all case study classrooms, and they impacted on the focus and confidence of the students. In different ways that reflected their own personalities, all the teachers used the reading texts they had chosen to engage critical thinking and to explore wider life questions, and to encourage students to bring their own experience and evolving questions to the text.

Finally, all the teachers expressed and demonstrated both a strong enthusiasm for reading and a sound knowledge of young adult fiction.

## Impact on learners

In broad terms, the impact on learners involved the development of enthusiasm for reading, and continuing improvement in their assessed literacy achievement. The students also expressed an enjoyment of literature, and were actively willing to make connections between the texts they read and their own lives.

**Figure 5** summarises the relationship between literacy leadership, classroom programmes and student reading achievement.

**Figure 5:** Leadership, programmes and reading achievement

### Literacy leadership

▸ literacy leaders

▸ support by principal

▸ sustained professional development

▸ supported by external facilitators

▸ active review of professional development provision

▸ choice of provider

▸ passion for literacy achievement

▸ collaborative support

▸ working to shift stuck attitudes

▸ use of norm-referenced assessment

▸ whole school analysis

▸ attention to gender and ethnic groups

### Rich classroom literacy programmes

▸ targeted instructional reading

▸ positive classroom environment

▸ good classroom management

▸ varied processes

▸ varied resources

▸ group and individual focus

▸ strong planning

▸ deliberate acts of teaching

▸ development of vocabulary

▸ purposive questioning

▸ feedback and reinforcement

▸ using text to explore wider life questions

▸ enthusiasm for reading

### Student reading achievement

▸ enthusiasm for reading

▸ continuing improvement in assessed achievement

▸ enjoyment of literature

▸ making connections between text and own life

## Further areas to research

In the schools that informed our case studies, due to the continued active teaching of reading processes, there was no evidence of a tapering-off of progress in reading achievement. There were, however, still some students who were achieving at significantly lower levels than others. Overall, in the schools which responded to the survey, there was evidence of a significant tail in terms of reading achievement.

In further stages of our research we are interested in examining that tail further. First, we would like to further distinguish between the occurrence of a plateau in reading achievement across the age group as a whole, and the increased visibility of particular learners who are struggling with reading. Secondly, we would like to examine further the factors which impact on the particular students who underachieve in reading.

Some of our yet unanswered questions about the students who constitute the tail in testing results include the following:

- Is their underachievement caused by a failure of the teaching strategies used at Year 7 and 8, or is it that what was learned earlier had a threshold of usefulness which runs out when more complex reading demands occur? Are we perhaps introducing critical responses in literacy too late?

- Is it competency in reading that tapers off, or is it interest? If it is interest, is that because of competing social pressures of community, peers and even puberty, or is it because of the choice of instructional materials? How can schools better bridge the gap, where it occurs, between what motivates students socially and socioculturally, and what motivates or doesn't motivate them to read? Can success in reading alienate a student from significant peers, or community? And if so, how can schools reconcile the tension?

- Do our schools have access to a sufficient range of culturally relevant materials to cater for all students, particularly for Maori, Pasifika, and new immigrants and refugees? How can a teacher, or a school, overcome a shortage of culturally relevant materials? How can a teacher, or a school, overcome their gaps in understanding the cultural background of their students? What happens when family and school values do not align?

- Are the tests of reading achievement we use at primary and intermediate level good indicators of the kinds of reading students will need for success at secondary school and in their adult lives? How does success in reading at intermediate level align with success at secondary level, or with success in the workplace?

We strongly encourage further research into these questions, in order to help us be more specific when we discuss the success or failure of our schools in developing readers and in raising reading achievement, and permit us to develop policies and practices to cater better for the needs of all learners.

## Key policy implications

*"Policy needs to be informed not only by the statistical data in national and international test scores, but also by a closer analysis of where the difficulties lie."*

Although this project represents only the first stage of an investigation into what happens to reading progress at Years 7 and 8, and, as shown above, we still have many unanswered questions, the patterns and the questions that emerge suggest a number of important considerations for the development of policy.

Policy needs to be informed not only by the statistical data in national and international test scores, but also by a closer analysis of where the difficulties lie.

For example, to what extent is the tail of underachievement an intrinsic component of norm-referenced spreads? To what extent does the current apparent lack of improvement in scores reflect the impact of increased numbers of non-English speaking immigrants, particularly refugees? What other factors influence difficulty with or disinterest in reading? Strategic focus and funding are needed to support the development of:

- schools which cater for difference and which collaborate with their communities
- culturally relevant and culturally interesting instructional materials
- whole family literacy programmes
- relevant programmes of instructional reading at secondary level
- greater liaison between primary, intermediate and secondary schools
- better understanding of the correlation between secondary literacy needs and the teaching of reading in intermediate schools.

# Conclusion

This project has laid a useful foundation for better understanding of what occurs in reading achievement and in reading instruction at Years 7 and 8. It shows that there is a wide range of practices, and that, across the group, teachers give less attention to specific acts of teaching the complex skills of reading than they would at a lower year level. It also shows that in schools where there is a strong leadership in literacy, a continuing programme of instructional reading, and ongoing professional development on a whole-school basis, there is continuing improvement in reading progress for all students. In these schools, however, there is still a significant variation in rates and levels of progress.

These results suggest that leadership, professional development and well-targeted programmes do make a significant difference. They also suggest that we need to further investigate the needs of those who are at the tail end of the range of progress, and, on the basis of our findings, develop a raft of teaching approaches that will lead to improvement in reading for these students.

> " *These results suggest that leadership, professional development and well-targeted programmes do make a significant difference.* "

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# CERT Comment

Janinka Greenwood and her team highlight an important role of research – not only discovering evidence and solutions to longstanding or new challenges, but also providing the space to discover the questions we didn't know needed to be asked. The impact of these questions often extends well beyond the implications for classroom practice, linking directly to the very purposes of education and the value of society's significant investment in the system: to help citizens lead better lives. CERT Trustees are looking forward to working with the research team to explore further the questions that have emerged as the research has progressed. Our purpose in doing so will be to deepen and broaden New Zealand understanding of how the trajectory of improved student achievement can be maintained at all stages of schooling and learner development.



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**2020VISION** is a programme of school-based curriculum development aimed at **transforming** the **educational experiences** of children at Southbridge School to equip them for the **opportunities and challenges** of life as young adults in the 21st century.

# Chapter 5

## Shaping the vision:
How the relationship between research and practice informs and enriches school-based curriculum development

*Peter Verstappen,* SOUTHBRIDGE SCHOOL
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### Introduction

Early in 2007, the principal of Southbridge School in Canterbury overheard a remark from a colleague that the new entrant children of 2007 will be in their final year of secondary school in 2020. This chance remark was the genesis of 2020VISION, a programme of school-based curriculum development aimed at transforming the educational experiences of children at Southbridge School to equip them for the opportunities and challenges of life as young adults in the 21st century.

2020VISION is Southbridge School's response to the New Zealand Curriculum, particularly to the invitation in that document for schools to substantially redefine their relationships with their communities.

*The New Zealand Curriculum sets the direction for teaching and learning in English-medium New Zealand schools. But it is a framework rather than a detailed plan. This means that while every school curriculum must be clearly aligned with the intent of this document, schools have considerable flexibility when determining the detail.* (Ministry of Education, 2008: 37.)

Freedom to design a local curriculum is both an opportunity and a threat. It invites educators to de-privatise their practice, both among themselves and with their school communities; but this requires them to confront deep seated issues of power, autonomy and professional confidence.

How do we – teachers – successfully confront and deconstruct those aspects of the current model of schooling, many of which are personal to the extent of being subliminal, that stand in the way of change? How do we enable multiple voices – students, parents, other professionals and the wider community – to form meaningful partnerships that expand and enrich children's education?

As we began our journey towards 2020VISION we discovered that, while there exists a large body of research into school leadership and school improvement, there is very little research into school-based curriculum development that explores the relationship between school and community. The few New Zealand studies that have been conducted in this area of school development offer insights on how to improve the relationship between school and home (Ramsay et al., 1993; Bolstad, 2004) or how to address deficits between school and home that affect student achievement (Bishop et al., 2003) but they offer only scant guidance on how to sustain and deepen the change process beyond the early innovation phase, or beyond addressing a particular problem or deficit. Resources to support the implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum are also limited, tending to be either digital 'snapshots' of innovative practice, or conversations among groups of school leaders groping towards enlightenment. One thing was clear: 2020VISION would need more support than this if it was to succeed.

The principal also realised that there could be value in recording the story of 2020VISION as a longitudinal case study of transformational change in response to the New Zealand Curriculum. How does a school manage the multiple challenges and opportunities of the new curriculum, while continuing to perform the day-to-day functions of a busy organisation? What actions must a school take to realise the potential of the New Zealand Curriculum? How can long-term transformational change be sustained amid the competing demands of the many stakeholders in a school?

> *How do we – teachers – successfully confront and deconstruct those aspects of the current model of schooling, many of which are personal to the extent of being subliminal, that stand in the way of change?*

In July 2007, the principal discussed the project with Dr Susan Lovett and Associate Professor Alison Gilmore at Canterbury University. By this time, the 2020VISION project had been launched at Southbridge School with a strategic planning day involving all staff, the board of trustees and a group of parents. At this event, the school's recent development was reviewed, the New Zealand Curriculum was introduced, vision and values were reaffirmed and ten broad areas for development were identified.

This work formed the basis of discussions with Dr Lovett and Professor Gilmore, from which the idea emerged to engage them in 2020VISION through a research project. This began with two broad aims: to provide a model for other schools of how to conduct community consultation towards the outcome of designing and implementing a local curriculum; and to provide information for the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders on the challenges and opportunities encountered by schools implementing the New Zealand Curriculum.

The research team intended that the project, like 2020VISION itself, would be a long-term commitment. The initial phase of the research sought to address two questions:

1. How does a school and its community design and implement a local curriculum in response to the expectations of the revised New Zealand Curriculum?

2. What effect, if any, does a locally developed curriculum have upon student engagement with learning?

A third question, to be addressed in future phases of the research project, was:

3. How effective is ongoing consultation in transforming the relationship between a school and its community?

A successful application for funding was made to Cognition Education Research Trust (CERT). The research project began in October 2007 with funding for one year. Further funding from CERT was secured in December 2008 to continue the project through 2009.

> *to provide a model for other schools of how to conduct community consultation towards the outcome of designing and implementing a local curriculum; and to provide information for the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders on the challenges and opportunities encountered by schools implementing the New Zealand Curriculum.*

## Exploring the research partnership

From the outset, the research project was designed as a reflexive-action model, with researchers acting as collaborators in the 2020VISION project, and research findings progressively informing subsequent actions. This approach to researching school-based curriculum development had proven successful in an earlier, much larger-scale New Zealand project (Ramsay et al., 1993). In that project, conducted under the management of the then Department of Education at the outset of Tomorrow's Schools, 28 schools throughout New Zealand worked with both developers and researchers to implement community consultation. Developers, mainly Ministry of Education field officers, worked as coaches in schools, initiating and trialling strategies for curriculum reform. The research team, under the guidance of the University of Waikato, provided ongoing evaluation on the change process while also monitoring, evaluating and giving feedback on the work of the developers (Ramsay et al., 1993: 4).

More recently, the Ministry of Education's Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) promotes partnerships between researchers and teachers. A review of 55 TLRI projects by Garvey Berger & Baker (2008) acknowledges the real issue of connecting research with practice in an educational context:

*…in most cases we have not been able to figure out how to make the tight connections between policy, practice, and research that will help put the research into practice.*
(Garvey Berger & Baker, 2008:1)

The 2020VISION project consciously addresses the deficit between research and practice both in its desired outcomes and in the nature of the partnership between Southbridge School and the researchers. Garvey Berger and Baker identified two archetypes of practitioner/researcher partnerships emerging from the TLRI: 'practitioner as research assistant' and 'researcher and practitioner as associates' (2008: 4). 2020VISION in its early phase demonstrates strong elements of the latter, with the rare distinction of being a research project initiated by the practitioner.

From the outset, the role of the research team (Gilmore, Lovett and Michelle Clarke) was to gather data through interviews, observations and a student engagement survey; to share the data with the principal, staff and others through verbal and written reports; and to report to CERT and the project's policy-making partners (the Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Educational Institute) through milestone reports. However, it was also understood that the research team would perform some of the functions of the developers in the project reported by Ramsay et al. This understanding grew out of a previous successful research project undertaken by the principal and Dr Lovett which explored teacher development through quality learning circles (Lovett & Verstappen, 2004). Dr Lovett participated in that project as both researcher and coach.

The research team began its work by spending time at Southbridge School, familiarising itself with the people and the place. Researchers attended meetings of the school community, a school picnic and staff professional learning meetings. Researchers recorded their reflections from these events. Throughout 2008, they conducted a range of interviews with the principal, teachers and support staff, and with children, parents and members of the wider community. A student engagement survey was also conducted with all children.

The research team has formed a close relationship with the principal, who holds a dual role as both a co-director of the project and a research participant. In his role as co-director, the principal's tasks have included drafting the research proposal to CERT, identifying the project's aims and research questions, liaising with funding and policy-making partners, and contributing to decisions about data-gathering, budgeting and future directions. As a participant in the research, the principal is not directly involved in drawing conclusions from data or writing milestone reports.

Team meetings to discuss the management of the research project inevitably include discussions about the nature and meaning of data. In turn, they have become a source of additional data and of the future focus for both the research project and the wider application of 2020VISION at Southbridge School.

An indicator of the strength of the partnership is the confidence of the researchers to contribute to 2020VISION outcomes with ideas drawn from their own research and experiences, or by directing the principal and staff towards other relevant research.

By attending professional learning meetings, the researchers also established their credibility among the staff and contributed further towards the process of change. By the time a second strategic planning day was held in October 2008, the research team was widely accepted as having a stake in 2020VISION. They offered ideas in discussions about the future of the school and its curriculum, and shared their findings from the research data and their perspectives as 'critical friends' of the project. At all times, the researchers have shown delicacy in balancing the roles of collaborator and data-gatherer. For example, at staff development meetings researcher participation tends more towards asking questions to promote reflection among staff, and offering suggestions about relevant resources and ideas to inform next steps, rather than offering advice or challenging teacher perceptions.

## How the research partnership supports 2020VISION

In the Teacher Professional Learning and Development Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration, Timperley et al. (2008) discovered that 'engagement of external expertise, often researchers, was a feature of nearly all core studies' – that is, those studies that were shown to be effective in promoting professional learning. They continued:

*the need for external expertise is understandable … because the substantive new learning involved in most core studies required teachers to learn new content and skills and to think about their existing practice in new ways. It is unlikely that any group of professionals would be able to manage this level of new learning without support and challenge from someone with expertise in the area.*

These statements throw light on the role of the research team at Southbridge School. 2020VISION is not a professional development project as this is commonly defined.

It does not aim to address a specific dimension of teacher learning, such as curriculum or pedagogy. 2020VISION is a broad strategic process that nevertheless embraces specific disciplines and highly focused activities. Other professional development programmes happen within, and through, 2020VISION.

For example, since the beginning of 2008 the principal and teaching staff have been engaged in the Literacy Professional Development Project (LPDP), which is facilitated by a literacy expert working in the school. The LPDP more closely matches the model of external expertise described above than the work of the 2020VISION research team, whose role is to inform and explain rather than to facilitate the 2020VISION project.

The researchers do not claim, nor are they expected to offer, expertise in the many facets of school life that are touched upon in the project. Neither are the researchers engaged to support the staff of the school to conduct research. As noted above, this project does not fit neatly into either the paradigm of 'practitioner as research assistant' or 'researcher and practitioner as associates'. While it may be desirable for staff to be more active in the research project (Sharp et al., 2006), their current involvement is as participants in interviews and in their consideration and application of research findings. The exception, as already noted, is the principal, whose role, to date, has been pivotal in shaping the 2020VISION and in linking the vision with the research project.

So what benefit does the research partnership bring, remembering that the research was initiated by the principal and is funded by CERT as a partnership project? How does it support the school to realise its vision of a 21st century curriculum? What are the benefits to the research community and to its policy-making partners, the Ministry of Education and NZEI?

## Benefits to the school

Despite this research project being somewhat outside Timperley et al.'s definitions of purposeful engagement of external expertise, there are several ways in which the research contributes to the success of 2020VISION.

*Accountability:* Participants in 2020VISION, particularly the principal, are motivated to maintain their commitment to the project by knowing that from time to time they will be interviewed by the research team, and will be expected to give an account of what they have done and the outcomes of their actions. As the date for the implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum draws close, this additional motivation to address its expectations has proven worthwhile. Through the 2020VISION project and its associated research, Southbridge School is well placed to give effect to both the form and the intent of the New Zealand Curriculum.

*Access to ideas:* The research project contributes to the construction of a strong theoretical base among the staff by providing access to research and ideas relevant to the project, and through researcher participation in staff professional learning activities. For example, researchers guided the principal to important research into home-school partnerships conducted by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (Bull et al., 2008). This work includes international case studies that link effective home-school practices to student learning, affirming the consultation already happening at Southbridge School and, more importantly, offering ideas for future activities that will promote improved student achievement.

The contributions of researchers to staff professional learning meetings and the resources they provide to staff through the principal enable a sense of greater efficacy among staff. It is rare in education that school staff are able to study aspects of their own organisation in partnership with academic researchers. The knowledge that they are constructing their own curriculum, one that is nevertheless well grounded in theory, fosters ownership, commitment and esprit de corps.

*Critical reflection:* A willingness and ability to reflect on their performance and, on wider issues of school management and educational theory are common among successful school leaders (Notman & Henry, 2009: 41). In this project, the principal's conversations with the research team and the findings from the milestone reports stimulate reflection on the progress of 2020VISION. To some degree the research team acts as mentor to the principal. The principal is encouraged to describe, explain and justify actions, to consider alternatives, to engage with the unexpected or the less successful actions and to seek improvements. It is a rich and rewarding discourse.

A direct outcome of this relationship is apparent in the principal's actions to distribute leadership within the school. The 2008 milestone report highlighted the extent to which 2020VISION was directed by the principal:

*There is an urgent need for more ownership and understanding of the vision to come from the teachers, parents and students. Leadership will need to include the work of the more experienced staff and the new deputy principal.*

Conversations between the principal and researchers helped the principal to construct a model of how 2020VISION was shaping after the first year and a half. The model was beginning to appear dangerously top-heavy. This was partly a reflection of the principal's natural leadership style and also a consequence of other factors, including a high turnover of staff in the previous twelve months. Armed with this insight, the principal, senior staff and board of trustees undertook a major review of school management. Six months later, the model looks different: the deputy principal and assistant principal have assumed responsibility for enacting many of the 2020VISION programmes and initiatives, enabling the principal to continue steering the long-term strategic plan and supporting teachers to get to grips with the new curriculum. At the same time greater efforts have been made to include more parents in the project. The DP now facilitates a parent focus group with the specific purpose of developing and implementing ideas to support parents as teachers.

