Students' transitions into initial teacher education: Understanding barriers and enablers through an ecological lens

Diana L. Amundsen
University of Waikato

Nadine Ballam
University of Waikato

Katrina McChesney
University of Waikato

Students' Transitions into Initial Teacher Education: Understanding Barriers and Enablers Through an Ecological Lens.

Diana Amundsen
Nadine Ballam
Katrina McChesney
University of Waikato, New Zealand

Abstract: This paper presents a small-scale qualitative investigation which explored early first-year transition experiences of pre-service teacher students. The study took place in one university in Aotearoa New Zealand, involving 24 students and three co-researchers from a Faculty of Education. Perceptions of students' transition experiences were gathered through an essay task six weeks into the first semester; data were analysed using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory to identify barriers and enablers related to students' transition experiences in various contexts. Diverse transitions accounts of 'becoming a pre-service teacher student' were analysed as being complex and intertwined with historical, social, cultural and political elements. These findings have implications for providers and educators of pre-service teacher programmes. Purposeful application of Bronfenbrenner's theory to identify, name and understand how various transition barriers and enablers impact wellbeing and resilience could open up a more visible, shared and understood transition experience.

Introduction

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, New Zealand's teacher shortage had reached crisis levels, compelling the Government in 2019 to contribute a one-off $9.5 million initiative addressing teacher supply. The package aimed to boost teacher supply by recruiting new graduates into teacher training, and to support more teacher graduates into permanent teaching positions (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2019a). For providers of pre-service teacher programmes, a swell in student enrolment numbers was anticipated throughout 2020 and beyond. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the teacher shortage due to inability to recruit foreign teachers from countries such as Australia and the UK and triggered an even bigger MoE focus on recruiting new teacher trainees (Gerritsen, 2020). For under-graduate pre-service teacher programmes in New Zealand, this raises important questions for teacher training service providers about how to attract, induct, retain and support students.

The transition for students entering university frequently involves great personal investment and significant social displacement (Briggs & Hall, 2012). First-year experiences are seen as high-priority by universities (Palmer et al., 2009), often owing to student attrition consequences impacting institution finances and reputations (Masters & Donnison, 2010). Yet, as Palmer et al. (2009) state, "the actual experiences of students entering university have somehow failed to attract the level of academic scrutiny that is necessary to appreciate this *transition*." (p. 38). While the significance of support in relation to student retention,

persistence, performance and achievement is well established, much less is known about the specific transition experiences of pre-service teacher students.

This paper presents qualitative research into the experiences of 24 students in their first year of an undergraduate pre-service teacher programme in New Zealand. The purpose of the research was to gain an understanding of factors that affected how individual students adapted at the start of their programme. The overarching research question was: *What transition enablers and barriers do pre-service teacher education students identify as most significant at the beginning of the first year of their undergraduate programme?* Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework was used to analyse the transition enablers and barriers that students highlighted.

Background
Transitions into University Environments

Transitions into undergraduate programmes are now recognised as complex processes that demand social, academic, and personal change and integration (Amundsen, 2019a, Briggs et al., 2012; Madjar et al., 2010). Students' experiences of transition into university environments are important both to the students themselves and to the institutions they attend (Coertjens et al., 2017; Masters & Donnison, 2010). This issue has piqued researchers' interest for some time, prompting various models being suggested to understand experiences, process and results linked to acculturation and adaptation aspects of transitions (Berry, 1997; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Tajfel, 1981).

Over the past two decades, factors influencing effective transitions into university have been identified (Amundsen, 2019a; 2019b; Box et al., 2012; Madjar et al., 2010; Tinto, 2006). Factors that hinder effective transitions (barriers) and factors that support effective transitions (enablers) can be seen as clustering around four overlapping themes: individual students; the higher education environment; student relationships; and teaching pedagogy and practice (Amundsen, 2019a; Hall, Rata & Adds, 2013). Table 1 illustrates our compilation of the main (though by no means all) barriers and enablers under each of the above four themes. Notably, some factors appear to be both barriers and enablers for effective transitions into under-graduate contexts – two sides of the same coin.