*Status:* The research gives 2020VISION status within the school and its community:

*Researcher presence at the school and regular reports of our activities to the school's parents in the weekly newsletters have… raised the profile and given the project an added status because of university staff showing support, interest and a willingness to be involved…*

The research team enjoys a high profile among a group of parents, particularly board members and parents who are involved in consultative focus groups, many of whom have been interviewed for the research project. Their contacts with the researchers are the impetus for these parents to take a greater interest in 2020VISION. The link with CERT, although less widely understood among the community, is also valued. There is recognition and a sense of pride within the school that on their own initiative, they have been able to secure the interest of CERT and the expertise of the University of Canterbury. Usually schools, if they are engaged in research at all, do so only as the subject of somebody else's project. Ownership has made it easier for the principal to 'sell' the project to the staff and community as being worth the resources of time, energy and money committed to it.

## Benefits to research and policy

The 2020VISION project seeks to contribute to our understanding of how school-based curriculum development can happen within a framework of devolved educational management. Compared with most other jurisdictions, New Zealand schools operate in an environment where central government takes an almost recklessly hands-off approach. The New Zealand Curriculum reasserts this paradigm, expecting each school to construct the curriculum in a way that is unique to itself and its community. Many school leaders and boards of trustees view this more as a challenge than an opportunity. Many remain uncertain about how to implement the New Zealand Curriculum, or what the Ministry of Education's expectations are about how the curriculum-in-action will look.

From our conversations with principals and participation in curriculum development meetings, it is clear that most schools are approaching the new curriculum either through the key competencies or by reviewing their vision, values and principles, but few are doing this in meaningful consultation with their communities. Nor do they know how to go about talking to their communities in ways that break out of traditional relationships of power and information-sharing.

Our wish is that the 2020VISION research will contribute ideas about how a school can engage with its community, and how it can reconstruct some fundamental relationships of learning among children, parents and teachers, with the result of improving student engagement. Furthermore, we believe the 2020VISION research project contributes to our understanding of how to bridge gaps between research and practice in educational settings. The project is small and resourced to a level where it is able to capture only parts of the process. The research team's vision is to strengthen the partnerships between Southbridge School, the University of Canterbury and Cognition to build other research activity around the core project and, over time, construct a highly detailed mosaic of how school-based curriculum development can transform teaching and learning in a primary school.

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## CERT Comment

Peter Verstappen notes that 'it is rare in education that school staff are able to study aspects of their own organisation in partnership with academic researchers'. The CERT Trustees view this as a critical feature of schooling improvement in the future, enabling practitioners and researchers to learn from each other and better enabling the collection, collation, analysis and use of good quality evidence to inform curriculum construction, as well as teaching and learning programmes. As Peter Verstappen points out, the knowledge that professional practitioners are constructing their own curriculum, well grounded in theory, fosters ownership, commitment and esprit de corps. It is CERT's goal that such activity becomes routine, so that new evidence set against the context of a rapidly changing environment can be shared across the profession and learning communities, and cement New Zealand's place as a leader of excellence in learning.



*Peter Verstappen*

**Peter Verstappen**, Principal, Southbridge School, entered the teaching profession after a career in theatre and broadcasting. He has been a teaching principal in rural Canterbury and is currently the principal at Southbridge School, near Christchurch. Peter has pursued research interests in professional supervision for primary teachers, the application of NEMP in schools and the development of Quality Learning Circles with primary teachers. He has held a research fellowship at the University of Canterbury and has published and presented research both individually and in association with Dr Susan Lovett and Associate Professor Alison Gilmore. His current research is in school–based curriculum development and student engagement.

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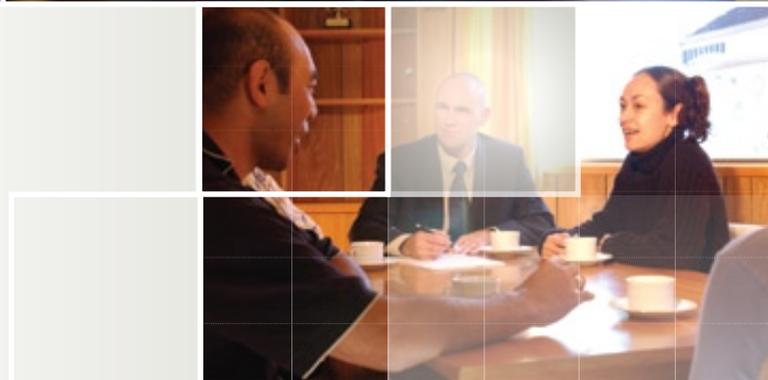
# Chapter 6

## How can working together help children learn?
Investigating the impact of cross-sector collaboration to improve numeracy progress

*Fiona Ell*
UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND

### Introduction

> *The stated mission was 'to raise achievement in mathematics for all students in Kaikohe'.*

In 2006, schools in Kaikohe came together to talk about the new New Zealand Curriculum document and its implications. The teachers split into learning areas to talk about their particular subjects. The discussion amongst the mathematics teachers resulted in the formation of a cluster group: the Kaikohe Mathematics Cluster (KMC). Their stated mission was 'to raise achievement in mathematics for all students in Kaikohe'. The kaupapa was to 'throw no stones': rather than blaming others or criticising, the group agreed to work together, develop a shared language and try to be active in improving numeracy outcomes for their students. Communication between schools and the sharing of ideas and knowledge were the central concepts.

Initially the teachers met after school on Fridays, along with their local numeracy facilitator. After several such meetings, they decided to invite a researcher to become involved. Three years later, the KMC is comprised of representatives of seven schools (primary, intermediate and secondary), a facilitator and a researcher. They work as a team on devising and implementing interventions to improve numeracy outcomes for Kaikohe students. The group has come a long way from meeting in their own time on Fridays. They now have the recognition of their principals and the community, and are providing leadership in their schools. In 2009 the research aspects of the KMC's activities are being funded by CERT.

The KMC's activities are firmly rooted in teacher concerns about student learning. Students who had shifted school within the region expressed frustration at the inconsistency in expectations. The teachers were concerned that progress was not occurring – the students seemed to be getting stuck, and not fulfilling their potential as learners of mathematics. This meant that many Kaikohe students were leaving school without qualifications in mathematics, and this was limiting their choices for work and further study. These are common concerns for teachers, but in Kaikohe two unusual things happened: the teachers decided to collaborate on the problem, and they turned to research to inform their choices and to drive the process.

The students in the seven KMC schools are predominantly Māori. Six of the seven schools are Decile 1, and one is Decile 2. Key issues in the area are transience, poor attendance and underachievement. The KMC teacher members are classroom teachers. Some are lead teachers of numeracy in their schools. They all share a particular interest in mathematics teaching and learning, and a passion for their students.

An essential element of the KMC is its self-determination. It is organised by the Kaikohe teaching community for the students of Kaikohe. Its agenda is driven by the teacher members, not by researchers or facilitators. Many hours of discussion resulted in a plan to look at Basic Facts, Place Value, and how children solved 'word problems' – three key areas of concern that the teachers identified as going across age levels and school boundaries. The KMC group identified that one of the issues was a lack of data on which to base decisions, which prompted the use of an iterative data collection, analysis and feedback cycle with the KMC schools. This is described in detail below.

## How do we work together to improve students' numeracy?

The KMC works to improve students' numeracy by organising and carrying out testing of students, designing and arranging appropriate professional development experiences and resources for teachers, and striving, through discussion and examination of evidence, to gain a deep understanding of what is happening for students.

One of the key issues that the KMC teachers identified in their early meetings was a lack of a common language and understanding about students' progress in mathematics. There were differences in expectations and assessment, and differences in the amount of professional development in numeracy that the schools had received. It was necessary to find common ground. The starting point needed to be manageable, seen as valuable, and easy to communicate. The KMC teachers were keen to undertake a shared activity across schools, to understand what was really happening for students in Kaikohe. The teachers had been involved in other schooling improvement initiatives that had used student data as the basis of decision-making about professional development and changes to instruction. They decided to employ this methodology to investigate the numeracy issue they had identified. Their collaborative activity in schools began in Term 1, 2008, with testing the students' knowledge of basic facts. From this starting point, a shared understanding, language and excitement about students' progress has emerged.

In 2009, with the aid of external funding from CERT, the KMC schools are collecting two types of data for collation at cluster level: data on Basic Facts progress, and data on Place Value knowledge. The Basic Facts assessment is in two parts: addition/subtraction and multiplication/division. The students have five minutes to complete as many facts as they can. There are 50 examples of each operation, yielding a score out of 100 for addition/subtraction and out of 100 for multiplication/division. The Place Value assessment tests students' knowledge of the structure of the number system, including fractions and decimals. It is presented as a Powerpoint, with a narration to reduce the negative effect of having too much reading in the test. The students have limited time to respond to each question, as the slides are timed and change automatically. This also standardises administration of the test between schools. Students receive a score out of 50 for the test. This can also be converted into an equivalent Number Framework stage for the teachers to use in planning and reporting to parents. The tests are given in the same week of each term, and scores for each child on both assessments are submitted to the central community database for analysis.

The longitudinal database provides robust evidence of improvements in the students' test performance.

The information in the database is converted into graphs, and tests of significance are performed by the researcher in order to give the KMC a picture of what the raw numbers show. These figures are the basis of a termly meeting of the KMC. The results are considered, queried and discussed by all the KMC members. The group works together to determine the story that the data is telling, and to consider what its implications might be for their schools and students.

Each KMC member takes the data back to their school, and the teachers use it to complete a brief action plan. The action plan outlines what the teachers see as the key messages from the data for their class, and what actions they intend to take as a result of seeing the evidence. In subsequent terms, the teachers are asked to briefly review their last plan and to complete a new one. This process is overseen by the KMC facilitator, and represents a significant professional development opportunity for the teachers, as well as a source of evidence for the research project.

In 2008 and 2009, the KMC group has responded to the student data by providing additional support for teachers in Kaikohe. Some activities have been within their own schools, for example: running staff meetings, working alongside colleagues, getting the facilitator to come in and focus on particular areas. Other activities have occurred between schools, such as running staff meetings or sharing resources and ideas. Two activities have been cluster-wide: a professional development day for all staff, focused on basic facts; and an extension group for students at high levels of the Number Framework, taught by a mathematics specialist.

## What have we found?

In 2008, data was collected and analysed for the purposes of informing the KMC and their schools about their students' performance. It was cohort data, and it provided sufficient evidence of student gains to warrant more formal investigation. In 2009 a research programme was added to the KMC's

> *The KMC's activities also produce several important 'side effects': professional growth for the KMC members as they interact with the data and their colleagues to bring about change; formal and informal professional development for the teachers in the seven KMC schools; and the emergence of a community of practice that includes principals, boards of trustees and whanau.*

activities. Data is now being collected from the students in a longitudinal database, as described above. The teachers' action plans are being collected and analysed to explore the links between the data and teacher intentions, actions and expectations. KMC members are being interviewed to investigate the key factors underpinning the group's success.

Our findings are therefore just emerging at the time of writing this chapter. We have two sets of Basic Facts and Place Value data in the database, and one set of teacher action plans to consider. Interviews of KMC members are currently underway. However, a few preliminary comments can be made.

The KMC was formed to improve outcomes for students. The student achievement data provides both the evidence for the effectiveness of the programme, and the 'fuel' that drives the KMC's initiatives. In striving to improve student outcomes, the KMC's activities also produce several important 'side effects': professional growth for the KMC members as they interact with the data and their colleagues to bring about change; formal and informal professional development for the teachers in the seven KMC schools; and the emergence of a community of practice that includes principals, boards of trustees and whanau.

There have been highly statistically significant increases in the students' Basic Facts knowledge between when we began collating data from the seven schools (Term 1, 2008) and Term 2, 2009. This result is based on cohort data rather than longitudinal data, so claims about growth need to be cautious. This significant improvement has occurred in all quartiles of achievement. There is a transition effect as the children shift to intermediate school, with students in all quartiles of achievement levelling off or losing ground at this point. The 'summer effect', where students' scores drop over the long summer holidays, is present only in some year levels and quartiles. Not all students go backwards over summer, but those who do tend to be in the lower quartile of achievement.

Place Value average scores for quartiles
within each year group (x/50), Term 1, 2009
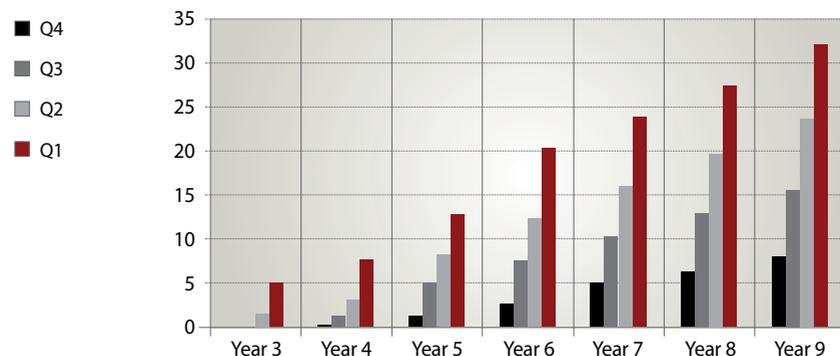


The first round of Place Value data was collected in Week 7 of Term 1, 2009. Figure 1 shows the initial results.

These results show that Place Value is indeed a key area for improvement with Kaikohe students. Even the highest achieving Year 9 students are averaging only 32 out of 50. As the years pass, the disparity between the higher-achieving students and the lower-achieving students increases. The lowest quartile of Year 9 students has a average score similar to that of to the higher-achieving Year 4 students.

The second set of data is currently being analysed, and shows that these scores are already beginning to improve. In response to these results, all the teachers in the seven schools have written action plans based on the data, and a cluster-wide professional development day is being held to provide information for teachers about how to teach Place Value.

These results provide fascinating material for the KMC to consider and work with. With only one set of action plans, we cannot comment on growth in teacher understandings; but an important feature of the KMC meetings has been increasing depth of understanding and discussion about the data. At each meeting, the group has posed new questions and called for more in-depth analyses of the data. The longitudinal database

format allows schools to request their own data alongside the cluster data, so that they can see how their students fit into the overall picture. The action plan process has encouraged this, with the prompt questions encouraging deep discussion about the issues present in the data. As each cycle unfolds, both the KMC group and the teachers in the schools are engaging in more depth with the evidence of student achievement.

As this project is just beginning formally, publishable findings are few. However, the pilot data on Basic Facts and the discussion observed within the KMC and the participating schools are all strong indicators of a significant positive effect on student achievement as a result of this collaboration. We are looking forward to quantifying this as our project progresses.

## Where are we going?

In 2009 we will collect Basic Facts and Place Value data in each of the four terms. In addition, we will build a picture of teacher thinking, with four action plans in response to each set of data, and improve our understanding of the KMC's functioning with interviews of KMC members. In our analysis, we will attempt to understand the complex interplay between the levels of activity in the KMC, and cast light on the mechanism by which the students' results are improving. Our analysis will include investigation of the properties of the Place Value test. If this test gives valid and reliable results, it may prove useful in other schools.

There are many additional issues which arise from this work. Two particular examples are exploring the best 'intervention point' to bring about improvement in student achievement, and analysing the effect of sharing results with the students. The link between teacher knowledge (of content and of students), teacher instructional practices and student achievement needs examination. Where is the 'leverage point' for making the biggest difference to student achievement? Where can we best direct our efforts – towards teacher knowledge, or classroom practices, or the intersection between them? The cluster results are shared with students by some teachers. Considering the sharing of results and the setting of goals with students, as well as with teachers, may be a fruitful direction for future research.

The third area identified by the KMC teachers in our initial discussions was reading and understanding word problems. The teachers felt that Kaikohe students were disadvantaged in mathematics examinations at secondary level because they struggled with reading the problems. There is considerable literature suggesting that this problem is not confined to these students. Comprehending the special language of mathematics problems is a skill that is distinct both from ordinary reading comprehension, and from understanding the mathematics of the problem. In addition, mathematics problems couched in words rather than symbols are often given a 'real-world' context. This context can clarify the mathematics for some students, but obfuscate it for others. The need to translate from the real world to the world of mathematics and back to the real world in solving these problems is also a challenge. This area may be the next focus for KMC activity, as we try to systematically address these issues with students at all levels of schooling.

## What are the implications?

Our initial results suggest that the KMC is operating as an effective agent for the improvement of student achievement in numeracy in Kaikohe. If that is the case, then how can its successes be translated to other clusters of schools in other areas of need? There are other examples of highly effective clusters of schools using evidence to improve student achievement, principally in literacy. The Schooling Improvement Initiative has built on these examples to use clusters as a mechanism for addressing underachievement. However, not all clusters enjoy the same levels of success.

What makes the difference? If we have something that works, the imperative is to share it with others so more students can benefit from it. 'Scaling up' and transfer are two of the key challenges for any educational intervention. Many promising projects founder when they are implemented at scale. Intuitively, we can see why this would be true. So much of the operation of a group such as the KMC is predicated on trusting, long-term relationships, patience, multiple iterations, and the passion of key people. These types of relationships cannot be legislated. Time is needed for them to be facilitated.

*"The most significant aspect of the KMC is that it originated with teachers, and is driven by teachers. Its agenda is one of self-determination."*

*"In creating education policy, we need to consider how we can bring different perspectives and sources of knowledge to bear on student achievement issues, valuing the contribution of each piece to the complex jigsaw."*

Perhaps the policy implications of this are that funding and resources need to be provided flexibly enough for initiatives such as the KMC to be nurtured where they arise. Facilitation in areas of need should be driven by a long-term view, with stable staffing structures and time allowed for the emergence of strong relationships of trust and respect.

The most significant aspect of the KMC is that it originated with teachers, and is driven by teachers. Its agenda is one of self-determination. The KMC has sought and used outside resources to serve its ends, rather than having people or methodologies imposed upon it. Perhaps a starting point for developing clusters has to be teacher identification of need. Many projects do this by engaging teachers with the collated results of an initial round of data collection. A slightly longer and more cumbersome – but perhaps more sustainable – approach might be to have teachers' concerns about student achievement driving the investigative process. In the case of the KMC, this has been brought about by skilled facilitation over a period of more than five years, so it is by no means a quick or easy 'fix' for achievement issues.

Where does the knowledge about how to improve outcomes reside? A second implication of the KMC project is related to how we can make best use of the expertise that resides in teachers and communities. Researchers, facilitators, teachers and parents all have a valuable perspective on student achievement. In the case of the KMC, very little outside input was necessary to make a difference to student achievement in Basic Facts; the knowledge and the power resided in the KMC teachers, who were able to make a difference when they were given the time and space to collaborate and share their knowledge. Adding the perspectives of researcher, facilitator and board member to the group has enriched the outcomes, but the expertise was distributed among the group members, not held by one particular person. In creating education policy, we need to consider how we can bring different perspectives and sources of knowledge to bear on student achievement issues, valuing the contribution of each piece to the complex jigsaw.

The KMC is an example of research being used in the service of teachers, rather than teachers being used in the service of research. This distinction makes a significant contribution to the KMC's success.

The theory-practice dichotomy is often discussed in education. Education is both highly theorised and essentially practical, and the articulation between these two dimensions is often poor. This results in research which is of little use to teachers, and teaching that makes little use of research. We need to consider how models such as the KMC begin to use the theory-practice dichotomy to the advantage of students, and what conditions make this happen. Education theory and practice are not the same, but neither exists in the absence of the other. The aim is not to resolve or dissolve the dichotomy, or to ignore or deny it, but to use its potential to improve outcomes for students.