Transition influence	Characteristics of …			
	Individual student	University environment	Student relationships	Teaching pedagogy and practice
Barriers	• Low self-esteem (Jeffries, 1998) • First generation HE student (Box et al., 2012; Chauvel & Rean, 2012; Madjar et al., 2010)	• Lack of quality course/enrolment info (Charteris & Dargusch, 2018) • Lack of student support units (Bowden, 2013; Hall et al., 2013) • Financial pressure (Chauvel & Rean, 2012, Curtis et al., 2017; Hall et al., 2013) • Geographic distance (Briggs et al, 2012; Tinto, 2006) • Institutional systems (Zittoun, 2008)	• Negative peer relationships (Madjar et al, 2010) • Lack of approachable staff (Gorinski & Abernethy, 2007)	• Course content (Zepke & Leach, 2010) • Teacher demeanour (Sciascia, 2017) • Emotional toll of hidden curriculum (Richardson, Watt, & Devos, 2013)
Enablers	• Strong student identity (Tinto, 1993; 2006) • High self-belief (Tinto, 1993; 2006)	• Provision of social support (Curtis et al., 2017) • Provision of academic support (Chinlund et al., 2011)	• High presence of staff role models (Madjar et al, 2010) • Development of student peers friendship network (Kantanis, 2000)	• Inclusive teaching practice (Ballard, 2014) • Culturally relevant pedagogies (Bishop & Berryman, 2015; Sciascia, 2017)
Both barriers and enablers	• Previous academic success • Wellbeing (Price & McCallum, 2015; Yager, 2009)	• Academic confidence and preparedness (Lee-Morgan, Courtney, & Muller, 2019) • Sense of belonging (Bishop & Berryman, 2015; Masters & Donnison, 2010)	• Peer relationships • Family/friend support (Sciascia, 2017; Gorinski & Abernethy, 2007)	

Table 1: Barriers & Enablers for Transitions to University

The 27 studies listed in Table 1 were published during a 26-year period from 1993 to 2019 and report research conducted across five countries: Australia (7), New Zealand (12), United States (3), United Kingdom (1) and Switzerland (1). Among these studies, sample sizes varied from 10 to 1200, although the average number of participants was 136. Data collection methods typically relied on surveys and questionnaires (9); other methods included interviews (4), case studies (2) and observations, photography, or journaling (4). Four publications were literature reviews while three reported the results of their specific institution-based transitions programme design, implementation and evaluation. Few specifically stated which theoretical framework underpinned their study, though many explicitly drew upon Tinto's (1993; 2006) seminal transitions work. Only one other study specifically used Bronfenbrenner's ecological theoretical framework (Price & McCallum, 2015). Taken together, all these studies document useful information about transition barriers and enablers (as presented in Table 1), yet a notable gap was identifiable: more research is needed to identify the impact of the contextual influences experienced by students during their transition in order for institutions to better respond to what students articulate as their needs.

Dunlop (2014) groups educational transitions studies into three sets: (a) studies that focus solely on characteristics of the *individual*; (b) studies that focus solely on characteristics of the *system*; and (c) studies that consider characteristics of both the individual and the system to explore transition as "*development in context*" (p. 32). We argue that focusing on either the individual or the system in isolation gives an incomplete picture of what is, in fact, a complex phenomenon (see also Quinn, 2009). Events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Australian bush fires highlight the significant influence of context on individuals' development. Accordingly, research reported here reflects the approach of Dunlop's (2014) third 'set' of transitions research which emphasises the inter-relatedness of a range of complex interactions between interpersonal and sociocultural effects on transition experiences.

Transitions into Pre-Service Teacher Education

It is reasonable to expect that findings from wider research on transitions into higher education will also be relevant to the transition experiences of initial teacher education students. However, there are also ways in which these students' experiences may be unique. For instance, although student wellbeing is a concerning issue across the higher education sector, Price and McCallum (2015) and Yager (2009) have argued that this is especially the case for pre-service teacher students. Not only must they attend to their own wellbeing during their study, but they must also simultaneously prepare for the demands of fostering the social emotional development and wellbeing of the students they will encounter in school contexts both during and following their training (Beatty & Campbell-Evans, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic is a relevant example of such challenges in a New Zealand context – many schools are being charged with helping children avoid mental health problems in future due to lockdown experiences (Radio New Zealand, 2020).