Finally, whenever a story of success is told, the perpetual issues of sustainability and scalability arise. There is little point in researching a process which has nothing to offer other schools and students who have similar problems. Nor is it worthwhile creating an effective but unsustainable practice. We want to be able to identify the 'magic ingredient' and give it to others. Unfortunately, the problems of education cannot be solved simplistically. When our research with the KMC concludes, we hope to be able to comment on these issues with insight from our experience. In this way, we hope that the passion and dedication of the KMC teachers will reach beyond the results they achieve with their own schools and students, into the wider education community.

## CERT Comment

Although this piece of research is still in its initial stages, it is evident that it will add value to the body of knowledge about how learning can be enhanced. The CERT Trustees are encouraged that the research project has already stimulated and energised a group of professionals who are increasingly being valued in their own communities. The chance to involve students in dialogue about their progress poses strategic questions about how the learning system can benefit from increased student participation and engagement in the development and implementation of their own learning programmes.



*Fiona Ell*

**Fiona Ell**, Senior Tutor in Education at the University of Auckland, is a registered primary school teacher whose career in research began when she returned to do further study after the birth of her children. As a consequence her research interests are centered on teaching and learning. Mathematics education has provided a rich context for Fiona's research, as this field is often challenging in primary classrooms. Her initial research was in the development of multiplicative thinking through classroom activity, and the sustainability of professional development initiatives in mathematics classrooms. Her current research includes working with teachers to improve student achievement, and investigating the processes and outcomes of pre-service teacher education.

# Chapter 7

## Expanding expression - expanding cognition:
An investigation

*Jannie van Hees*

## Introduction

It has long been recognised that the quality and quantity of a child's capacity to orally express on entry to school at 5 years of age is a strong predictor of the child's general learning pathway and transition into print. In low socio-economic schools in particular, a deep-seated concern for many teachers is that some or a majority of the children entering school at age 5 are under-resourced in overall communicative competency, and especially under-resourced in English. Both limit their capacity to fully engage in learning processes and contexts, presenting considerable challenges in terms of literacy acquisition.

Numerous initiatives have been undertaken in New Zealand (e.g. Phillips et al., 2002; Robinson & Timperley, 2004; Timperley et al., 2003), and internationally (e.g. Ackers & Hardman, 2001; Alexander, 2003; Applebee, 1994; Damhuis et al., 2004), in an endeavour to address the English and language gaps of 5- and 6-year-old children in low socio-economic schools – with varying success. Some initiatives have focused on intervention programmes designed specifically to address the gaps or weaknesses of the child; others have focused on the pedagogical approaches teachers might adopt, in recognition of the highly influential effect of teachers on learner outcomes.

In almost all cases, however, initiatives have been orientated towards literacy, rather than towards the child's expressive capacity and vocabulary resources underpinning literacy competency in English. To date, the persistent 'long tail' of learning disadvantage in core learning areas of children who enter school minimally resourced in expressive language and conceptual understandings has yet to be satisfactorily addressed.

It has long been recognised that the quality and quantity of a child's **capacity to orally express** on entry to school at 5 years of age is a **strong predictor** of the child's general **learning pathway** and transition into print.

From research over the last two decades, much is known about the environmental and interactional conditions that optimally support language acquisition and use (e.g. Adams et al., 1996; Christie & Martin, 2007; Ellis, N. C., 2005; Ellis, R., 1990; Hoff, 2006; van Lier, 1998, 2004). The fields of cognitive psychology, first and second language acquisition, applied linguistics, child development, and neuroscience, for example, have all contributed to currently available insights into the language acquisition of young children. While the emerging picture is complex (as are language and learning), this chapter posits that by conflating the available evidence into a set of underlying principles and understandings about language acquisition, and by critically examining whether the classroom environment optimally supports these, we may be able to identify what is likely to make the greatest difference to the language and cognitive acquisition of 5- and 6-year-old children who are under-resourced expressively.

What follows is a brief consideration of supporting research evidence, an outline of the study, and a discussion of some insights gained from the study to date. The study sets out to investigate:

- current environmental conditions and pedagogy operating in four Year 1-2 classrooms in four low socioeconomic schools

- how closely these align with a set of identified underlying principles and understandings about language acquisition

- whether, by teachers changing some fundamental practices, the language and cognitive acquisition trajectories of the children in these classrooms also fundamentally change.

The study is work-in-progress; however, significant issues and implications have already become evident.

## Some research background

While genetic factors cannot be ignored, variability in children's language acquisition and expression is to a great extent the result of the quality and quantity of environmental language input and output (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Hoff, 2003, 2005, 2006; Huttenlocher et al., 2002; van Lier, 2004;

Vygotsky, 1978). Outside of home and family, the effectiveness of environmental learning conditions in mainstream classrooms has the greatest potential to provide the interactional and discourse optimal conditions that under-resourced children need to exponentially expand their English language expressive and cognitive capacities.

Teachers realise that where the child cannot or does not engage with fullness of expression at school and in the classroom, this is a matter of some concern. A child with effective oral language to express his/her thinking and meaning, and with an extensive vocabulary base orally, is advantaged in terms of early years' education. Higher levels of verbal competency correlate with increased levels of participation in learning and increased levels of cognition (Adams et al., 1996; Green, 1995; McNeil, 1959). The extent of a child's vocabulary knowledge and his/her expressive experiences and oral capacity are strong predictors of successful transition into print, both as a reader (e.g. Clay, 1998; Lonigan et al., 2000; Richgels, 2004; Scarborough, 2001; Snow et al., 1998; Strickland, 2002) and as an emerging writer.

In a small study of language development of 5- and 6-year-olds in American schools, Huttenlocher et al. (1998) found that vocabulary size and syntactic development were highly related. Low-income children used less than two-thirds the number of different vocabulary items of middle-income children, and less than 10 percent of their speech was complex utterances, compared with over 25 percent for middle-income children. The apparent relationship between a child's vocabulary resources and complexity of expression was a significant finding in this study.

On promoting vocabulary and comprehension in the primary grades, Moses (2005:1) reported that 'children from the lowest vocabulary quartile at the end of second grade are already two or more grade levels behind average children in vocabulary…. [and] at risk of never catching up to their peers'. On average, children from low socio-economic communities entered school with a receptive and expressive vocabulary of less than half the number of words of children from socio-economically advantaged communities, who generally entered school with

a working vocabulary of 6000 or more words, and with well-established and age-appropriate language resources to understand and express meaning orally (Hart & Risley, 1995, 2003; Moses, 2005; White et al., 1990).

Theoretically, this research study is seated within a framework of sociocultural theory, based on the work of Vygotsky and other sociocultural theorists, including Bronfenbrennner (2005). He proposed that the 'form, power, content and direction ….that affect development (and learning) vary systematically as a joint function of the…developing person and the environment (both immediate and remote)…' (2005:178). In the words of Haugen (1972:325), 'Language exists only in the minds of its users, and it only functions in relating these users to one another…'. Vygotsky (1934/1962:125) differentiated between two planes of speech – 'the inner, meaningful, semantic aspect… (the intraspsychological plane) and the external, phonetic aspect (the interpsychological plane)'. It is primarily through the process of externalisation – 'saying' – that insights can be gained and expression can be made about the inner processes of thought and language. Conversely, it is the externalisation of inner processes in the form of speech that has the potential to expand (transform) a person's inner meaning-making capacities, cognitively and linguistically.

Grappling with the complex notion of language acquisition and use as primarily an ecological and social process is not simple. This study sets out to investigate one component of this complexity: the identified vocabulary and expressive gap of children on entry to school as 5-year-olds in the classroom environment where children spend significant amounts of time daily.

Research evidence across many disciplines and fields points towards a set of commonly agreed underlying principles or elements that are contributory to optimising language and cognitive acquisition and expansion. These can broadly be divided into two aspects, linguistic and interactional. The interactional aspect is highly influential on whether optimised conditions for linguistic acquisition and cognitive expansion can or do occur. However, in themselves, optimised interactional conditions may not result in optimised language

acquisition and expansion (Alexander, 2003; Ellis, N.C. 2005; Hardman, 2009; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Optimised interactional and optimised language acquisition conditions are in partnership. The first impacts primarily on the quantity of language expression by students and teacher. Yet saying is not enough (van Lier, 2004). Explicit attention to the linguistic quality of utterances (Ellis, N. C. 2005; Ellis, R, 2002; van Lier, 2004), of both the teacher and the students, appears to make the critical difference as to whether linguistic expression in the classroom will result in optimised language acquisition and expansion by students.

Hoff's (2006) review of evidence from first language acquisition research identified key factors affecting young children's acquisition of language. These included: (a) the mutual engagement of child and prime caregiver, where replies to children's verbalisations are responsive, frequent and contingent upon the child's utterances; (b) talk that elicits conversation from the child, this being a predictor of grammatical development; (c) the total quantity of speech addressed to a child being related to general measures of cognitive and linguistic development – more speech enhances the language development by the child; (d) frequency and in-built redundancy, recasts and expansion, in combination, being positive predictors of grammatical development, accounting for 18-40 percent of variance among children; (e) children who hear longer utterances being more advanced in syntactic development; (f) quantity of speech – the more speech heard and produced by a child, the greater their vocabulary resources. What is often termed elaborative style discourse is a feature of child-caregiver interactions with children who have fullness of expression linguistically and cognitively.

Second language acquisition research similarly supports the view that elaborated speech and elaborated modification, implicit and explicit, matter for effective language acquisition (e.g. Ellis, R. 2002, 2006; Ellis & Barkhuzen, 2005; Gass, 1997, 2003; Halliday, 1985; Robinson & Ellis, N.C., 2008). Linguistic expansion shapes more complex oral and written text, a feature of linguistically enhanced expression (Halliday, 1985). School-based texts are typically literate-like, and linguistically complex

in clause structure – that is, elaborative style expressions. The child who has fullness of expression linguistically, as a result of elaborative style discourse opportunities, is advantaged in managing classroom exchanges and discourse (Schleppegrell, 2001). 'Variation in [vocabulary and grammatical] acquisition must [primarily] have its origins… in the nature of talk to [and with] the child' (Marchman & Thal, 2005:149).

## The study

> *"Making connections between the interactional patterns and the quality and quantity of linguistic expression of case study students and their teacher endeavours to identify whether the classroom offers optimal conditions for language acquisition."*

The core underlying linguistic and cognitive principles and conditions identified from cross-disciplinary research evidence have been summarised into three considerations: attention to the teacher's utterances and expressions; attention to the students' linguistic utterances and expressions; and the operating interactional patterns that are optimally supportive to the first two (Figure 1). Each set of identified principles, and each item within each set, is in co-relationship, each one affecting and interwoven with the others.

Two methodological approaches, linguistic analysis and classroom interactional analysis, have been selected (see Figure 1) to illuminate how classroom conditions affect the quality and quantity of students' language acquisition and use in the context of the classroom (Alton-Lee et al., 2000; Christie & Unsworth, 2000; Halliday, 1977; Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999; Nuthall, 2004; Unsworth, 2000). Making connections between the interactional patterns and the quality and quantity of linguistic expression of case study students and their teacher endeavours to identify whether the classroom offers optimal conditions for language acquisition.

## The study's structure

Four Year 1 and 2 classrooms in four different low socio-economic primary schools in Auckland, New Zealand, are involved in the study. The participants are 5- and 6-year-old students (12 of whom are case study students), and their teachers. The teachers have at least three years teaching experience and are permanent appointees in their schools. No further teacher attributes are specified.

Figure 1: Underlying linguistic, cognitive and environmental principles and conditions

**Linguistic attention: teacher**

- linguistically and cognitively enhanced input
- frequent output opportunities
- fullness of expression
- recycling and redundancy
- focus on form and focus on meaning
- degree of salience
- less salient - greater explicitness needed
- meaningful feedback
- noticing and engagement
- meaningful contexts - utterances
- vocabulary - implicit and explicit attention

**Supportive environmental conditions: teacher and students**

- taking turns
- teacher relinquishing control of topic and the way
- explicit elaborative style expression
- conversation and dialogic exchanges
- minimising low-level cognitive questions and dominance of IRE response patterns
- minimising hands-up student responses
- increased dialogic exchanges, spontaneous expression, participation
- increased think and wait time
- scaffolded classroom activity structures
- increased communicative - interactional opportunities
- varied class formats for shared expression
- joint construction

**Linguistic attention: students**

- extended think and prepare to say time
- initiating and sustaining expression: fullness, interactional, dialogic
- responsive to others' expressions
- increased control of topic and the way
- seeking to know and express more
- expanded expression: guided, spontaneous
- expressing dialogically and monologically
- relevant and meaningful expression

The selected classes are ethnically diverse, the largest ethnic groups in these communities being Pasifika and Maori. Many of the children in the classes have languages other than English as the dominant home/family languages of communication, although many may be New Zealand-born. All have attended school for at least three months (one term), and they range in age from 5.5 years to 7.0 years old. Ethnicity, and the languages other than English used in the home, are features which are not a focus of the study.

There are four basic phases in the study. The first and last phases are wrapped around an intervention of five workshops with the study teachers, and there is also an implementation phase of one school term. Pre- and post-intervention data gathering (phases 1 and 4) includes: (a) assessment of all students, in order to select three case study students from each of the four classes – thus, 12 case study students in all; (b) vocabulary assessment and oral text production information about each of the case study students (video recorded); and (c) 30-minute video recordings of three 'typical' lessons in each of the four classrooms on three different days in one week. Additionally, the four teachers are interviewed about matters related to language acquisition and use in the classroom.

The intervention of five workshops is designed to offer the teachers understandings about the identified principles and conditions, and how to implement these in day-to-day classroom practice. Following each workshop, teachers trial the workshop focus and report back on what has occurred; they are regarded as co-researchers rather than research 'subjects' (Mills, 2000).

Each videoed lesson of 30 minutes' duration involves four video cameras – one camera trained on each of the three case study students, and one on the teacher as she engages with the class. Thus, in each classroom, four sets of 30-minute observational data are obtained each videoed lesson in a set of three lessons, pre- and post-intervention. This rich data offers the potential to gain deep insights into the reality of classroom and environmental factors affecting students' language acquisition.

## Data analysis

It is hypothesised that even with quite limited training, when teachers implement the identified principles and conditions with focus and attention, noticeable changes in the quality and quantity of students' oral expression will become evident.

The pre- and post-intervention case study student data triangulates three sets of analysis information for each child: (i) vocabulary level as measured by the British Picture Vocabulary Scale II (Dunn et al., 1997); (ii) oral expression competency, analysed at below and above clause level [the lexico-grammar level of text] (Halliday, 1977; Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999; Matthiessen, 2001); and (iii) classroom expression and interaction during three class lessons, analysed using a linguistic and interactional coding scheme.

Human behaviour analysis software (Observer XT 8.0, Noldus, 2007) is being used to analyse videoed lessons. Each case study student can be coded and compared against self and other at any one instant and across time, pre- and post-intervention. The teacher's interactional and discourse ways of operating, and how this influences child expression at any moment and in terms of long-term acquisition, become evident.

Pre-intervention data gathering has been completed. The intervention workshops have been conducted, study teachers are currently implementing in their classrooms, and video analysis of pre-intervention data has begun. Some significant insights directly related to the research questions are already evident. The discussion below is confined to the students only.

## The students – insights and implications

### Class assessment of students' communicative competency

The selection of the randomly selected case study students involved the class teacher making judgements about each student using a checklist [CombiList] (Damhuis et al., 2004) of 16 criteria related to the child's communication in class. Each child was simply rated Y (yes), S (sometimes), and N (no), based on the teacher's cumulative knowledge of the child after at least one term at school. Individual child assessments took no more than ten minutes, from which a whole class

profile could also be derived. Assessment using the CombiList early on in a child's schooling offers a valuable reflective and selective tool for teachers. Whether children can and do communicate effectively in the class, whether opportunities to do so are optimally available, and how these might become so, are some important teacher considerations, as suggested by Damhuis et al. (2004).

The teachers in the study found the CombiList simple to understand and use, minimally time-demanding, and insightful. It gave them specificity, as well an overall 'best fit' general trend, about each child, and about the class as a whole. In all four classrooms, most students were 'best fit' S or N, with very few Y, serving as an alert to the extent of the students' communicative competency, and how they as teachers might go about developing this in the context of the classroom.

### Case study students' communicative competency

One student from each Y, S, and N category in each class was randomly selected as a case study student – thus, four students each of Y, S, and N, 12 case study students in all. Pre-intervention assessments of each child included an assessment of vocabulary and three oral production texts generated from two student-selected photos and a retell of a sequential text – firstly the child's retell based on the text visuals only, and a second retell after listening to an oral text while viewing the visuals.

### Vocabulary

As measured by the British Picture Vocabulary Scale II, nine students aged between 5.03 and 6.03 years had vocabulary age equivalents of between 3.03 and 4.11 years. Of the three remaining students, two were close to but below their expected age level in vocabulary, while one student stood out as well above. The considerable gap in vocabulary competency of the majority of students, compared with age expected levels, is of enormous concern, vocabulary being at the heart of a child's capacity to communicate.

Currently, there is limited knowledge of Year 1 and 2 students' vocabulary competency, based largely on observational/anecdotal information gathering and/or varying school entry assessments in Year 1, and from the six-year observational

survey (Clay, 2005), which records the child's self-generated oral and writing vocabulary, word recognition of high frequency vocabulary items, and phonological knowledge.

The vocabulary pre-intervention assessment results of this study suggest we would do well to use a consistent, highly reliable and valid vocabulary assessment tool, such as the British Picture Vocabulary Scale II, to measure the English vocabulary of students in low socio-economic schools as early as possible after entry to school at age 5, possibly around age 5.3 years. This would offer timely insights into the child's vocabulary resources. More precise knowledge would alert the class teacher to the vocabulary acquisition needs of the child soon after school entry at 5 years of age. Explicit attention to the depth and breadth of students' vocabulary acquisition is undoubtedly an urgent pedagogical matter to address in low socio-economic schools and classrooms.

### Students' oral text production

While not fully analysed linguistically at this point, transcripts of oral texts produced by each case study student show significant trends. All 12 students produced dominantly syntactically simple text utterances, exhibited significant vocabulary limitations, and generally lacked fluency to produce logically connected ideas. Much of the time, finger pointing and prompting was needed to 'draw out' minimally sustained and fluent texts. The stand-out exception was the above-age vocabulary level child. Based on transcripts alone, 11 of the students appear to have an oral text competency level in English well below expected age-equivalent levels. They lack fluency in elaborative style expression in English, hugely affected by their limited vocabulary resources and syntactical competency.

If we are to gain informed insights into the expressive capacities of Year 1–2 students in low socioeconomic schools, we need to go well beyond the limited oral text assessment information that is gathered on entry and at 6 years of age. More extensive oral text gathering and informed deep-level analysis would provide timely and needed information about each child's expressive resources. This should then act as a key pedagogical point of departure on which classroom teaching and learning is based.

Such assessments need not be time-consuming. The oral text production battery of assessments in this study took on average no more than 20 minutes, and transcriptions no more than 30 minutes. Thus, with minimal investment of time and effort, teachers can gain valuable insights into each child's oral text expression, as long as they have a minimal core of grammatical knowledge.

### Classroom text production

Pre-intervention videoed footage of case study students' oral expression and interactions during three class lessons in the four classrooms in this study, at this early stage of analysis, foregrounds significant patterns and issues about the quality and quantity of each child's oral expression and interactions. These include:

(a) students' quantity of oral expression typifies patterns identified in the research literature, namely, minimal oral expression opportunity available to the child;

(b) the teacher is overwhelmingly dominant in what gets expressed, by whom, and when;

(c) when child utterances occur, they are in large part syntactically and lexically simple and short, whether curriculum-based or social-communicative based;

(d) teacher responses to child utterances tend to be minimally linguistically and cognitively expanding, dominated by typical initiate, response, evaluation (ire) patterns, and by low-level cognitive questioning and evaluations, which do not provide the child with effectively scaffolded, rich potential input;

(e) generally, where the class lesson activity structure is group rotation, children involved in activities where the teacher is not present are operating at very minimal levels of cognitive and linguistic engagement;

(f) when students are involved with the teacher, individually, in small groups or in a class group, expanded cognitive and linguistic expression by teacher and students is for the most part not occurring.

> *How teaching is related to learning (acquisition) requires an understanding of how individual student behavior and experience are shaped by the way the teacher designs, manages and assesses classroom activities.*

When students such as the case study children come to school under-resourced in oral expression and vocabulary, it is critically important that classroom environmental conditions are as optimal as possible in terms of quantity and quality of oral expression by students and teacher, if there is to be exponential growth in language acquisition.

## Next phases of the study

One term of implementation in each of the four classrooms in the study is in full swing. There is a common goal by the four teachers involved: to explicitly attend to optimising discourse and interactional conditions in the classroom, across all curriculum areas, based on what they learnt in the intervention workshops. At the end of each week, they report on and evaluate implementation.

The language effects on the students' quality and quantity of oral expression are already evident. Some comments by the teachers capture this:

*I am definitely seeing the students' linguistic, cognitive and vocabulary expansion.*

*I have noticed more spontaneous expression, and children wanting to know words, write about what we've talked about, and read.*

*The children didn't just remember facts, but also the sentences that we had shaped and recycled, like: "Cash is money like notes and coins. You can use cash to buy something, but if you don't have cash you can use a card to buy something".*

'How teaching is related to learning (acquisition) requires an understanding of how individual student behavior and experience are shaped by the way the teacher designs, manages and assesses classroom activities' (Nuthall, 2004:281). Investigations focusing on this kind of understanding are inevitably complex, theoretically and methodologically, as is this study.

# Conclusion and acknowledgements

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## CERT Comment

CERT's whole approach to funding reflects the idea that too close a concentration on one aspect of learning, no matter how important, can impede success. This research project highlights the extent to which existing initiatives to help those children making up the 'tail' in achievement have focused on literacy alone. Jannie van Hees draws on a wide range of international research to support the hypothesis that a broader language focus is required to help those school entrants who are currently most likely to fall behind, and that it needs to involve specific attention to expressive capacity and the vocabulary resources underpinning literacy competency in English. She has designed her project to hone in on what teachers are doing, or not doing, in these respects, and develop specific tools they can use to develop these vital capacities more effectively.



*Jannie van Hees*

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In this study, a **student-led conference** is defined as a conference between 30 and 60 minutes long, **run by students, for their parents**, about their learning. During the conference, students present work in different curriculum areas.

# Chapter 8
## Student-led conferences
How effective are they as an alternative reporting method?

*Cherie Taylor-Patel*

## Introduction

> *Students engage their parents in a range of interactive activities, designed to demonstrate current skills, knowledge and understanding of their learning.*

This paper is focused on a research study exploring the extent to which student-led conferences can be considered effective as an alternative reporting method. Included is a brief literature review, an overview of the study, preliminary results and a summary of key themes that are emerging from the data. Challenges for research and policy development around effective reporting practices are identified.

In this study, a student-led conference is defined as a conference between 30 and 60 minutes long, run by students, for their parents, about their learning. During the conference, students present work in different curriculum areas. Students discuss the process of learning, and the progress they have made, with reference to their goals and the criteria against which their work has been evaluated. Students engage their parents in a range of interactive activities, designed to demonstrate current skills, knowledge and understanding of their learning.

The literature informing this study is drawn from four different areas of research: reporting, teacher effectiveness, student motivation, and parental participation in education.

## Reporting to parents

There has been very little research on the effectiveness of school reports in conveying information to parents about student progress and achievement (Hattie, 2003). It seems that while schools engage in the activity of designing, preparing and delivering reports to parents, their effectiveness in conveying information is not examined. The New Zealand Ministry of Education (2009) has highlighted a need to improve reporting

systems, in order to create more consistency in information provided to parents about student progress and achievement.

In a study of ten New Zealand schools, Timperley and Robinson (2002) found reports differed in terms of the standards against which achievement was reported between schools, and there was also inconsistency within schools. Research also shows there is lack of clarity around whose job it is to guide schools on reporting procedures (Cuttance & Stokes, 2000; Timperley & Robinson, 2002; Hattie & Peddie, 2003).

The frustration of trying to interpret school reports that lack consistency and explicit information about achievement is evident in research involving parents. The language used in reports was unclear, misleading and filled with educational jargon. Comments on difficulties were couched in positive terms (Power & Clark, 2000; Cuttance & Stokes, 2000).

Where grades were used, parents wanted information on what they meant and how they were decided upon (Savell, 1998; Cuttance & Stokes, 2000). Parents consistently identified difficulty in understanding the grading system used in reports and clearly stated they want fair and honest assessment.

Shared understanding of the purpose of parent-teacher meetings is another issue identified by parents. Many parents view these meetings as opportunities for two-way communication and forming a relationship with their child's teacher. Parents want to have an interactive discussion about how teachers interpret their child's assessment in terms of focusing on improvement, with reference to samples of work, and how parents can assist their child's learning; but they often feel the parent-teacher interview is a one-way dissemination of knowledge from the teacher to the parent (Cuttance & Stokes, 2000; Power & Clark, 2000).

Parents also want to share their perceptions about their children, and find teachers are not always receptive to this. Where parents hear a different interpretation of difficulties their child is having from that given by their child, they are placed in the difficult position of believing either their child

or the teacher (Le Countryman & Schroeder, 1996). Some parents, especially those from a lower socioeconomic group or ethnic minority, do not have the confidence to be assertive in parent-teacher meetings (Cairney, 2000; Hoover-Demsey & Sandler, 1997).

## Teacher effectiveness

In response to the call for schools to become more accountable for student achievement, schools in recent years have developed systems to collect and collate information on student achievement.

Researchers leading assessment reform to raise student achievement have shifted their focus from the data that schools generate about student achievement to schools analysing that data, and setting targets for learning. Better understanding and knowledge of the processes that lead to learning in the classroom, through the practices of teachers, is seen to be an integral part of assessment reform (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Stigler, James & Hiebert, 1997).

Changes in classroom assessment represent major paradigm shifts in thinking about learning and teaching. In developing effective teaching practice, focused on embedding assessment in the learning process, key components of class-based assessment have been identified in the literature. These include: sharing learning outcomes with students; exposing students to quality exemplars; creating opportunities for peer and self-assessment; giving quality feedback; and focusing on the quality of interaction between teacher and pupil (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Tunstall & Gipps, 1995; Hattie, 1999; Clark, 2000).

## Student self-reporting

Hattie's (2009) revised list of the most effective influences on student achievement identifies student self-reporting as the most significant indicator linked to raised student achievement. The process of students reflecting on their learning, through effective questioning that promotes the articulation of student thinking, is integral to classroom assessment practices that enhance student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998a).

Hargreaves, Earl & Schmidt (2002) reported that teachers valued pupil self-assessment and sharing of assessment targets with other students and themselves more, as students took ownership of their learning. As students developed confidence in their ability to self-assess, they began devising and applying evaluation criteria to their work, independently of the teacher.

It cannot, however, be assumed that students possess the self-confidence and the organisational and communication skills necessary to lead a successful conference without the support of teachers (Hackmann, 1997). Student-led conferences, as an effective reporting method, need to be seen as one part of a whole school alignment of strategic intent, assessment systems, professional development, classroom pedagogy, student involvement and parent participation.

## Student motivation

*If reporting is about sharing information about student progress and achievement, arguably the most important person to inform is the student.*

Most of the literature on reporting to parents is focused on teachers providing information about the student to the parent (Cuttance & Stokes, 2000). If reporting is about sharing information about student progress and achievement, arguably the most important person to inform is the student.

In some instances students do attend traditional parent-teacher interviews. Cuttance and Stokes (2000) described how students involved in three-way interviews who discussed their reports with parents before attending the meeting were then able to contribute to discussion in the interview. It is more common for students to discuss their reports with their parents, but not attend the meeting. Some parents feel that having their child present can act as a constraint and inhibit discussion, while in other situations parents favour their child being present for part of the time (Cuttance & Stokes, 2000).

Student-led conferences give students a voice in the reporting process. They have the potential to inform parents about learning in a way that both deepens parents' understanding of the learning process and improves communication about learning between them and their children.

Research looking at student motivation and learning distinguishes between learning goals ('mastery' or 'task' goals) and performance goals ('ego' goals). Learning goals involve students developing skills and understanding so as to achieve mastery in their learning. Student-led conferences have the potential to foster mastery goals for individual students in the context of the classroom.

## Parental participation in education

*Research shows parental encouragement and support for learning activities at home, and parental involvement in schools and classrooms, have a positive impact on children's learning.*

Integral to the concept of student-led conferences is the desire to involve parents in their children's education. Research shows parental encouragement and support for learning activities at home, and parental involvement in schools and classrooms, have a positive impact on children's learning (Bastiani, 1988; Epstein, 1983, 1987).

Historically, communication between parents and teachers has been one way – school to home (Beattie, 1995). International research, focused on links between student achievement and parental involvement, indicates that partnerships between schools and parents result in improved academic achievement (Sanders & Epstein, 1998).

Current literature on partnerships and participation develops the themes of social democracy and student achievement separately, without examining how they are linked, or how effective home-school partnerships could be developed to combine the two themes (Timperley & Robinson, 2002). Literature on social democracy is focused on social equality, the power relationships between the partners, the barriers that inhibit successful relationships developing, and the development of partnerships that empower parents (Anderson, 1998; Cairney, 2000; Crozier, 1998; Timperley & Robinson, 2002). Other studies have focused on the involvement of parents as partners in the learning process, providing the basis for improving student achievement (Bastiani, 1988; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997).

The themes of student achievement and social democracy are both relevant in this study. As an assessment tool for reporting progress and achievement, participation in student-led conferences could lead to greater parental involvement in their child's learning and, over time, raise student achievement. Of more significance could be the impact of student-led conferences on redefining and clarifying the roles, and therefore the power relationships, between teachers, students and parents. These changes have the potential to lead to a long-term, stronger, more collaborative and effective three-way partnership between students, teachers and parents.

Having parents involved in their children's learning in more authentic ways is about changing the nature of teacher–parent relationships. Mawson (1996) found that many teachers perceived parents as a threat to their position. Where parental involvement increased from passive receipt of information to consultation with the teacher, teachers were found to be less secure (Bastiani, 1988).

The literature also identifies parental concerns about teachers. Teachers' reluctance to give information about their child's progress in relation to their age and class level, and the school's reluctance to alert parents to children's difficulties early on, were issues identified by Savell (1998). This reluctance was, in part, linked to a belief that if students were achieving within a broad, normal band, there was no cause for concern.

Cuttance and Stokes (2000) defined characteristics of effective parent-teacher partnerships in education as: the sharing of power, responsibility and ownership, but with different roles; responsive dialogue, characterised by 'give and take'; shared aims and goals, based on a common understanding of the educational needs of children; and commitment to joint action.

For schools to build successful learning partnerships with parents, it is important for them to be clear about why they want parents involved in student learning, and how they are going to develop this involvement of parents in their child's education.

> " *Of more significance could be the impact of student-led conferences on redefining and clarifying the roles, and therefore the power relationships, between teachers, students and parents.* "

## Description of the study

'To what extent are student-led conferences an effective reporting method?' was the question this study set out to answer. Case study methodology was used and involved teachers, students and parents of two multicultural suburban primary schools in Auckland. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected from teachers, students and parents over six months. The research design was an embedded multiple-case study with four units of analysis: the student-led conference event; and evidence from Year 3 – 6 students, their parents and their teachers.

## Key themes emerging

Key themes emerging from this study are discussed below in terms of teachers, students and parents.

### Teachers

#### Changing roles, changing the focus

The process of implementing the student-led conference reporting method presented challenges for teachers, in terms of their role in the reporting process and what they shared with students. In both case studies, teachers believed parents wanted information about student behaviour and social engagement at school. The student-led conference agenda, however, was focused on providing information about learning.

To accommodate parents, the Case Study 1 school chose to add a 'slot' for teachers to meet with parents at the end of each conference. During this time, the teachers checked to see whether the parents had any further questions about the students' learning, and then shared information about their social skills, behaviour and attitude. While this fulfilled teachers' expectations of an effective reporting evening, in some instances, it disempowered students by shifting the focus away from learning.

To address the issue of how to inform parents about students' social and behavioural welfare, teachers in Case Study 2 were asked to telephone parents before the student-led conference event. During these conferences, the focus stayed on learning.

> " *In both case studies, teachers believed parents wanted information about student behaviour and social engagement at school. The student-led conference agenda, however, was focused on providing information about learning.* "

After the event, teachers still felt parents wanted information beyond that shared by their child. Some teachers had arranged to meet with parents on another day.

### Achievement information and reporting

While teachers understood the principle of students sharing progress and achievement information with parents, in practice they found it difficult to transfer information, especially about achievement, to students. Traditionally, achievement information has been known by teachers and not shared with students. Nor have teachers expected students to understand it. Teachers in the study were challenged about what information they would share with students and how this was to be done, so that students could report to parents effectively.

In Case Study 1, teachers focused on preparing students to be able to explain the process of learning and to demonstrate skills learned. Students had little understanding of achievement information and this information was not used in their conferences. In Case Study 2, while confident that students could explain the process of learning, and progress from Term 1 to 2, teachers had underestimated the time needed to share achievement information with students, so that they understood it well.

Both case-studies highlighted the fact that teachers were not used to sharing achievement information with students. This was a challenge that was underestimated by teachers and impacted on student understanding of their learning.

### Student understanding of learning

In the preparation for student-led conferences, teachers were diligent in checking for student understanding of learning. Teachers spent time revising work covered, so that students understood it well, rather than teaching all that they had planned to get through in a term. Teachers were obliged to use time in lessons differently, checking for understanding and then adjusting their programme according to what they found. Teachers identified the tension between creating time to deepen understanding, and getting through the content they wanted to teach.

### Student capacity/teacher capacity

While preparing for student-led conferences, teachers, students and parents expressed concerns about students' capacity and capabilities to report to parents about their learning. Teachers were asked to predict which of their students would struggle to do this, and to consider strategies they would use to support these students.

After the conferences, nearly all their predictions were found to be wrong. Students whom they expected to struggle did not. Students whom they expected to have no problem needed support. It would seem that teachers had based their assumptions on students' academic ability, rather than on confidence levels. They had also not considered how the relationship the students had with their parents might impact.

Teachers had worried that they did not have the skills to prepare students well for the conferences. Younger teachers were still developing their use of effective teaching strategies in different curriculum areas. Older teachers were being asked to modify their practice. In both case studies, teachers worried about students not being able to explain things well enough, or 'freezing' and not having anything to say.

After the conferences, teachers, as well as being very positive about the outcome, clearly articulated what they would be doing to further improve their teaching practice, as a result of preparing for the conferences.

## Students

### New role, new expectations

Most students (89 percent) enjoyed the process of preparing for and conducting conferences with their parents. Some interviewed students stated that they would have tried harder in different subject areas if they had known they were going to be reporting to their parents, suggesting that the process had made them more accountable.

### Student understanding of learning

Interviewed students reported that the conferences improved their knowledge and understanding of their learning. Before the conferences, some students were not sure they would be able to explain their learning well, their comments echoing those of their teachers. In both case studies students were expected to explain the process of learning, the progress they had made and, for the students in Case Study 2, their current levels of achievement.

In the post-conference interviews, students were positive about how well they had explained their learning to their parents, with most surveyed students giving themselves ratings of 'very well' or 'extremely well'.

When asked to consider how well they understood their learning after the conferences, most students gave themselves ratings of 'reasonably well' or 'very well'. Student understanding varied, depending on the students' age, their teachers' ability to develop student knowledge of the process of learning, and the time students had to assimilate information about their progress and current achievement levels, before the conferences took place. That this was their first conference experience would have also have been a factor.

## Parents

### New role, new opportunities

Parents participating in student-led conferences for the first time found the process very different from traditional parent-teacher interviews. Some parents may have been used to talking with teachers about their child's learning, but others were more used to being 'passive receivers' of information. Some parents had not experienced having their children participate in any way in the reporting process. They were not sure about what was expected of them or what they could expect from their children. Some parents were unsure about what information their children could provide or if it was accurate or reliable.

Parents reported enjoying the conference process. Their children were able to articulate clearly what they had learned

> " *Parents reported enjoying the conference process. Their children were able to articulate clearly what they had learned and where they were 'at' in their learning.* "

and where they were 'at' in their learning. Parents understood aspects of their child's learning more clearly and how they could support their child's learning at home.

### Understanding student learning

Like the teachers and students, parents thought students understood their learning 'reasonably' well.

Parents, in Case Study 1, rated their understanding of student progress and achievement the same as they had rated traditional reporting methods, at the beginning of the study. Student-led conferences had not changed what information this school provided about progress and achievement.

What did change in this school was the number of parents who attended student-led conferences. Parent attendance improved from around 50 to 75 percent. Parents found the process less intimidating and more informative. They valued the process of their children explaining their learning, and enjoyed being active participants.

In Case Study 2, parent turnout increased from 85 to 99 percent. Like parents in Case Study 1, parents reported enjoying having time to learn about their children's learning from their children. The student portfolios in this case study contained samples of work, student self-assessments, teacher comments, achievement levels and information about how they were derived.

Some parents commented that it was a lot of information to absorb, in addition to the students' explanations of the process of learning, and that they needed more time to make sense of all the information.

### Perceptions of the effectiveness of student-led conferences

Most of the parents in this study thought the student-led conference was a 'very effective' or 'extremely effective' method of reporting on student progress and achievement. Parents found it less intimidating and thought the information provided was jargon-free. They appreciated having more time than in traditional interviews, and found that seeing samples of work and demonstrations of how students learn helped them to understand the learning process.

Having said this, in both case studies one quarter of the parents felt strongly that it was important for them to meet with their child's teacher. They believed the teacher would be able to explain their child's progress and achievement more effectively, and they wanted an opportunity to discuss issues traditionally covered in parent-teacher interviews, such as social skills and behaviour. Some parents wanted an opportunity to talk with the teacher without their child being present.

### Effectiveness as a reporting method

As a reporting method that gives parents understanding of how students learn, student-led conferences were effective in both case studies. In terms of giving parents reliable, accurate information about student progress and achievement, they were only as effective as the quality and type of information that teachers shared with students, or provided in student portfolios.

In this study, teachers had a range of teaching experience, and a range of beliefs about and understanding of what reporting was, what information should be reported and to whom. This influenced what information was shared with students and parents in student-led conferences.

The effectiveness of the reporting process in Case Study 1 was affected by teachers' understanding of assessment information and its usefulness for teachers and students. In Case Study 2, sharing achievement information with students was not given sufficient time for students to be confident that they understood the information well. It was not a regular, school-wide aspect of classroom pedagogy prior to the implementation of student-led conferences.