Existing transitions research in connection with pre-service teacher students tends to focus on students in their final year of the programme preparing to transition into their teacher career or those in their first year of service (Charteris & Dargusch, 2018; Crosswell & Beutel, 2013; Miles & Knipe, 2018; MoE, 2019b; Paris, 2013; Price & McCallum, 2014). Two Australian studies focused on first-year pre-service transition

experiences (Donnison et al., 2009; Masters & Donnison, 2010) and concluded that institutions must foster a strong sense of collaboration and connectedness among students to facilitate effective transitions. Common to all these studies were the authors' calls for broader aspects of transition to be addressed in pre-service teacher programmes. Further, similar to studies reported in Table 1, among these research projects a methodological reliance on questionnaire and survey data was apparent, highlighting a need to draw more heavily on the 'student voice' perspective (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2015). In all, literature concerning pre-service students' transitions reports an urgent need for pre-service teacher providers to develop cohesive and connected programmes that play a role in ongoing development of early career teachers.

There is a shortage of New Zealand-specific research on transitions to pre-service teacher programmes (Amundsen 2019a; 2019b; Madjar et al, 2010). This study contributed to an identified gap (Price & McCallum; 2015; Roffey, 2012) of how ecological influences impact pre-service and beginning teachers' resilience, wellbeing and likely retention. Little is known about pre-service students' perspectives of their transition experiences in a New Zealand context, which was the impetus for the design of this study. Although a whole body of research exists outside the scope of this article about resilience related to transitions, it is worth noting that limited studies have focused on resilience processes for youth in Australian and New Zealand contexts (also see Gibbs, 2011). In particular, Shean, Cohen and de Jong (2015)'s research points to the significance of a sense of self-worth and purpose as a protective factor for resilience and healthy wellbeing. Our project contributes to knowledge of pre-service students' transition experiences in their first year by using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory to interpret barriers and enablers as identified by the students themselves to understand how these may support wellbeing and resilience.

Research Design
Methodology

A qualitative approach with a phenomenological emphasis was considered an appropriate way of exploring barriers and enablers related to students' transitions into their pre-service teacher programmes. This decision was informed by Dockett et al.'s (2014) acknowledgement that transition is "experienced in different ways by different people in different contexts" (p. 3), and Ballam et al.'s (2017) caution that "what is considered a successful transition might well differ for stakeholders in diverse contexts and cultures and across time" (p. 2). A qualitative, phenomenological approach allowed for a focus on the voices of participants (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2015) with sensitivity to various elements affecting ways the phenomenon of interest is experienced by a person in a particular historical, social and cultural context (Langdridge, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory was selected as the theoretical framework for the present research. The theory provided a sound framework for exploring the roles and experiences of individuals as they interact in and move

between various contexts, which is what the present research sought to do for the case of students' transitions into a pre-service teacher programme.

Concerned with development in context (Dunlop, 2014), Bronfenbrenner's framework offered an appropriate explanation for the way in which individual students' dispositions and resources inter-relate with features of the higher education learning environment and pre-service teacher programme to become either barriers or enablers, or both at the same time. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory depicts the various interconnected contexts a person exists in, which impact on the person's development; Table 2 defines the theory's six key contexts and shows how they were interpreted for this study.

We acknowledge that Bronfenbrenner's (2005) later work expanded to address critique and add further explanatory power to his theory. His later work recognises the key role an individual plays in development (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), highlighting four dimensions of processes, person, context, and time (PPCT; Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Failing to engage with both Bronfenbrenner's earlier and later concepts for analysis purposes has been criticized by some researchers (Aubrey & Riley, 2019). Primarily, our decision to use Bronfenbrenner's early framework (as summarised in Table 2) was made because the first-year student participants in this study were asked to use this framework in order to reflect on their transition experiences.

Context	Description	Examples of application
Individual	Attributes and characteristics of the person	• Experiences • Resources • Temperament • Motivation • Agency
Microsystem	The immediate contexts occupied by the individual	• Home • Friendship groups • University
Mesosytem	Connections between two or more microsystems	• Home–university • University–friendship groups
Exosystem	Contexts the individual does not directly occupy, but which impact on the individual	• Neighbourhood • Mass media • Government agencies
Macrosystem	Broad socio-economic, cultural and political context	• Laws • Customs & traditions • Social & cultural values
Chronosystem	The idea that human ecology changes over time	• External (e.g. separation from parents) or internal (e.g. physiological changes as an individual grows older)

Table 2. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Model

Research Context and Participants

The research took place in a satellite campus of a New Zealand university. Ethical approval was obtained from the institution's ethics committee before commencing the research.

Participants were pre-service teacher education students in their first year of a full-time, on-campus Bachelor of Teaching programme, which later, in practice became a 'blended' programme in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Data collection began before the pandemic effects necessitated social distancing and online study from home. All 60 students in the first-year cohort were invited to participate in the study, with 24 students (40% response rate) choosing to do so. As shown in Table 3, all but one of the 24 participants were female. Five participants had entered the programme directly after finishing school; the remaining 19 participants were post-school leavers. Five students identified as Māori, two as South African, one as Pasifika and one as Filipino. In almost all these respects, the sample of 24 participants was approximately representative of the makeup of the wider first-year cohort at this campus.

	Number	Percent
Females	23	96%
Males	1	4%
Direct-School Leavers	5	21%
Post-School Leavers	19	79%
NZ European	15	63%
NZ Māori	5	21%
Other	4	16%
Participants enrolled in BTchg ECE	2	8%
Participants enrolled in BTchg Primary	22	92%

Table 3. Participant Demographic Data

Data Collection

Data for the study came from a 'transitions assignment' that was compulsory for all first-year students in the programme within a paper focused on lifespan development. The first two authors were lecturers of this paper. For this assignment, students were invited to use Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory as a tool to identify barriers and enablers related to their personal transition into full-time study in the Bachelor of Teaching Programme. Barriers were defined for students as factors that inhibit effective transitions (Amundsen, 2019; Madjar et al., 2010). Enablers were defined as opportunities that facilitate effective transitions (Chauvel & Rean, 2012; Madjar et al., 2010). The assignment was completed six weeks into the first semester of the programme, allowing early transition experiences to be captured. Thus, we were able to collect data in which students reflected on their own lived experiences of transition (as is appropriate for a phenomenological study) through the specific lens of Bronfenbrenner's theory. Asking students to use this theoretical lens intentionally encouraged them to reflect on their transition experiences in ways they might not normally

consider, for example, in relation to particular contextual influences. All students were reminded that their decision to participate in this study was in no way associated with their assessment for this assignment or any other aspect of their coursework.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were selected as they aligned well with the research question – themes could comprise descriptions of students' experiences within each of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) contexts (see Table 2). Firstly, specific barriers and enablers identified within students' essays were recorded on a spreadsheet by one researcher. Next, two of the research team sorted and assigned codes to these data, noting any emerging patterns as well as common or outlying experiences. A third member of the research team who was not involved with the initial data coding process subsequently reviewed and consolidated emerging themes, with all three researchers agreeing on the final codes and themes. As all three researchers were mindful of the students' intensive study workloads, member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was not undertaken in response to not making extensive demands on participants' time. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model was then used as a lens to ascertain the immediate or broader contexts in which these barriers and enablers existed. Lastly, similarly coded data was categorised into each of the contexts described in Table 2, and response frequencies were logged.