As a reporting method that looks to improve the consistency and quality of information provided to both students and parents, student-led conferences can only be as effective as the systems that support teacher and student learning in a school.

> " *As a reporting method that looks to improve the consistency and quality of information provided to both students and parents, student-led conferences can only be as effective as the systems that support teacher and student learning in a school.* "

# How findings could influence educational outcomes for students

### Teachers

Student-led conferences require teachers to be effective student-focused practitioners. They require teachers to find a different balance between coverage of the curriculum and 'mastery', or understanding, of curriculum content.

Student-led conferences work if teachers engage with assessment information, to inform their teaching programmes and to inform students about their progress and achievement. To do this effectively, teachers have to use lesson time in ways that engage students in quality conversations about their learning. This research highlights the importance of effective professional development that supports teachers to become student-centred practitioners.

### Students

Student-led conferences help students become informed 'assessors' of their own and others' learning. As they prepare and conduct conferences about their learning, they are developing their knowledge and understanding of themselves as learners. They are also developing 'real life' skills in presentation, making the reporting process an authentic part of their learning.

### Parents

Student-led conferences create new ways for parents to learn about their child's progress and achievement in learning. Over time, they have the potential to systemically support parents to become informed partners in the learning process, more able to understand how learning can be supported at home.

### Summary

Student-led conferences improve parents' attendance, engagement in learning about learning, and support for student learning. They create social democracy in the reporting system, because power traditionally held by teachers is shared with students and parents.

Student-led conferences can effectively provide quality information about progress and achievement and about the process of learning. More importantly, they change the traditional 'power-based' relationships between schools and their communities.

## Research and policy challenges

### *Reporting – just one school system*

Currently there is a strong focus at a national level to create more consistency in reporting student progress and achievement to parents. Consistency in reporting relies on the quality of assessment information made available, and how well it is understood by its intended audience. Assessment is complex and not easily explained in brief written reports. Shared understanding needs to be built over time, with teachers, students and parents.

Effective reporting involves clearly defined tasks to meet specific goals, focused on student achievement, shared responsibilities, explicit processes and mutually accountable partners. Reporting policy needs to recognise that the quality of any reporting method is an end result of the organisation of inter-related, integrated school systems that inform the reporting process.

### *Reporting and assessment*

The Ministry of Education's 'Assessment for Learning' professional development initiatives have focused on teachers using effective formative teaching practices. While these contracts have created school-wide consistency in teaching pedagogy, more work needs to be done around how teachers use assessment information: what data is collected, collated and analysed, and how the information from the data is used. Teachers need to ensure that students are informed about all aspects of their learning, so that students understand the purpose of their learning and their next learning step.

### *Reporting and 21st century teaching and learning*

As schools work at becoming learning communities that are effective in preparing students for the 21st century, learning needs to be something done with, not to, students. Learning needs to empower students to develop knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies.

> " *…learning needs to be something done with, not to, students. Learning needs to empower students to develop knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies.* "

Self-reporting is the most powerful indicator of student success in learning (Hattie, 2009). In reporting there is a need to consider how to create 'student voice' because students, as learners, know the most about their learning. Effective reporting systems will be ones where 'student voice' is an integral part of the reporting process.

Reporting processes used by schools need to be information-sharing processes, based upon mutual respect and trust on the part of all parties. There is a need to develop multiple ways for parents to get information about their children's learning and new ways for schools to engage with students and parents as valued partners in the learning process.

## Conclusion

At present, New Zealand policy on reporting is in the process of being reviewed. It is now time to create dialogue around the purpose of reporting and what effective reporting methods should, and could, achieve – for students, for parents and for home-school relationships in the 21st century.

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## CERT Comment

The vital relationship between home and school stands at the centre of Cherie Taylor-Patel's work; but this time the students themselves provide the key factor in improving this relationship, through the innovative reporting method of student-led conferences. The timeliness of this research, given that New Zealand policy on reporting is in the process of being reviewed, bodes well for CERT's goal of relevance. Interconnectedness is a major feature: for students to be able to report effectively on their own learning to their parents, teachers find they must ensure that students are indeed fully informed, clearly understanding 'the purpose of their learning and their next learning step'. This points to a conclusion centring, once again, on relationships: 'Reporting processes used by schools need to be information-sharing processes, based upon mutual respect and trust on the part of all parties.'



*Cherie Taylor-Patel*

**Cherie Taylor-Patel**, Principal of Flanshaw Road School since 2004, has a diverse primary teaching background, having taught all levels from New Entrants to Year 8 in small rural schools, large inner-city schools and Decile 2 to Decile 10 schools for over 20 years. Gaining a Masters Degree in Education in 2000, Cherie is currently completing her PhD at the University of Auckland. She describes herself as a lead-learner whose fortune it is to work with talented teachers, students, staff and parents that inspire and challenge, support and energise her every day.

# Chapter 9

## Strengthening learning partnerships
through purposeful reporting

*Wendy Kofoed*

### Introduction

Reporting is one of the main methods of communicating information on children's learning from the school to home. Typically, reporting plays a fundamental role in informing parents/whanau, or other supporting adults, of children's achievement and progress (Broadfoot, 1990; Education Review Office, 2008; Guskey, 1996). In addition, this communication is a key aspect of the partnership between the school and home (Bastiani & Doyle, 1994). It appears likely that reporting can strengthen the learning partnership between school and home if the information reported is of a nature that enables parents to support children's learning. However, school leaders and teachers may need to reframe how they report in order to achieve this purpose.

A key question for school leaders and teachers is, therefore: how does the nature of the information in written reports support the purpose of strengthening the learning partnerships between school and home?

### Strengthening the learning partnership

Parents play an important role in supporting children's learning in academic and non-academic fields. Parents provide encouragement, expectations and aspirations for their children, and in this way they can support and mediate learning (Harris & Goodall, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2004). This parental support of learning is critical, as a large body of evidence indicates links between positive parental encouragement, expectations and aspirations, and the raising of children's achievement (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Hattie, 2008; Hong & Ho, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995).

A key question for school leaders and teachers is: how does the nature of the information in written reports support the purpose of **strengthening the learning partnerships between school and home**?

In order for parental support of learning to be advanced, a learning partnership between the school and home appears beneficial (Edwards & Warin, 1999; Epstein, 2001). Furthermore, it would seem that a critical aspect of a learning partnership is parents' ability to access meaningful information from the school in terms of their child's achievement and progress.

Schools are required to assess students' progress and achievement and report this information to parents. This can produce many challenges for teachers, especially in relation to the method used to report to parents. Schools typically use a range of methods to report student progress and achievement. This might include the more traditional written reports, parent interviews (with or without the child), paper-based portfolios, and informal conversations. Alternatively, schools may use newer forms of reporting methods, such as performance assessment, student-led conferences and e-portfolios. That schools use a range of reporting methods is important and relevant to the purpose of reporting. No one method of reporting is likely to serve all purposes well, with the purpose likely to be different for each method (Guskey, 1994).

## Purposes of reporting

As a school principal, I found it useful to find out whether current reporting was perceived as purposeful for our 21st century learners' parents and teachers. This was important, given that newer assessment concepts and terminology have emerged as a significant aspect of assessment discourse over the last two decades (Brown, Irving, & Keegan, 2007; Moss & Schutz, 2001; Newton, 2007).

Descriptions of purposes of reporting have remained fairly constant over the last half century. The purposes for reporting suggested by Thorndike and Hagen in 1955 have many similarities to those suggested over the last two decades. Thorndike and Hagen suggested several primary purposes of reporting: to provide a parent with their child's record of achievement, provide background material for understanding the child's development, help the school itself to do an effective job of teaching and guiding pupils, inform parents

so that they can work closely with the school for the child's good, and help motivate and guide learning. More recent research has indicated that purposes include the intention of providing documentation to parents, enlisting parents in supporting learning, possibly providing incentives from the school or home for learning, identifying learning objectives and outcomes, and supplying a feedback mechanism to assist self-evaluation and enable children to set further learning goals (Guskey, 1994; Johnson, 2001; O'Donoghue & Dimmock, 2002; Stiggins, 1994; Wiggins, 1999). Given the wide time span between the publications mentioned, purposes have remained remarkably constant.

## Establishing a hierarchy of purposes

My research first explored how parents and teachers perceived current methods of reporting, and the characteristics included in school reporting frameworks. This exploration enabled me to establish a hierarchy of purposes (see Figure 1), in order to gain a greater understanding of how key purposes might underpin the design and use of reporting frameworks.



Figure 1: Hierarchy of purposes for school reporting to parents

The establishment of a hierarchy ultimately led to a framework and model for written reporting. A further benefit of establishing a hierarchy of purposes is that this arrangement provides an indication of relative importance and makes purposes explicit, but also emphasises the relationship between levels of purpose. When there are competing purposes, establishing a hierarchy is useful, because explicit prioritisation helps to define the primary purposes (Cangelosi, 1990; Newton, 2007). In addition, the differentiation of levels of purposes supports schools to develop reporting frameworks.

For example, it could be argued that the purposes of reporting range from those that are of a higher level – the 'whys' of reporting – to those that are more instrumental – the 'what' and 'how' of reporting – with the higher-level purposes informing the lower-level purposes. We need to know, for example, that reporting will serve overarching goals which can be considered as higher-level purposes, such as promoting learning partnerships with the home; but knowing this does not of itself tell us how this is achieved.

## 'Why' schools report

The hierarchy of purposes flows from the overall purpose of strengthening learning partnerships between the school and home. Intuitively, it appears that a strong learning partnership between the school and home should be able to promote children's achievement. Theoretically, in a strong partnership between the school and home that is centred on children's learning, parents can be involved in productive ways to focus on raising achievement. For instance, in this research parents and teachers indicated that it is through the communication of meaningful information, of a nature that enables parents to support the learning of their child, that reporting is most effective and may play a part in raising achievement.

## 'What' schools report

Both parents and teachers indicated the usefulness of assessment that informs learning, and were closely aligned in this perspective. Parents perceived that the written report was useful when it focused on the child's learning, and provided

goals and next learning steps. In particular, for parents, reporting was useful when it demonstrated both strengths and learning gaps. For this reason, the hierarchy shows the purpose of informing learning as central if a learning partnership is to be achieved.

In particular, the research findings supported the notion that assessment to inform learning has a critical place in written reporting, because:

- feedback, goal-setting and feedforward can allow for progress over time to be clearly related to learning

- feedback in relation to next learning steps may be a conducive method of teachers ensuring that parents are informed of children's strengths and learning gaps

- feedforward and indications of 'where to next' allow parents the opportunity to work with teachers to provide support for children's learning.

This finding has implications for the nature of the information presented in a written report, the collaborative nature of the decision-making involved in reporting, and the possible shifts needed in teachers' practice.

## 'How' schools report

This section outlines the more instrumental purposes that are important for school leaders and teachers when establishing reporting frameworks. In particular, it is through the identification of the lower-level purposes which support higher-level purposes that a strong written reporting framework can be developed.

The first lower-level purpose identified by the research findings is the use of the written report as a means of providing parents with a judgement about a student's learning. This is termed a best-fit assessment judgement, to ensure that a dichotomy is not created of one method of assessment or tool over another. The term 'best-fit' implies that the purpose is to provide a summary of performance on a sequence of instruction, but does not specify the tools used to provide

such a judgement. There appears to be a place for reliable and relevant academic assessment from whatever source (Newton, 2007). Moreover, it can be difficult to separate assessment judgements into discrete parts.

The second lower-level purpose is that of progress over time. Parents indicated that reporting a child's progress over time allowed opportunities for them to support learning as part of a continuous process, which in turn allowed for changes to expectations of learning outcomes (Sadler, 1989). In this way the continuous assessments of processes that inform learning are useful information for teachers and parents. As well as providing valuable information in a written report for the child and parent, such fluidity is also highly likely to be useful for the child's next teacher.

Moreover, assessment information that allows the parent to reflect on the adequacy of a child's progress over time towards short-term goals, and, intrinsic to this, the child's learning opportunities, appears to be important for parents. If a child's progress is supported by the provision of information over time – a movement or motion from one place to the next – it implies a before-view and after-view of a child's achievement. Thus it appears that an instrumental purpose of reporting is to show progress over time, ideally towards short-term goals.

A further finding was that parents and teachers perceived that a purpose of reporting was to provide broad information – that is, complementary academic and non-academic outcomes, or broad competencies, across the curriculum. Parents placed a high value on non-academic competencies. The relevant information identified in the research included personal and social development information, and effort grades or comments. This was consistent for all methods of reporting, and was particularly useful to parents in written reports.

The high value of non-academic competencies to parents and teachers highlights the role of the practitioner in reporting explicitly on the student's self-management and collaboration skills. Just as parents value academic skills, so too do they value and hold schools accountable for information about the extent that children achieve these competencies. This is

an important focus in a written report, as life skills impact on the capacity of the student for significantly greater learning, and are highly pertinent to self-directed learning, including self-evaluation. This finding is particularly relevant in New Zealand, given that the 2007 New Zealand Curriculum includes five Key Competencies.

A final lower-order purpose of reporting is the provision of information that is trustworthy and meaningful. This purpose rests on three principles of reporting identified in the research: the information reported must be clarified, have commonality, and have clarity.

## Clarification, commonality and clarity

Three identified principles support the purpose of providing information that is trustworthy and meaningful. The first is the use of a key or guidelines to clarify the information presented. The second is the use of common information. The third includes stylistic features that may enhance clarity of meaning for the audience of the report. These principles were important, particularly as the alignment of their usefulness was perceived similarly by both parents and teachers.

### *Clarification*

> *In order to be accountable to parents, information must be accessible, that is, able to be understood by parents; but it must also have meaning for parents.*

Clarification means that parents are helped to understand the information they are given by schools. Parents perceived information as incomplete without a reference point, guideline or key to help interpret what the achievement results meant for children's progress and achievement. Parents and teachers perceived that it was important to be able to clarify information, and that it was very useful for practitioners to make explicit some broad basis for the marks, grades or judgements they assign.

In order to be accountable to parents, information must be accessible, that is, able to be understood by parents; but it must also have meaning for parents. This way, mutual accountability is made explicit through the nature of the information reported. Moreover, the need for practitioners to clarify information has received considerable attention in the literature (Cuttance & Stokes, 2000; Frisbee & Waltman, 1992).

It seems curious that schools present information without clarifying the meaning of the information with a reference point, as this appears vital if parents are to understand the information. For example, in this research the findings indicated that much information was presented using descriptors which reported relative progress over time against assumed standards. In the majority of reports analysed, the absolute or external standard or norm was not made clear to the reader. Schools often compared children's performance to a taken-for-granted standard of achievement and progress. If operational levels are to be used, making clear to parents what the descriptors mean in relation to the standard is likely to be useful, particularly if this is done relative to the child's own previous performance or potential for growth and performance.

## Commonality

Commonality means that the information used in written reports needs to provide parents across schools with similar (but not necessarily the same) information. The diverse practices used in written reports currently appear to make it difficult for parents to gauge the progress children are making with learning across schools. However, presenting information that has some commonality of use for the audience, and that is most useful to parents, has implications for assessment practice at both a national and local school level.

While commonality has been discussed above in relation to the wider educational environment, it is also relevant to individual schools. If schools are to embrace parents as learning partners, it follows that teachers and parents might consider it useful to have a common understanding of children's achievement. Such a common understanding is vital, whether it be, for example, a normative-referenced assessment, goal-setting, where to next or feedforward. The value of a common understanding is that the parent can use their understanding of the assessment not only to learn more about the child's achievement, but also to support the next learning steps, through providing non-judgemental feedback to the child in relation to the assessment used.

*The challenge for school leaders and teachers is how to present information in a way that provides clarity for the audience.*

## Clarity

Clarity means that the language used in reports needs to be understood by the audience. The notion that the audience of the report – the parent and/or child – must be able to decipher the contents of the report is central for meaningful partnering with parents. If parents are to be active partners, able to work with the school in the development of the child, both academically and socially, clear communication between parents and teachers appears vital. Moreover, to be meaningful for the reader, the report must be written with the audience in mind.

This research confirmed that the language of schooling can be very difficult for parents to understand. For example, the nature of the information presented in a written report could suggest that teachers might assume, incorrectly, that parents have expertise in educational practices. The research findings indicated that parents did not have extensive educational knowledge, and therefore found the overuse of technical data and terms from curriculum statements confusing. While it may be useful for parents to engage with the school to learn this language of schooling (Clinton, Hattie & Dixon, 2007), it appears that teachers learning to temper their use of overly complex language would be of more practical value to parents.

The challenge for school leaders and teachers is how to present information in a way that provides clarity for the audience. While it is best for a written report not to rely heavily on or be imbued with educational language or complex data, how is this to be achieved? In order to answer this question, it may be necessary to develop new ways of presenting information which enable the audience to draw on information based on more common norms and expectations of student learning.

## A framework and principles for written reporting

Stemming from the construction of the hierarchy of purposes, a framework for written reporting was developed that included instrumental purposes and principles. These included:

- best-fit assessment judgements on a sequence of instruction
- continuous assessment to inform learning
- progress over time towards short-term goals
- complementary and broad academic and non-academic competencies
- clarification of information with a reference point
- common information which is easily recognised and used in many schools
- clarity of information which is presented in a form that ensures good communication.

This framework led to the development of a model incorporating both key written reporting purposes and principles (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** A written report model
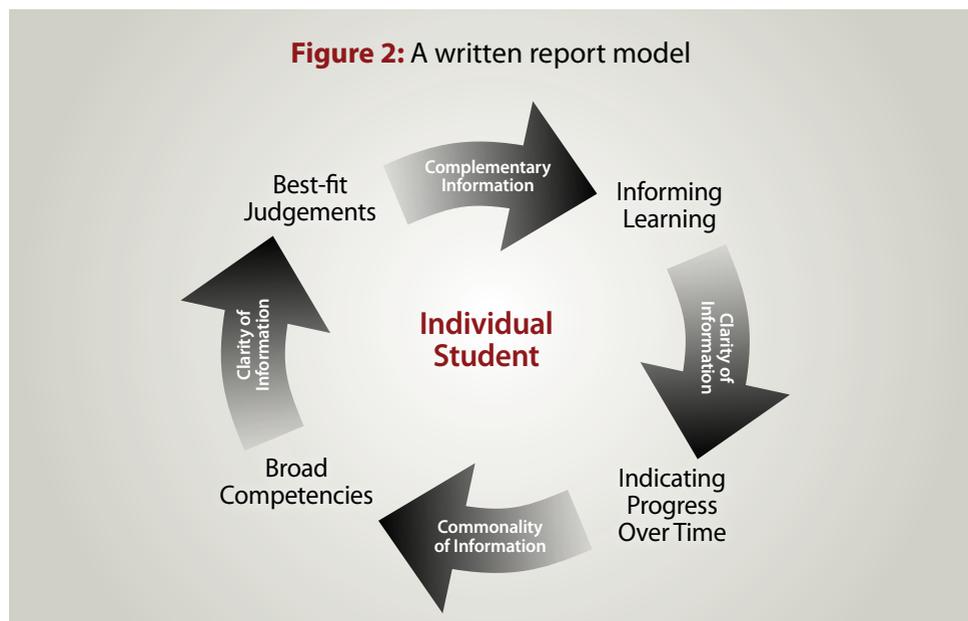
In this model, it is unlikely that each of the variables is discrete. For example, in order for a report's audience to gain an understanding of children's progress over time, they are likely to need summative judgements. However, this is not always the case, and as such, the progress category is treated discretely.