Findings & Discussion
Enablers

In all, 30 distinct transition enablers were identified. Figure 1 shows these enablers and the numbers of students reporting each one, with each enabler classified into Bronfenbrenner's (1979) five contexts: individual, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Although Bronfenbrenner's sixth context, (chronosystem) was considered during coding, none of the students' reported enablers were seen as relating to this context.
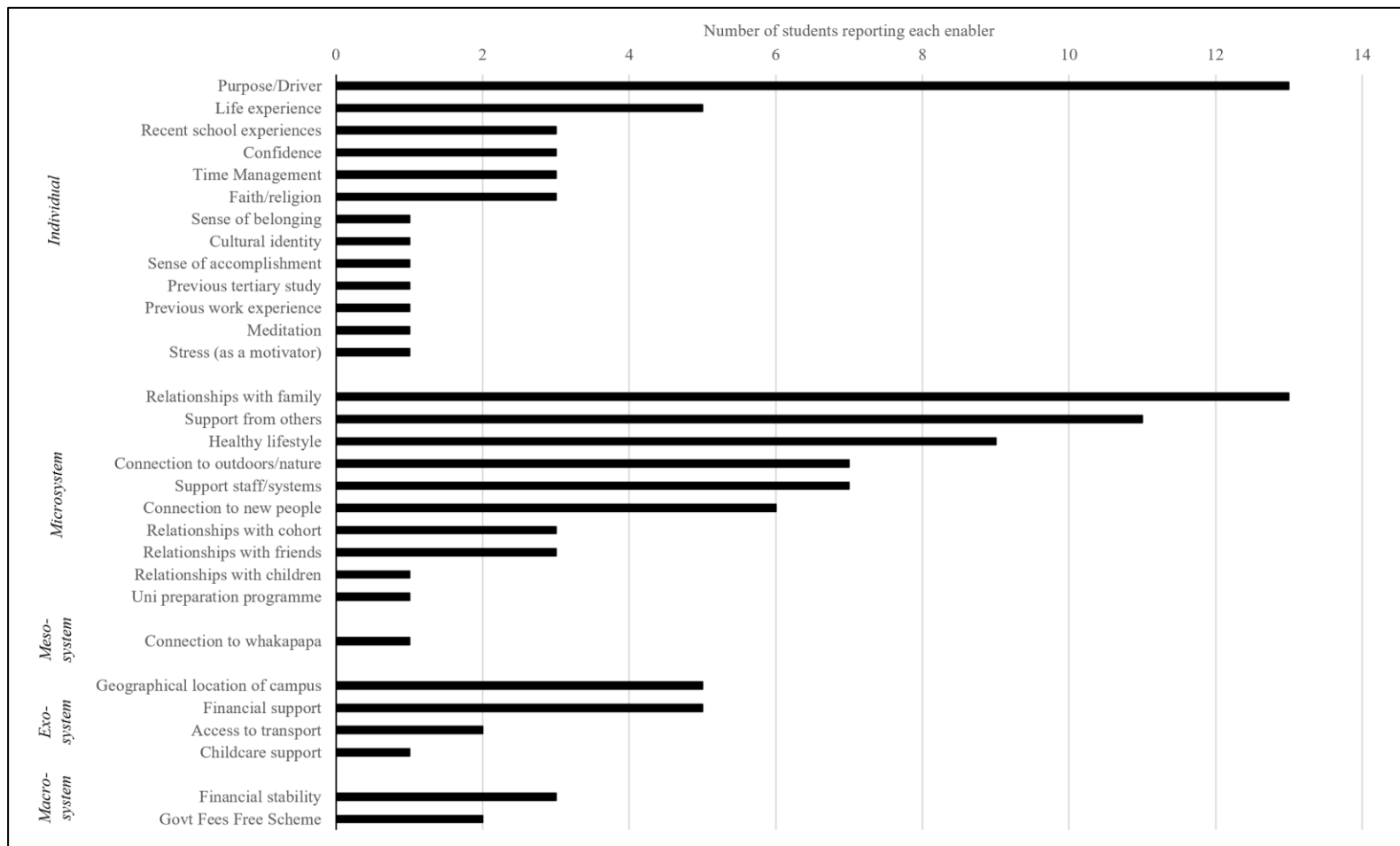
Figure 1. Enablers for Students' Transition into their ITE Programme

The most frequently reported individual-level enabler was having a sense of purpose and drive (reported by 54% or 13 of the 24 students). This finding resonates with Tinto's (1993, 2006) landmark university transitions research, which showed that students were driven by a 'vision' of their future. The sense of purpose and drive described by participants in our research appeared to come from one of two main sources: a desire to be a role model for their children, or a personal faith, spirituality, or worldview.

"My children are the reason that I am at university and they are my biggest motivation." [Participant A1]

"When I think of my spirituality, I view this as my 'purpose'; my morals and view on the world…I'm extremely passionate…to be able to share knowledge and empower the younger generation…" [Participant A10]

Next, at the microsystem level, supportive relationships were a key enabler. The most commonly reported enablers were relationships with family (54% or 13 students) and support from others (46% or 11 students). Seven students cited the university support staff and support systems, three cited relationships with their university cohort, and three cited relationships with friends. Other supportive relationships mentioned by participants included ex-workmates and *iwi* (tribal members). This pattern aligns with wider transitions research demonstrating the importance of social elements of transitions (Richardson et al., 2013) and Crosswell and Beutel's (2013) identification of the significance of ongoing support for pre-service teacher graduates transitioning into their teaching careers. Our study illustrates the importance of similar relational support during the initial transition to university.

"I come from a family of teachers and their own enthusiasm for their roles as teachers gave me the courage to make this change. They are … the roots from which I have grown, and they continue to help me see how I can find my place in this new environment of university and then into teaching." [Participant A15]

"Throughout the beginning of the course I met a group of people who were all extremely similar to me who provided support, social interactions, help with assessments, and simply a meaningful friendship." [Participant A10]

Remaining at the microsystem level, an unexpected finding that emerged among the enablers from these participants was a meaningful connection to nature and the outdoors (reported by 30% or 7 students). This may have been a particular affordance associated with the campus the study was conducted at, which is located in a beautiful coastal region with ample bush and tree life. The reciprocal relationship between people and place is known to influence mental well-being (Hartig et al., 2014) and thus connections with nature could help support effective transition experiences.

"I start putting myself into a feeling of peace and calm environment when I can partake in taking walks on the beachfront…" [Participant A6]

"No matter what I'm going through in my life, being there in the bush with the sound of the water flowing brings me peace of mind". [Participant A8]

Connecting with nature and the outdoors (30% or 7 students) also sits within a wider pattern of students engaging in a range of 'self-help' activities as enablers: meditation and mindfulness (1 student), proactive time management (13% or 3 students), leading a healthy lifestyle (38% or 9 students), and completing a university preparation programme (4% or 1 student). This finding indicated that participants recognised and drew on resources within themselves or in their immediate settings (microsystems) to support their transitions to university.) Of 30 enablers, 23 were identified within the individual and microsystem contexts, as discussed above and illustrated in Figure 1.

Only one enabler linked to the mesosystem: students' sense of connection to their *whakapapa* (genealogy/family or tribal ancestry), reported by one Māori student. Four

enablers were identified in the exosystem and they related to logistics around accessing study: geographical location, financial support (e.g., support from scholarship funds or relatives), transport, and childcare. Other studies as earlier reported in this paper have identified similar factors so these enablers were not unexpected. Finally, in the macrosystem, both the enablers related to students' financial situations, a theme that is further discussed within the barriers section.

Barriers

Across the 24 students' assignments, 33 distinct transition barriers were identified. These barriers and the associated response frequencies are illustrated in Figure 2. Starting at the individual level, there was a clear theme of mind-set and mental wellbeing issues acting as a barrier for effective transitions into university study. Participants reported self-doubt (38% or 9 participants), mental health challenges (30% or 7 students), fear of failure (8% or 2 students), and a sense of pressure to perform (4% or 1 student). Accounts of struggles with perfectionism (4% or 1 student) and an identity crisis (1 student) could also be interpreted as relating to this theme.

All nine participants who described self-doubt related it to their academic preparedness and beliefs about success. Research (Amundsen, 2019a; 2019b; Madjar et al., 2012) has highlighted the influence of academic preparedness on academic engagement; as in these researchers' studies, our study also found that students' academic efficacy sometimes shifted upon entering university.