A next step for this researcher (or others) is to evaluate this model using applied research, given that using non-objective measures such as parent perceptions is liable to introduce bias. However, the research findings indicate that the model holds partial validity in practice.

## Conclusion

> " *A major role of schools is to develop constructive learning partnerships with the home, and in doing so, support parental involvement in a child's learning.* "

A major role of schools is to develop constructive learning partnerships with the home, and in doing so, support parental involvement in a child's learning. An aspect of this partnership is the reliance parents place on a common assessment practice – the written report. If the written report is successful in meeting the purposes of reporting, the learning partnership is likely to be strengthened.

This research set out to make explicit the expectations and preferences of each partner in the learning partnership, with regard to school reporting. It is school leaders' and teachers' beliefs which influence practice, but it is parents who are the intended audience of the report. In order to achieve a greater understanding of written reporting, the research has taken us back to the purposes and first principles of reporting. It appears likely that the development of a learning partnership has much to do with the nature of the information reported.

This research has highlighted the need for all participants in the written reporting process to have shared expectations of the learning outcomes and future learning needs of students. Shared expectations make it possible for learning partners to set meaningful learning goals. It appears that ongoing consultation with the audience of the report on why, what and how practitioners report will ensure reporting that is purposeful. As John Hattie (2003) has commented, schools that create a climate in which all are responsible for the progress of students, schools that de-privatise the information and evidence, and schools that collaborate to improve learning are great schools – it is that simple.

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## CERT Comment

Sometimes the role of research is to remind us of the core goals we are hoping to achieve. If schools are aiming to create a climate where all partners in learning are responsible for the progress of students, how can this happen when at least one party does not understand what the other says? Amongst other findings, this research reminds us that parents do not have extensive educational knowledge, and find the overuse of technical data and terms confusing. If schools knew this, how might they temper their use of overly complex language? By changing the way they communicate, schools can create a climate where there is ongoing consultation about the what, why and how of reporting, and where all are responsible for the progress of students.



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# Chapter 10

## Crossing the bridge to high school:
Positive responses to challenge

*Pamela Higgins*

## Introduction

School transition is recognised as one of life's major change events for children and young people (Felner et al., 1983). It is known that most children negotiate a smooth and successful move to secondary school, and that students, families, and teachers are all critical contributors to the quality of transition outcome. There is considerable understanding of the institutional practices that support positive transitions of the student majority.

However, even though there are plenty of available practice examples indicating ways to achieve successful transfers to secondary school, positive transition remains an elusive ideal for some children and families. Research shows that transition can be tough for children who have faced difficulties at primary school, or who experience poor transition preparation and process, thereby increasing their vulnerability to poor engagement in learning at secondary school (Bishop et al., 2003; Cox & Kennedy, 2008; Galton et al., 2003; Nisbet & Entwistle, 1969; Wylie et al., 2006).

The research project outlined here, which is supported by the Cognition Education Research Trust, focuses on the transition of students who have faced learning challenges at primary school, and aims to identify factors perceived by them, their parents/caregivers and teachers to facilitate positive transitions.

## Some of what we know

The increasing emphasis on seamless learning pathways and student engagement has ensured a prominent place for transition matters in discussion, research, practice and policy development. Some examples of the issues addressed are: achievement losses (Galton et al., 1999); adolescent

School transition is recognised as one of **life's major change** events for children and young people

socialisation, development and coping (Humphrey & Ainscow, 2006); age-environment fit (Eccles et al., 1993); continuity (Galton et al., 2000) and discontinuity (Nisbet & Entwistle, 1969); drop-out prevention (Catterall,1998); problem behaviours (Rutter et al., 1979); and self-esteem (Wigfield & Eccles, 1991).

There has been steady interest in achievement losses observed after major transition points in children's school life. The original Observational Research and Classroom Learning Evaluation (ORACLE) Project, completed in the 1970s in Great Britain, showed a general hiatus in progress and evidence of deterioration in students' attitudes on transition to high school. The resultant concern about curriculum and pedagogical continuity prompted the British Government to respond with the introduction of a national curriculum.

Galton, Gray and Rudduck (1999) reported evidence of greater public accountability as a result of national British initiatives. Transition practices improved, especially those involving social and induction strategies. However, findings from the replication of the ORACLE study in 1995-1998 again demonstrated that students experienced interruption in their learning progress (Hargreaves & Galton, 2002). Furthermore, evidence was found of children 'turning off' in their first year at secondary school. There was widespread agreement that transition strategies must also concentrate on pedagogical, curriculum and relationship aspects.

Since then, Evangelou and colleagues (2008) have shown that children settle to secondary school if they feel supported in their change to the new facility, and experience social adjustment and curriculum continuity. Good communication between clusters of schools raises the likelihood of opportunities for sharing practice between primary and secondary schools.

Closer to home, Vinson (2006) questioned principals in New South Wales (NSW) about their transition practices, and found that priority was given to administrative measures, including data transfer and information giving. Social orientation and induction processes, with an emphasis on students' wellbeing,

were well-organised; however, although fostering home-school relationships was regarded as important by 70 percent of principals, only 31 percent had systems operating to do this. A majority of principals placed high importance on the development of primary/secondary teams to focus on curriculum, learning and pedagogical processes; however, only 3 percent to 20 percent of principals were actually involved in active cross-sector engagement. Principals reported that they felt overwhelmed with transition requirements, being both time-poor and skill-poor.

Vinson recommended that the government provide two earmarked staff for each educational district, and ensure that each school have an appointed transition co-ordinator. He suggested (2006:18) that 'The resultant benefits to the social and economic capital of our state and the increased social justice that would flow from the measure make this a small price to pay.' It appears that his advice was taken seriously, for in October 2006, the NSW Department of Education and Training's (DET) new Middle School Strategy, aiming to strengthen primary-secondary connections, initiated state-wide support for transition, and required every public school to establish a primary/secondary transition programme (DET, 2006). The strategy stated: 'Our teachers will work together collaboratively to promote effective transition in curriculum approaches and welfare practices from primary to secondary schools' and 'ensure that effective primary-secondary transition programs are included in every school plan and, where required, in school targets' (DET, 2006: 5, 11).

The lack of shared understanding of teaching and learning methods between secondary and primary teachers, and the persistent stereotypical views held by each group of 'how they do it' in the 'other' school, have been identified as having serious implications for learning continuity, especially for students identified as potentially 'at risk' (Galton et al., 2000). A small local initiative in New Zealand (Higgins, 2008) was able to illustrate this great gulf, with teachers' comments indicating little contact by classroom teachers across sectors. However, when relationships formed, many innovative and successful transition strategies evolved to support teachers,

families and students. As in Vinson's study, the participating educators valued a co-ordinated, supportive response to transition, and recommended the appointment of a transition co-ordinator with district responsibilities (Higgins, 2008).

In New Zealand, little research had been reported until very recently, as highlighted in a comprehensive literature review produced by McGee and others in 2003. That same year, Bishop and colleagues (2003) published findings from their unique investigation of Year 9 and 10 Māori students' experiences in secondary school. Although transition was not a prime focus of the research project, their published report declared transition to be one of the most important influences on Māori students' experience at secondary school, and stated that school structures and relationships with teachers could create barriers to successful transitions.

The impact of transition on school performance was the focus of a comprehensive chapter in the longitudinal New Zealand study, 'Competent Children, Competent Learners'. Although those students most at risk of poor performance had already demonstrated disengagement at primary school, time taken to settle into high school was highlighted as being negatively associated with attitude levels. Those students not at their school of choice were also less settled (Wylie et al., 2006). Like Cox and Kennedy's (2008) New Zealand study, the importance of positive teacher/student, home/school and peer relationships was confirmed, while curriculum, pedagogical and environmental factors were identified as important to school engagement. Both studies identified a minority of children who found transition particularly challenging, and failed to match the progress of their peers in secondary school.

Themes of risk and resilience do feature in the literature. Catterall (1998), for example, followed the progress of students whose achievement and level of confidence when finishing primary school indicated they were at risk. Progress was tracked and analysed at secondary school, according to academic and commitment resilience and drop-out rates. Family support, student involvement in extra-curricular activities, and school responsiveness were all identified as important to recovery from risk. Significantly, it was

demonstrated that risk is individually experienced and changeable. The tendency to group-label, which perpetuates a problem-focused response to children's needs on a wholesale level, thus ignores the resiliency factors that many children individually exhibit.

Roderick and Camburn (1999) also tracked students to secondary school, investigating the effect on student progress of intake factors, including primary school experience, pupil readiness, and familial support structures. Their findings that students' success at secondary school depended on good attendance, work completion and examination passes are hardly surprising. However, they also showed that once children started to fail at high school, recovery was extremely difficult, and dropping out was often the inevitable outcome. With a focus on school effects and student engagement, the importance of ensuring children's learning needs were catered for on arrival at the new school became apparent. Early transition experiences and school practices at high school appeared critical to long-term successful outcomes.

## What's happening now?

" *Managing for Success states that schools are required to 'work more effectively to engage Maori students and their whanau, hapu and iwi, support their transition into secondary school…* "

In recent years, New Zealand's Ministry of Education (MOE) business plans and strategies have emphasised participation, engagement, achievement, presence and retention. With reference to transition, *Ka Hikitia – Managing for Success* states that schools are required to 'work more effectively to engage Māori students and their whānau, hapū and iwi, support their transition into secondary school…' (2008a: 22). The MOE Special Education Business Plan states that transition between education settings is key to attaining continued presence (2008b: 2). Initiatives have included 'Team Up', a programme for parents providing web- and paper-based resources for all aspects of school planning, and there has also been support of localised transition practice initiatives (see Higgins, 2009).

The commitment to school transition in Australia continues today with the NSW government assigning $11.5 million in November 2008 to expand the support already in place for initiatives such as orientation and induction, taster classes, data transfer and pastoral care (NSW Government, 2008).

The provision of district transition co-ordination is regarded as a priority in NSW, while a centralised enrolment scheme for the state ensures that all children are aware of their secondary school placement before the end of their primary school year. In Victoria, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) recently designated transition a priority area for system improvement (DEECD, 2009a), allocating special funding to school research projects to investigate primary-secondary transition (DEECD, 2009b).

In the United Kingdom, the latest White Paper (CM 7588) from the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) celebrates the establishment of cross-sector partnerships: 'Secondary and primary schools working together on transition from Year 6 to Year 7 have made a significant difference to the learning experience of children and young people' (2009a: 45). Family-school partnerships are regarded as a critical element in transition support, with support of parents and families in transition mandated in the DCSF School Admissions Code: 'Children **must not** be disadvantaged because their parents have difficulty accessing the school admissions process or do not engage with the process of applying for a school. [Local authorities] **must** provide an independent service that is focused on supporting the families who most need support in navigating the secondary school admissions process' (2009b: 73; bold in original). Parents have free access to a Choice Advisor who will help them navigate the change to a new school.

It may be that the government transition structures described above would have positive utility here in New Zealand. In a recent communication, a secondary school deputy principal, Frank (not his real name), raised three important points. First, he had become increasingly worried about the number of children who were simply 'turning up' at the beginning of the new school year without having been through the enrolment process. These children were typically sent home until a formal enrolment was completed and a uniform purchased; as a result, they missed important transition induction experiences. Secondly, curious to know more about a large number of students recently stood down or excluded from

school, Frank looked back at the students' enrolment history. What he found was intriguing: each of the disciplined students had been a late enrolment at high school, and therefore would not have been present on the first day of school. Lastly, Frank had started to notice that when supports for children who had been identified as being potentially vulnerable in learning or other domains were in place at the beginning of the Year 9 school year, progress in both learning and behavioural domains was smoother.

Frank felt that the growing positive relationship with feeder schools, which enabled good data transfer and some curriculum continuity, was paying dividends for children transitioning to Year 9. He added that information enabled better placement and learning support to be assigned in timely fashion. This last point illustrates the value of asking what is working well for schools, so that other schools can learn from success experiences.

## The research study

The present study will explore the transition from Year 8 to Year 9 of children who have learning support needs and/or are considered to be vulnerable for social, cultural or emotional reasons. The central research question is:

What home, school and personal practices do students with learning support needs, their parents/caregivers and teachers perceive to be helpful for positive transition from Year 8 to Year 9?

## Context

The study has been conceived within the strength orientation of positive psychology and humanistic psychology, which Taylor described as the 'psychology of inclusion' (2001: 22). It is founded on the belief that only through inclusive practice involving all members of the school community will the participation of all students be increased (Ainscow, 2005). The strength approach, increasingly advocated in recent years (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), is not new to educational research.

For example, Rutter and colleagues (1979) identified variables that appeared to make a positive difference to behaviour and attainment, including community heterogeneity, classroom management strategies, and leadership styles. Such findings provide educators with quality information that enables the formulation of preventative, supportive systems and policy.

## Research design and methodology

The reported experiences and perceptions of students and parents/caregivers in transition, and of teachers in relation to pedagogical and systemic practices that enhance transition, will be examined using a case study design and mixed methods approach. No hypothesis will be tested in the present study; the goal is to 'gather information to build a description of what is "going on"' (Bouma & Ling, 2004: 90). The focus will be students who have been identified by their primary school as having learning support needs in transition, and those people who are involved in the transition process. The principal objective is to focus on participants' personal experiences and views.

The research will be structured around an entire school district containing three 'pyramids' of mainstream state schools, each comprising a secondary school and contributing primary, full primary and intermediate schools. With around three to four main feeder schools per secondary school, there will be approximately twelve schools involved altogether – a near complete set of schools within the chosen area. Four main participant groups comprise the sample for the investigation: students with identified needs transitioning from primary to secondary mainstream settings; parents or caregivers of these students; Year 8 teachers (pre-transition); and Year 9 teachers (post-transition).

Data collection is based on surveys and interviews. The study incorporates three main data collection phases. The first two phases require students and their family members to complete a questionnaire before and after the move to secondary school. Student surveys will be delivered orally. Year 8 and Year 9 teachers also complete the questionnaire in these first two

phases. A third phase will involve a small sub-sample of all four participant groups, who will be individually interviewed to explore further the main question: 'What helps?'

## Research progress

At the time of writing, no specific results are able to be reported, as data analysis is still in progress. It is possible to say, however, that good relationships and good knowledge around transition appear to be emerging as foundational to positive experiences and constructive transition process. The research will express how teachers, students and family members have found these and other aspects beneficial to their transition experiences, and helpful to settling into secondary school.

## Research potential

Transition to secondary school is an important step for every child. Nearly a decade ago, Mizelle and Irvin (2000) highlighted that although evidence about appropriate practice is 'compelling', there is still a lack of investment by many schools into this critical period. This statement is still pertinent today.

There is general agreement that well-planned transition practices enhance the learning experience of children in secondary school. It is clear that transition practices within schools benefit from government backing. There has been considerable investment by governments, through their continued support of specific primary/secondary transition practice initiatives, and through sponsorship of research.

However, the recurring pattern of incidental findings with regard to the poorer transition of children with learning or other difficulties has not been adequately addressed in research or practice. Cox and Kennedy (2008) reported that some secondary teachers found it difficult to plan, support and build relationships with children whom they experienced as low achievers. It would be interesting to know about the school factors that enable teachers to cater for children with challenging learning needs in transition.

We also know that home-school relationships are critical in transition, especially for children potentially at risk. Yet Cox and Kennedy (2008) state that the teachers who took part in their study reported little contact with parents of low achieving students. It follows that knowing which supportive factors can facilitate positive teacher–parent/caregiver relationships would have change-making potential.

Third, Cox and Kennedy (2008) report briefly on factors which, students felt, had assisted their transition, and noted that more needs to be known about what is important to all participants in the transition process. Through a strength orientation, which moves the focus from children as the 'problem', there is considerable opportunity to enhance our understanding of transition, particularly of more vulnerable young people.

Fourth, the Cox and Kennedy study measured adjustment (success) in terms of school achievement and attitude. No criticism of that methodology is offered here, but it is interesting that for some children in the 'low achiever' band, progress assessments by their parents did not match their teacher's assessments. Do some parents have a different view of what constitutes successful transition?

The specific documentation of these processes and practices will extend the wider knowledge of transition, provide opportunities for school policy and procedure development, inform future teacher and school practice, and inform work within the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, this information can immediately inform further action learning opportunities within schools.

## Opportunities

It is suggested here that there exists in New Zealand the potential to improve our transition practices in the areas of families' transition experience, including access to good information and assistance with school choice and enrolment processes, pedagogical and curriculum continuity, inter-school relationships, common school understandings about transition practice and process, and the role of the Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour in being a critical link. Moreover, transition outcomes could be enhanced through support of

> *Knowing what helps children with learning support needs in transition, and what works for their teachers and family members, will help all students and provide an opportunity to strengthen capability around retention, engagement, and presence in secondary schools.*

centralised transition co-ordination in school communities and districts. The comprehensive extension of transition resources overseas is based upon evidence that transition services enhance student progress and achievement in secondary school.

Knowing what helps children with learning support needs in transition, and what works for their teachers and family members, will help all students and provide an opportunity to strengthen capability around retention, engagement, and presence in secondary schools.

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## CERT Comment

The focus on transition in Pamela Higgins' project illustrates only too well that awareness of issues and good intentions are not sufficient to bring about real change, particularly for those students who are most at risk of being seriously set back in their education if the transition to secondary school is not carefully managed. Despite widespread recognition of the issues, and clear indications of what makes a difference, so far there has been little effective action in this country. As so often turns out to be the case, relationships – in this case between the schools and teachers involved, as well as between schools and parents – are of key importance. As Higgins stresses, 'when relationships formed, many innovative and successful transition strategies evolved to support teachers, families and students.'



*Pamela Higgins*

**Pamela Higgins** is a psychologist in Special Education, Ministry of Education. In recent years she has worked with teachers and schools in the area of transition. Previously a secondary teacher in Auckland, South Waikato, Australia and Great Britain, she has also lectured at the University of Auckland, and has extensive experience facilitating learning opportunities with groups of educators, adult students, parents and children. Pam is currently working on her PhD, which looks at systems and practices that support positive transition experiences to secondary school for children with support needs. She grew up in Hamilton and now lives in South Auckland.

In this research I intend to explore the reasons for a **disparity of achievement** across the eight schools within the Wainuiomata cluster, with a particular **focus on leadership, school culture** and **professional learning communities** in these schools.

# Chapter 11

## Beginning the journey into educational research

*Sue Jury*

## Introduction

> **"** *I try to work in ways which, I believe, best enhance academic outcomes for all students.  The driver for undertaking research is gaining a better understanding of how this can be done.* **"**

This chapter identifies both the background and impetus for the study I am currently engaged in.  In this doctoral research I intend to explore the reasons for a disparity of achievement across the eight schools within the Wainuiomata cluster, with a particular focus on leadership, school culture and professional learning communities in these schools.  This doctoral study is my first step in a journey into educational research.  While still in the very early stages of my study, I have been able to begin the process of identifying the issue, posing the research question and exploring the scholarly literature.  This research is planned to be completed by December 2012.