"I had done really well at school, so I thought I'd do well at university too, but I was very wrong. With every C that came my way for almost every assignment my self-confidence shot down and even though I tried harder and harder, it seemed I wasn't getting any better. I was extremely stressed and felt incredibly alone because everyone around me seemed to be thriving. I started to feel like a failure." [Participant A7] Eight out of these nine participants described self-doubt as related to the identity shift of becoming a university student; one student went as far as to call this an "identity crisis" [Participant A3]. Other literature (e.g. Amundsen, 2019a; 2019b; Briggs et al., 2012; Palmer et al., 2009) has explored the complexity and challenge of this identity shift, with Price and McCallum (2015) arguing that pre-service teacher programmes should provide more explicit support for students' identity development.
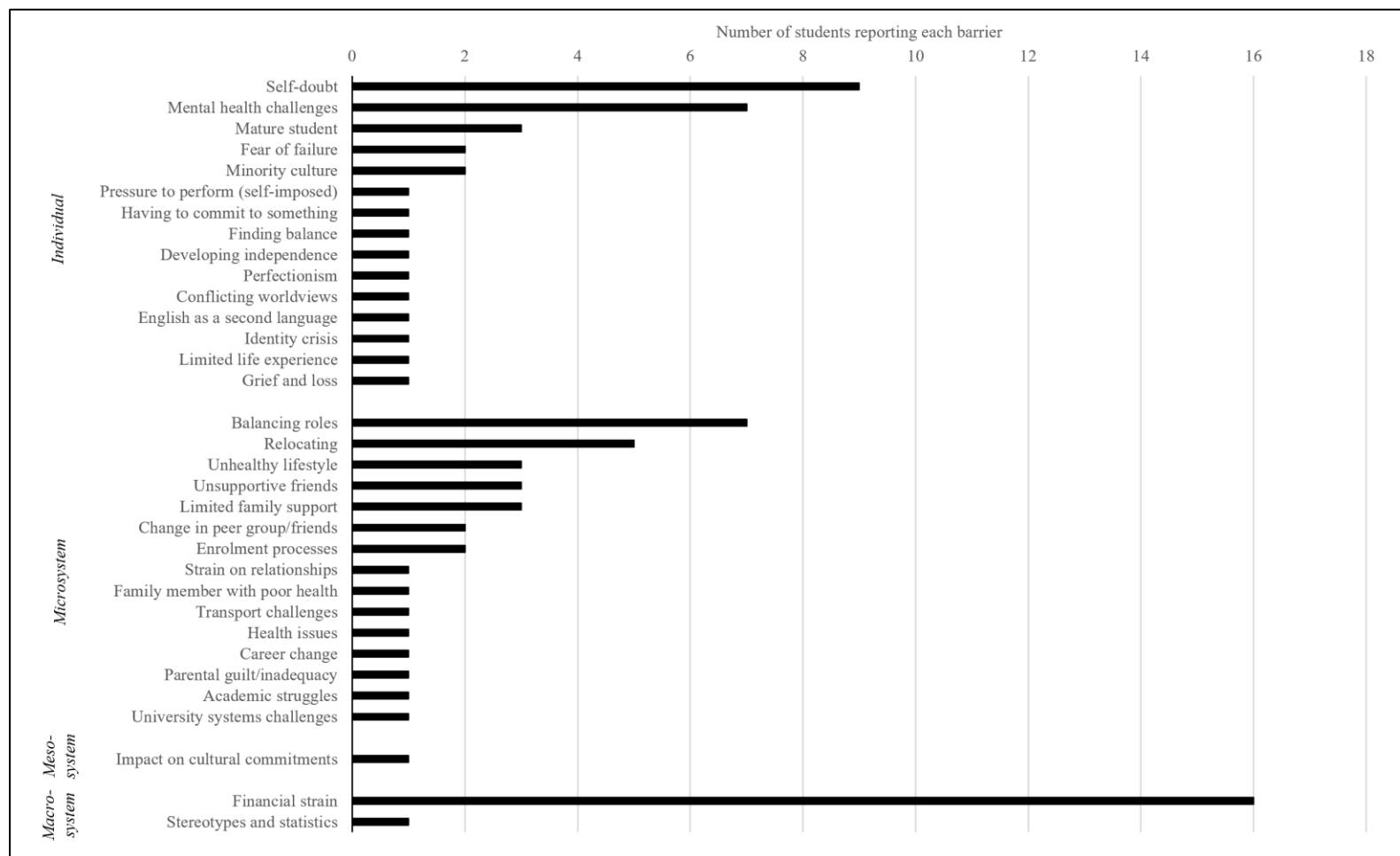
Figure 2. Barriers for Students' Transition into their ITE Programme.