My own teaching experience of 26 years has been in state integrated Catholic schools.  New Zealand Catholic schools have been integrated with the state since 1975.  All funding for staff and operations comes from the state, and all property is funded and maintained by the Catholic Diocese in which the school is located.  My teaching experience has for the most part been in Catholic schools in low socioeconomic areas with high percentages of Pacific Island students.  I was appointed as principal of St Patrick's School Wainuiomata in January 2002.  In 2004, a decision was made to merge two existing Catholic schools, St Matthew's and St Patrick's, into St Claudine Thévenet School, a new full primary school (Years 1–8) opening in January 2005, and it is at this new school that I now hold the position of principal.  This role holds for me much responsibility and much passion.  I try to work in ways which, I believe, best enhance academic outcomes for all students.  The driver for undertaking research is gaining a better understanding of how this can be done.
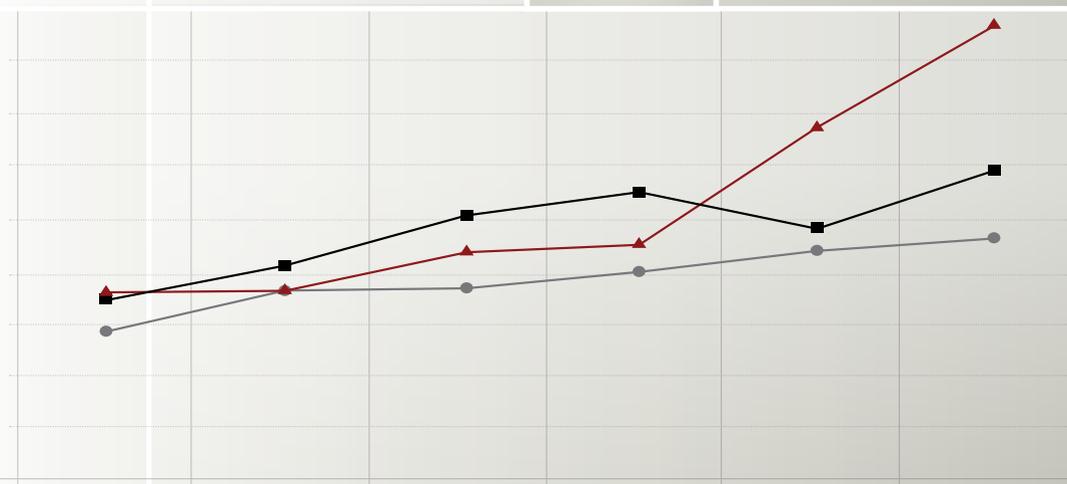
In 2002, I was fortunate to participate in the pilot programme 'First Time Principals', funded by the Ministry of Education and provided by the University of Auckland. This programme was designed to enable new principals to undertake intensive professional development in leadership and learning. The programme was undertaken in each school holiday period for the first year of principalship. At the time, I found this programme both daunting and rewarding. I realise now that it created a very solid platform for my ongoing professional learning and development.

In my second year of principalship, we took part in an Education Review Office (ERO) visit. ERO is charged by the Ministry of Education with undertaking reviews within all New Zealand schools, to identify good practice and areas for improvement in both instructional programmes and compliance. The visit involves four ERO team members spending three days in the school, with a report day on the fourth day. The review process is viewed by many as a threat and intrusion. However, I see it an opportunity to review current practice and to gain feedback and advice on ways to ensure that we, as a school, are providing the best possible opportunity for student success over a range of academic, social and cultural areas. This collaborative approach was acknowledged by the ERO team members in their report:

*The new principal, who began at the beginning of 2002, provides strong professional leadership and sound advice and guidance to the board. She has introduced a culture of shared decision making and is well supported by her deputy and assistant principals. Considerable work has been undertaken to strengthen management systems and documentation to better guide curriculum delivery across the school. Teachers are encouraged to reflect on their practice, through whole-staff discussion and professional development in order to improve outcomes for students.*
(ERO Report, 2003: 2)

This report was the first indicator for me that particular systems, behaviours and practices could have a more positive impact than others on student outcomes and achievement.

From 2003 we, as a school, began to identify areas for improvement. This focus for improvement was enhanced by the opportunity to work with other schools in the Wainuiomata area.

The report also identified areas for improvement which enabled the staff to have a clearer picture of current student achievement and next steps. It needs to be noted that on my entry into St Patrick's School, there was a large amount of assessment data available. However, none of the data available was benchmarked, normed or analysed. This was a major concern, as teachers believed they were doing a great job, yet could not articulate their justifications for their belief. My first steps were to:

- Initiate a new school–wide assessment plan, which enabled us to collect and analyse assessment information in literacy and numeracy to establish baseline data about levels of students' achievement

- Identify specific areas for improvement

- Plan actions to be taken to lift performance.

This first ERO visit in 2003 was a real driver for my professional learning and practice. It began in my own school and merged well into the local Wainuiomata context.

## Forming a cluster of schools in Wainuiomata

Wainuiomata was designed to accommodate families on low incomes, and much of the housing in this area was planned and built by the State in the 1950s. In the 1950s and 1960s, Wainuiomata grew very rapidly. Many schools were built to accommodate this new growth. Over recent years, the number of young people in Wainuiomata has been declining. In 1991, according to census data, there were 3,636 students in Wainuiomata schools. The 2001 census reported 3,127 students. At that time, it was estimated that in 20 years' time there would be approximately 2,000 students in school.

In 2002 there were 10 primary schools (Years 1–6 and 1–8), two intermediate schools (Years 7–8), and two secondary schools (Years 9–13) servicing 3,127 students. The prediction of a decline in numbers led the Ministry of Education to

undertake a review of the provision of schooling within the area. It could be argued that this review reflected a concern about the cost of maintaining half full schools. The review, based on the predictions after the 2001 census, indicated the need to reduce the number of schools within the Wainuiomata Valley. The option of closing schools was not supported by the local community, so a decision was made to merge schools within the area, reducing the total number of schools from 14 to eight.

Merging schools was a new initiative in New Zealand, and guidelines for merging developed as the process unfolded. Essentially, students from each of the merged schools would begin in a new school environment with a new school name. This process was intended to allow for a smoother transition and recreation of cultures. The purpose for this was to ensure that students from one school were not swallowed up by another in the process of change. Merging created a new school culture and a new beginning.

As part of the merger process, funding was made available for schools to develop property and create opportunities for enhanced educational outcomes within the Valley (Greening, 2008). This funding, Joint School Initiative Funding (JSIF), is based on a per head formula. It is to 'allow the co-operative development of projects for community wide multi-school initiatives for the improvement of education achievement within the community' (Greening, 2008: 5).

All eight Wainuiomata schools formed a cluster to undertake the process of designing a project intended to enhance educational outcomes for all students within the Valley. The forming of this cluster was a significant movement in how schools worked together. There had always been collegiality amongst principals. However, this collegiality did not extend past the local management issues of the local schools. Wainuiomata was one of the first areas within Wellington to work in this new way. A 'cluster' was clearly defined by the principals' group as a group of schools willing to learn and work together for the enhancement of all students within the Valley.

> *Merging schools was a new initiative in New Zealand, and guidelines for merging developed as the process unfolded.*

The decision to form a cluster had implications for:

- Assessment, data analysis and sharing – common tools and trends
- Professional learning groups – principals, literacy leaders, cross-school year group teachers
- Valley-wide (cluster) expectations
- Teacher assessment and cross-school observations.

## Student achievement

Initial data indicated that every year group was achieving below the National Mean in reading. This indicated a need to begin with a focus on literacy across the Valley. The Wainuiomata Educational Literacy Development (WELD) project began in 2005. It aimed to show evidence of improvement in four main areas: student achievement, teacher content knowledge, transfer of literacy pedagogy into practice, and the development, support and implementation of professional learning communities.

The project identified specific objectives in the area of improved student achievement. These are set out in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Achievement objectives for WELD 2004

| Target group | Achievement Expectation | Timeframe |
|---|---|---|
| Students starting school | 95% will have attended a recognised preschool education environment | By end 2007 |
| Year 1-4 | 90% will be reading, comprehending and writing at their chronological age | By end 2007 |
| School leavers | 80% will have achieved 8 credits in literacy and numeracy (NCEA) | By end 2007 |

## Teacher content knowledge

The focus for this aim was to assess the current level of content knowledge which teachers had in the area of literacy. This assessment was undertaken through the use of a scenario, developed using a fictional classroom reading lesson. Teachers were asked to identify the level of effectiveness of the practices in this situation. Based on the responses of teachers, levels of content knowledge were assessed and gaps targeted to ensure improvement in the content knowledge of the teaching of literacy.

## Transfer of literacy pedagogy into practice

Once a clear picture of their content knowledge levels was obtained, teachers were observed in order to assess their practice in the teaching of literacy. It was thought that there might be discrepancies between what teachers knew and what teachers did in the teaching of literacy. Standardised observations were undertaken by independent observers, and data from these were collated and shared within and across schools.

## Developing and supporting the implementation of professional learning communities

> " *As the project developed and grew, questions continued to be asked about what other practices could have a positive impact on achievement.* "

Professional learning communities (PLCs) were set up and facilitated by the Project Co-ordinator. This allowed for all schools to undertake this process with some level of individuality. An essential feature of a professional learning community is the willingness of teachers to 'deprivatise' their practice; that is, teachers would be working in collaboration with their colleagues, rather than in isolation in their classrooms (Timperley & Parr, 2004).

As the project developed and grew, questions continued to be asked about what other practices could have a positive impact on achievement. More pointedly, what were the leadership teams within the Valley doing to improve their knowledge and practice?

## Variations in achievement

This project lasted for four years. Cumulative cluster data indicated some movement in literacy achievement levels across the Valley, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Wainuiomata and National asTTle Reading Mean Score comparison, 2004-2007
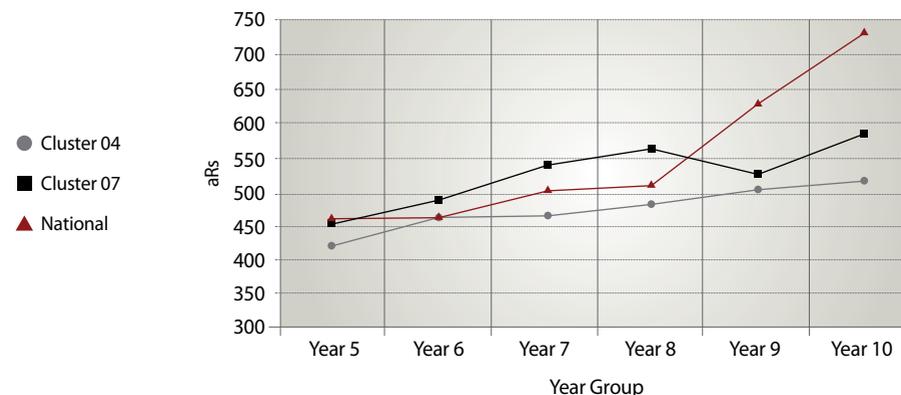


The results shown in Figure 1 are based on collective data. While the cluster-wide mean levels of achievement had improved, further investigation identified that not all schools within the cluster had achieved the same degree of improvement. The end-of-project data reflected a disparity of achievement across schools within the cluster, after four years of the schooling improvement project.

Despite the eight Wainuiomata schools drawing students from similar socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and receiving similar levels of professional support through the schooling improvement project, some schools within the cluster had high levels of academic achievement, while others had low levels. This disparity in levels of achievement did not differ greatly from the overall disparities within the national picture. While New Zealand's education system has many strengths, and many students achieve very well compared with students in other countries, performance on international studies consistently shows disparities in achievement across the population that are as large as or greater than the international averages (Marshall et al., 2008).

# Research project on understanding and reducing achievement disparities

The important question which arose from the results was this: why, within a group of schools which are so similar to each other, and which have participated in the same improvement project, should there be a degree of variation in achievement levels similar to that which exists within the whole national achievement picture?

This was the question which formed the basis of the research project on which I began work in January 2009. I intend to extend existing New Zealand research in this area, and develop a deeper understanding of: what impacts on sustained student achievement; how these impacts can best be addressed; and how schooling improvement projects can best enhance academic outcomes for students within and across schools.

The disparities in achievement across the New Zealand population consistently shown in student performance in international studies are often explained as relating largely to socioeconomic disparities. However, similar disparities have been shown among schools of similar cultural and socioeconomic circumstances within the Wainuiomata cluster. The aim of this research is, first, to seek to understand the problem of disparity of achievement across schools within one community which appear to be similar to each other; and secondly, to contribute some understanding of how we may deal with this problem.

A review of current literature in this area has indicated four major concepts to be explored: learning organisations, school culture, teacher professional development, and leadership. Through this research, it is intended to give those who develop and implement local policy (and potentially, those responsible for national policy) increased understanding and knowledge of how to facilitate instructional improvement in order to promote improved outcomes for all students. A particular aim is to help the Wainuiomata cluster teacher leaders to lead and contribute to enhanced professional practice in their schools, through the systematic collection, analysis and dissemination of evidence related to student achievement and classroom practice.

> " *I have found the process very challenging and rewarding, and the grant I have received from CERT has been invaluable to my participation in this study.* "

This research project forms the basis of my doctoral studies, which I am undertaking through the Australian Catholic University in Brisbane. The EdD (Doctorate of Education) is a structured 18-month process, consisting of three modules: Research Problem Exploration in Context; Literature and Theoretical Critique; and Research Paradigms, Methodologies and Methods. Each module requires me to attend the University three times, enabling me to meet with both of my supervisors, develop ideas, and refine my writing. In 2009 I completed the first module and began the second. The third module begins in January 2010. With ethics approval, I plan to begin my data collection in August 2010. I have found the process very challenging and rewarding, and the grant I have received from CERT has been invaluable to my participation in this study.

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# CERT Comment

Sue Jury's deep understanding and experience of school reform is clearly informing her PhD research topic. Knowing that structural change in itself is not the answer to improved student outcomes, she is intent on exploring concepts such as: how learning organisations work together to share information; how to find out what works and what doesn't within reform initiatives; how we can reset the foundations for trust within and between schools and their communities; and how we can increase students' chances of success. As a practitioner/researcher, she can expect that her findings will resonate and have credibility amongst others involved in school reform initiatves. Her findings have the potential to influence future school reform initiatives in New Zealand, and in so doing, ensure that a focus on improved student outcomes is a key driver of structural changes to schooling.



*Sue Jury*

**Sue Jury** has been Principal of St Claudine Thévenet School in Wainuiomata since its opening in 2005. Previously she was Principal of St Patrick's. Sue has taught in Wainuiomata for the past 20 years, taking time out to spend one year in the Australian outback town of Broken Hill. She is actively involved in the Wainuiomata Principals' association and co-leader of the Wellington Catholic Principals' Association. She is currently undertaking her education doctorate through the Australian Catholic University. Her research interests are in leadership, professional learning communities and building capacity.
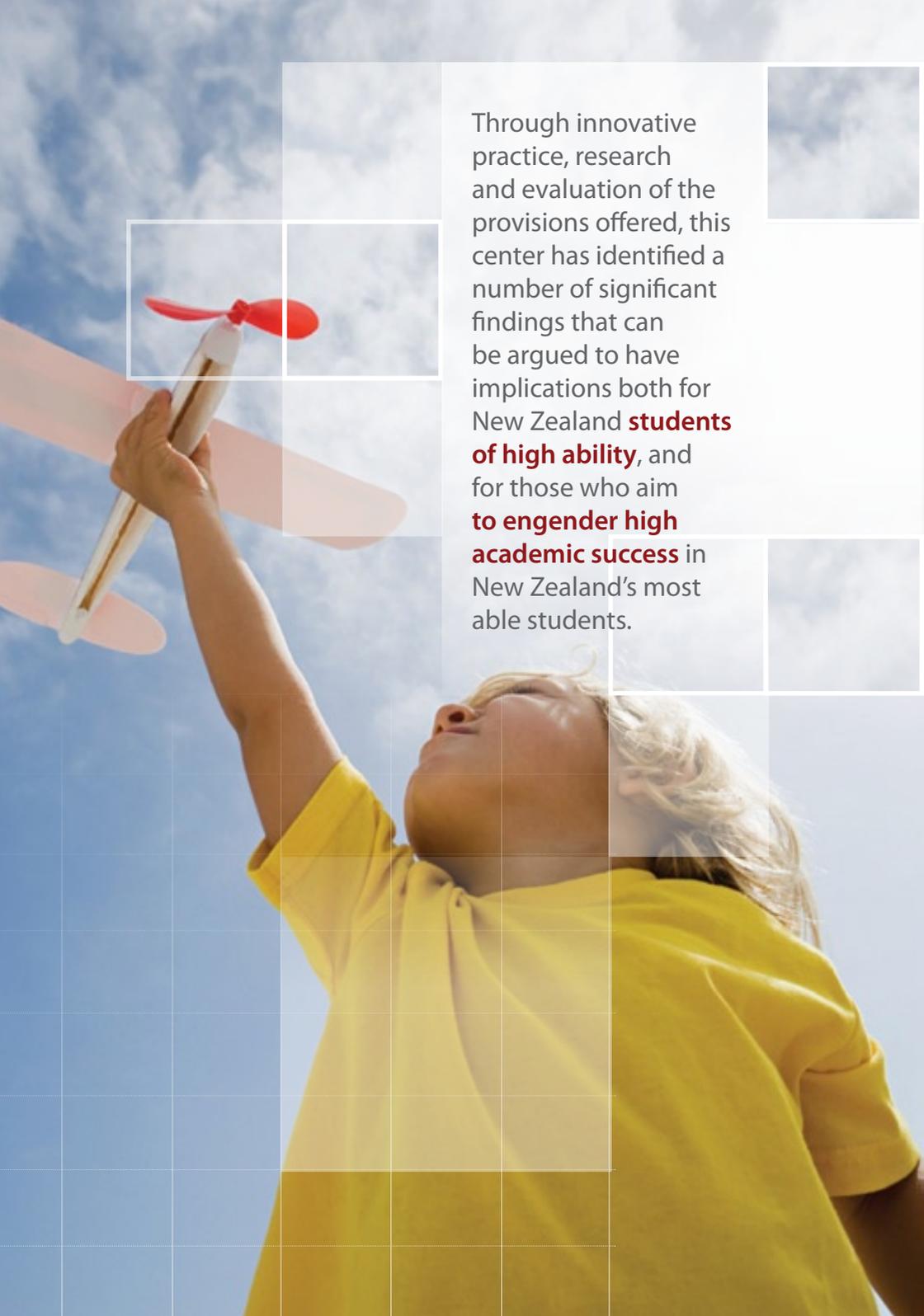
Through innovative practice, research and evaluation of the provisions offered, this center has identified a number of significant findings that can be argued to have implications both for New Zealand **students of high ability**, and for those who aim **to engender high academic success** in New Zealand's most able students.

# Chapter 12

## Out-of-level achievement:
The case for acceleration in New Zealand secondary schools

*Jennifer M. Horsley*

### Introduction

The Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth (CTY) has earned an international reputation through the model it has developed for working with students of high mathematical and/or verbal ability (Touron, Touron & Silvero, 2005). Since 1979, the institute has increased the number of provisions it offers to meet the needs of students who demonstrate high academic ability on out–of–level standardised testing (Barnett, Albert & Brody, 2005). Through innovative practice, research and evaluation of the provisions offered, this center has identified a number of significant findings that can be argued to have implications both for New Zealand students of high ability, and for those who aim to engender high academic success in New Zealand's most able students. This article considers just one of these provisions, acceleration, and its applicability for high ability students in the New Zealand context and school setting.

My time at CTY has altered the way I view provisions for students who demonstrate high academic ability. These views are the result of time spent working beside those who, over the past thirty years, have developed a model which has been designed to meet the academic needs of this group of students. This paper describes one practice that I believe New Zealand schools and teachers should consider adopting to enable them to meet the needs of their most able students. In addition, this paper identifies provisions that are already in place for some students who have demonstrated high academic ability on New Zealand assessment, are Māori, and are attending low–decile schools.

> "*My time at CTY has altered the way I view provisions for students who demonstrate high academic ability.*"

Compared with CTY and with educational provisions for gifted and talented students in most of the United States, New Zealand's foray into programming for high ability students can be considered to be fairly recent. In 1997, the Ministry of Education established a national advisory group for gifted education in New Zealand. The Ministry subsequently produced a handbook for schools which Howard Fancy, then Secretary for Education, described as aiming to '…support schools and teachers in assisting gifted and talented students to reach their full potential academically, emotionally, and socially…' (Ministry of Education, 2000: 1). The handbook, he said, discussed a range of principles and practices pertaining to the education of gifted and talented students, and supported school practice by presenting models on which schools could base their own programmes to meet the needs of their students. The Ministry also increased funding to the national advisory service, created a contestable funding pool to support talent development initiatives (TDI) and produced a handbook for parents, in addition to making it a requirement that from 2006, all New Zealand state and state integrated schools were required to demonstrate how they were meeting the needs of their gifted and talented learners.

More recently, the government announced that funding for gifted advisory work was ended from June 2009. In a rather unexpected statement – given the previous level of support for gifted education – the Minister stated that: 'In 2010 there will be no further professional development or national coordination services purchased by the Ministry in the area of gifted and talented education.'

## Out-of-level testing

The success of the academic provisions which Julian Stanley, the founder of CTY, made for one boy ultimately led to the formation of an institute that now annually serves the needs of approximately 80,000 students who have demonstrated high academic ability on standardised testing (Barnett et al., 2005). The breadth of tiered programs offered includes admission to the Study of Exceptional Talent (SET) for the very top scoring students; participation in CTY summer programmes; Center for Academic Achievement (CAA) summer programmes; on-line programmes; and family academic programmes. In addition, the center offers spatial testing, counselling, and assistive funding for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

Admission to CTY programmes is gauged through student performance in out-of-level testing on standardised tests. Students are assessed on tests that are usually administered to students several grades ahead. If they are successful – that is, if they perform in standardised testing (SAT, SCAT or ACT) at or above the 95th percentile – students are able to access CTY courses and materials which research has shown to engender high-academic learning. These courses are often accelerated, with students participating in subjects beyond those taken by their 'regular' class peers. CTY data show that many schools are accepting student completion of these Advanced Placement (AP) courses (their own AP courses, or those offered through CTY) as evidence that students can be accelerated in their regular school programmes. In turn, these students may be completing high school early. Stanley's very first accelerated student entered university earlier than his age peers, successfully completing undergraduate and Masters degrees, and commencing doctoral study at the age of 17 (Stanley, 2005).

## The New Zealand provisions

> " *In 2010 there will be no further professional development or national coordination services purchased by the Ministry in the area of gifted and talented education.* "

Two significant reports have focused on gifted and talented provisions within New Zealand schools. The first was a research report commissioned by the Ministry of Education to evaluate planned approaches to teaching gifted and talented students in New Zealand (Riley et al., 2004). The second was the Education Review Office (ERO) 2008 report. Both documents – the 2004 Riley report and the 2008 ERO report – identified inconsistency in current 'gifted' practices within New Zealand schools and regions. These disparities led to the identification of a relationship between school-based concepts or definitions of giftedness and school decile, with the review finding that the higher decile the schools (defined in the study as deciles 6 to 10), the more likely they were to report a school-based concept or definition of giftedness (Riley et al., 2004). ERO (2008) also found that some schools had developed and implemented programmes, and a few were 'just beginning' to make special provisions.

The latter report made particular recommendations pertaining to gifted and talented students in rural and low-decile schools, recommending that the Ministry provide these groups with 'targeted, high quality professional development' (ERO, 2008: 54). Importantly, it also recommended '…ongoing participation in school-wide professional development, and specialist training and development for people specifically responsible for gifted and talented education' (ERO, 2008: 54).

One option for meeting the needs of New Zealand's high-ability students is the provision of material that matches the student's instructional level rather than their age. Despite the frequent use of this practice for acceleration in overseas schools, New Zealand literature is cautious in advising or recommending it. In its simplest form, acceleration differentiates the timing of students meeting the levels of the curriculum, thus enabling gifted or talented students to progress more quickly through course material, rather than progressing at the same level as their age peers. Riley et al. (2004) describe the tenets on which acceleration ought to be based, including: the importance of involving the students in the planning for differentiated instruction; matching the instructional material with the student's needs; monitoring the student's progress; and evaluating that progress. A student may be accelerated in one or a number of subject areas.

Enrichment, on the other hand, involves adding more material at the level at which the student is already working, a practice sometimes described as adding length or breadth to content. The Ministry of Education recommends the combined practice of both enrichment and acceleration, but also states that enrichment is the preferred option for meeting the needs of gifted students in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2000).

One reason for this preference must lie in the perceived inability to definitively quantify a student's readiness to be moved up one or more levels in content, thus grouping the student with out-of-age peers. With no identified common measure to demonstrate the student's competence with

*" How teaching is related to learning (acquisition) requires an understanding of how individual student behavior and experience are shaped by the way the teacher designs, manages and assesses classroom activities "*

curriculum material at their age level, the New Zealand preference is to hold the student at that age level and provide enrichment through opportunities that develop additional skills at the same level.

However, international literature suggests that the practice of providing enrichment may not be appropriate for the most able students, with those students who are accelerated reporting positive effects (Brody & Stanley, 1991; Kolitch & Brody, 1992; Mills, Ablard & Gustin, 1994; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002). Gross (2006) identified that the more radical the acceleration (i.e. the greater the number of years the student was accelerated), the greater the student's overall satisfaction with life. One study investigating teacher attitudes towards acceleration found that teachers who had attended information sessions displayed more positive attitudes towards the practice than those who had not attended (Hoogeveen, van Hell & Verhoeven, 2006). Research has identified advantages to schools in accelerating high-ability students, including the ease with which this practice can be implemented, with schools able to use existing courses to meet the needs of younger students who are ready for acceleration (Swiatek, 2007). One American study found that the AP courses were the greatest predictors of success in those students who were accelerated to university ahead of their age peers (Brody, Muratori & Stanley, 2004).

One argument against accelerating students relates to the perceived social and emotional problems students may experience if they work with out-of-age peers. International literature disputes this, with accelerated students reporting positive effects connected with this practice, including opportunities to work with their intellectual peers, and experiencing heightened interest in their fields of study (Mills & Ablard, 1993; Ablard, 2005). Neihart (2007) identified socioaffective benefits for gifted students who were accelerated on the basis of having demonstrated academic, social, and emotional maturity. The same study found that acceleration could be harmful to students who were '…arbitrarily accelerated on the basis of IQ, achievement, or social maturity' (Neihart, 2007: 330).

In their report for the Ministry of Education, Riley et al. (2004) considered the provisions of the Talent Search identification programmes initially developed by Julian Stanley. They state that 'The power of this assessment programme lies in the precision of the assessment, especially for students of exceptional ability. Although this programme is not available in New Zealand, its potential in the accurate identification of academically talented students may be worthy of exploration and consideration' (Riley et al., 2004: 26). The precision assessment referred to is the out-of-level SAT, SCAT or ACT test that is used to determine academic provisions for students scoring at the previously described percentile. In New Zealand, no one quantifiable test is used to identify those students who demonstrate exceptional or even high academic ability. However, Year 1–8 students whose 'gifted and talented' needs are not being met through their regular school may enrol for correspondence schooling as a means of receiving appropriate curriculum enrichment and acceleration. Ministry of Education eligibility requirements state that these students must achieve scores in the top 5 percent or above of PAT, TOSCA or AsTTle or equivalent testing, thereby quantifying and describing this gifted and talented group as the top 5 percent of those students who sit these tests.

Top academic performance is also quantified in those students who gain New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) Scholarships. The NZQA Scholarship examinations identify those scholars who are 'within a range of 2% to 3% of the cohort in each subject' (Ministry of Education, 2005: 3). In addition, endorsements of Merit or Excellence in the National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA) identify top performing students in those examinations. The purpose of these endorsements is to encourage students to produce work of 'high quality', with the intention further described by NZQA Deputy Chief Executive of Qualifications, Bali Haque, as being: '…to encourage students to strive to produce work of a high quality and to recognise that achievement when it occurs' (Haque, 2007). This recognition, then, provides acknowledgment of those students who are within the top 2–3 percent of their cohort; in 2008, Level 3, those who are within the top 5 percent of the cohort, gaining an Excellence endorsement;

and those who are within the next top 20 percent, gaining a Merit endorsement. By providing us with a quantifiable top 3, 5 and 20 percent of scholars in this particular 2008 cohort, these data make it possible to identify New Zealand's most able scholars, based on their performance in the NCEA and NZQA Scholarship. Research into the NCEA conducted by Victoria University of Wellington was instrumental in the government decision to acknowledge students who perform 'exceptionally well' in specific NCEA subjects. From 2011, those students who demonstrate 'strength in a particular subject' will qualify for a single subject endorsement.

Data on the NZQA's NCEA website provide a picture of secondary students' success in the NCEA. The same data also make it possible to consider student performance in an out-of-level test, specifically, Year 11 student performance in Level 3 of the NCEA, and to a lesser extent, Year 12 student performance in the NCEA. These 2008 data are shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Out of level success in the NCEA Level 3, 2008*

*Data Source: NZQA
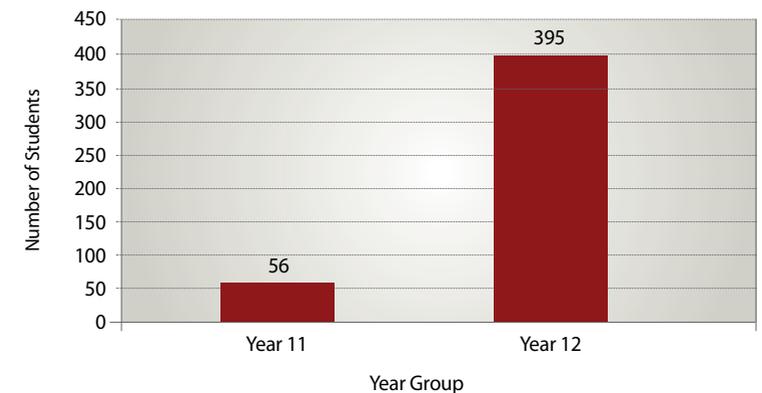


As Figure 1 shows, in 2008 there were 56 students who gained Level 3 NCEA while they were enrolled in Year 11, and 395 who gained Level 3 while enrolled in Year 12. It would appear that these students have been accelerated, and they worked at a curriculum level commensurate with their ability, rather than their age. What is not clear from these data is whether these

students gained the NCEA on internal credits, external credits, or a mixture of both. NZQA data also reveals that of those students who gained the NCEA Level 3 in Year 11, only one gained an endorsement, and that was a Merit endorsement. This suggests an area that requires further investigation: is gaining 'Achieved' an adequate outcome for students who have been selected for accelerated entry to the NCEA? Rather, should these accelerated students – if they have been selected appropriately – be expected to gain an 'Excellence' or, at the very least, a 'Merit' endorsement? It is possible that the impending individual subject endorsements will enable these students to demonstrate excellence in single subjects, and this may assist in providing a clearer picture of the student's academic achievement following acceleration.

> *Perhaps even more interesting is the breakdown of these data by ethnicity and school decile.*

Evidently, some students are able to sit the NCEA early; but whether they are invited to so, or they ask to do this, or whether some measure is employed to gauge their readiness for accelerated provisions, is unclear. Perhaps even more interesting is the breakdown of these data by ethnicity and school decile. Figure 2 shows the data for out-of-level success in the NCEA by ethnicity, and Figure 3 by school decile group.

**Figure 2:** Roll-based data showing Year 11 out-of-level success in the NCEA Level 3, 2008, by ethnicity
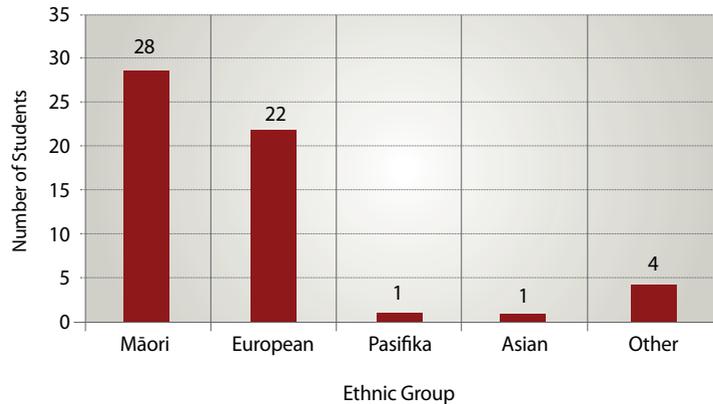
In 2008, most of the students who gained the NCEA Level 3 in Year 11 were Māori. This finding is particularly interesting, given the arguably popular perception that Māori academic achievement is likely to be less than that of other ethnic groups (Rubie-Davies, Hattie & Hamilton, 2006). Certainly the numbers are low, but the data are representative of a group of students who attained high academic success in assessment proposed for students who were two years ahead of them.

Figure 3 shows that most of the students who gained Level 3 in Year 11 were from low-decile schools. These data changed for the next year group, where most students gaining Level 3 in Year 12 were from mid-decile schools.

**Figure 3:** Participation-based data showing Year 11 and 12 out-of-level success in the NCEA Level 3, 2008, by school decile
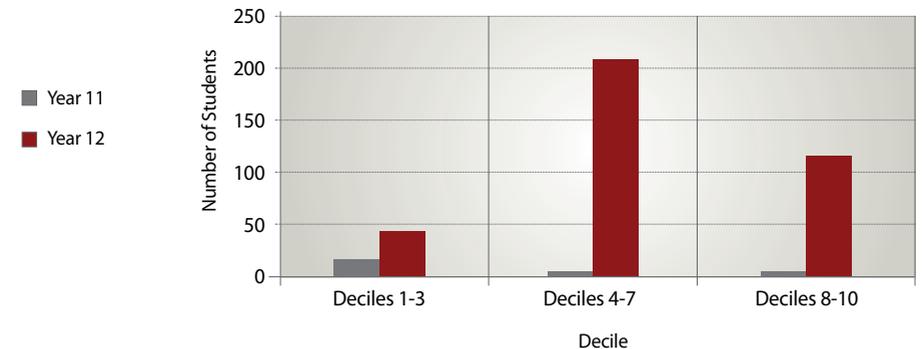
Source: NZQA Statistics (Endorsement Data).

*NB: Endorsement data is based on participation-based data rather than roll-based data. Participation data percentages are based on participating students; roll data numbers are based on the 1 July school roll in 2008. Hence the greater numbers of students shown in roll-based data.*

Based on these data, it would appear that in 2008, most of the students who gained the NCEA Level 3 in Year 11 were Māori students from low-decile schools, and that the practice of early entrance to the NCEA was more prevalent in Year 12 among mid-decile schools than among high- or low-decile schools.

## What does the data tell us?

What is evident in the 2008 NCEA roll-based data is that there are students in New Zealand who are already receiving accelerated out-of-level educational opportunities. It is also clear that there are groups of students – particularly Māori and European students – who, in 2008, gained Level 3 NCEA ahead of their age group peers. What the data does not tell us are the names of the schools attended by these students, whether those secondary schools prepared students in the two previous years for early entrance to the NCEA, and – most importantly – how student readiness for out-of-level provisions was gauged.

## The way forward

If we consider international models of acceleration, particularly those of CTY, it is evident that these New Zealand students have demonstrated high academic ability. The next step is to ensure that the education system continues to support them. To that end, perhaps these results need to be considered as the starting point. Following the CTY model, the next stage is to consider programme options and to offer counselling and guidance. Longitudinal data that follows these students in their decision-making will assist future decision-makers where schools or parents perceive a student is not receiving appropriate academic provisions with in-level curriculum.

Clearly, these are areas that require greater investigation. As the New Zealand report (Riley et al., 2004) noted, the power of a Talent Search such as that provided by CTY lies in its ability to accurately identify academically talented students.

It is important, therefore, that measures being used to accelerate students through the NCEA are identified, for two reasons. First, this is necessary to ensure the 'right' students are being accelerated: these data show only those who were successful, not those who may have been accelerated and were not successful. As international research has found, selection can be harmful if students are being arbitrarily admitted to

*"Advanced placement through acceleration that is supported by comprehensive assessment, and involves the student in the decision-making process, is one option that this country needs to consider seriously in order to build on what is evidently already happening in some New Zealand secondary schools."*

accelerated courses. Secondly, identification of criteria for accelerated entry to the NCEA is needed to ensure inclusion of additional students who may also be successful if they are given this opportunity.

With only one of those students who gained Level 3 NCEA in Year 11 also gaining an endorsement, it is important that there is discussion to identify expected and acceptable outcomes for those students given early entrance to the NCEA. With single-subject endorsements available from 2011, it may become evident that these early entrance students are strong in one or two subjects, and that it is those subjects in which they have gained the bulk of their credits. Perhaps it will also be possible to identify levels of achievement in the NCEA examinations that – like the AP courses – are predictive of future success in those students who are accelerated ahead of their age peers.

The NCEA data shows that most of those Year 11 students who gained the NCEA Level 3 in 2008 were from low-decile schools. The success evidenced by these students suggests that in some secondary schools, real progress has been made in the provision of accelerated programming for high ability secondary students. These findings appear to be at odds with both the 2004 and the 2008 report, making it even more important that there is further research to investigate the processes underpinning those provisions, and to consider their applicability in providing a model for other schools to assist them to make appropriate academic provisions for their high ability students.

Advanced placement through acceleration that is supported by comprehensive assessment, and involves the student in the decision-making process (such as that in practice at CTY), is one option that this country needs to consider seriously in order to build on what is evidently already happening in some New Zealand secondary schools. Although the New Zealand government will no longer fund the gifted advisory service, there is still a need to identify specific practices that make appropriate academic provisions for high ability students. Research that identifies, describes and disseminates the process of gaining early entry to the NCEA – coupled with planning for the collection of longitudinal data – is needed to follow these students and gauge the long-term outcomes of this initiative.

This will ensure that the practice of acceleration will become recognised as one appropriate academic option for high ability students in New Zealand, and will have the added benefit of being informed by an evidence base. It is to be hoped that in the not too distant future, this country will also have earned an international reputation for accelerated practices that enable New Zealand's most able students to learn at a level commensurate with their ability, and not their age.

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# CERT Comment

Jenny Horsley's contribution to this volume illustrates important goals for the research CERT can support: understanding how the experiences of New Zealand students and educators sit alongside those provided by other nations; and helping to contemplate what this means for how effectively our education system positions New Zealand to succeed in an increasingly global future.

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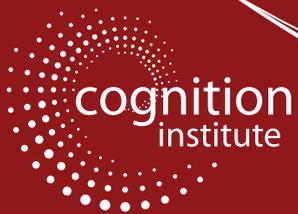
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