Our study particularly reveals how students felt about their shifting identities at an early stage (week 6) of their ITE programme.

"I really felt that psychologically I was overwhelmed with this immense pressure to find myself in this big wide world." [Participant A3]

"One barrier was trying to find "me" within a short period of time ... I had to learn to step outside of my comfort zone and become independent which gives me the freedom to grow as an individual, but it took a while to adjust." *[Participant A3]*

Seven students (29%) reported mental health challenges including anxiety, worry, nervousness, and fear. These challenges made it more difficult for students to settle into their studies. Students' self-doubt also seemed to be related to students' mental health and emotional wellbeing.

"I soon became stressed and over-emotional. I was thinking I couldn't do this, missed my family, and then found myself wanting to move back home where I felt safe and comfortable". [Participant A22]

"Mental health became a barrier that prevented me from seeing things clearly and positively. This meant I couldn't focus on my day to day tasks and I was questioning if I was going to be able to handle completing my teaching course." [Participant A10]

Moving to the microsystem level, as with the enablers, a common theme among the barriers was the influence of relationships on students' transitions. Altogether, seven students (29%) indicated that their transitions were negatively affected by relationships with family, friends, and/or their pre-service teacher cohort.

"I had a group of friends from high school who weren't supportive of me starting this programme. They made me feel guilty about not working full time and not having time to hang out. They were not happy about me having a new friendship group ... I started to feel torn between my dream career and my guilt for not seeing them so much." [Participant A9]

At the mesosystem level, just one barrier was reported by one student (4%). This was the impact of commencing study on the student's role in her Māori community.

[One barrier for me is ...] "having to prioritise the big part I play when it comes to whānau, iwi, hapū (my family, tribe and subtribe). As a quick example, I am unable to attend tangihanga (funerals) as I normally would." [Participant A2]

This student felt that she needed to de-prioritise family and cultural commitments because these were not compatible with the demands of her study. Tensions between study and family and cultural commitments were also identified in Amundsen's (2019a; 2019b) research.

The single most frequently reported barrier was financial strain (67% or 16 students), which was identified at the macrosystem level. It is widely acknowledged that New Zealand university students experience financial challenges (Lange & Byrd, 2012), and international research has also highlighted financial considerations as affecting students' transitions to university (Gibson, 2019). Our data were saturated with accounts of the financial pressures of being a full-time student, and it was evident that these pressures (from the macrosystem level) influenced pre-service teachers' mental health and wellbeing (individual level). This aligns with the notion that Bronfenbrenner's (1979) contexts are not discrete but in fact overlap (Aubrey & Riley, 2019).

The specific nature of financial strain varied, partly in relation to differing life stages. Three of the five direct school-leavers expressed fear and anxiety about beginning to manage their money independently; others struggled to cover all their costs of living.

> *"It would have made things a lot easier to have experienced [financial]*
> *independence in high school." [Participant A3]*
> *"Flatting (shared living)... costs a lot of money and I would just get by. I also*
> *lived on the opposite side of town, so gas was expensive and sometimes I didn't*
> *have enough money to come to class." [Participant A7]*

On the other hand, half (50%) of those who had already established careers felt financial pressure around losing their previous income and taking on debt (12 participants); the significance of such financial considerations among pre-service teacher student was also noted by Anthony and Ord (2008).

> *"Buying a home or saving for our future will need to wait until I have finished*
> *my degree and found employment." [Participant A11]*
> *"Voluntarily subjecting myself to immense debt for a degree I couldn't*
> *guarantee success in was extremely unnerving." [Participant A12]*

Direct-School Leavers and Post-School Leavers

An interesting example that illustrates the complexities and variation among transition experiences relates to life experience (i.e., whether pre-service teachers had come to university directly from school). Some factors were both an enabler and a barrier, raising our awareness of the uniqueness of the human experience. For instance, having life experience beyond school was reported as an enabler by five students (21%) and previous work experience as an enabler by one student. Conversely, having recent school experiences was reported as an enabler by three students (13%); being a mature student (rather than a school leaver) was reported as a barrier by three students (13%). Having limited life experience was reported as a barrier by one student (4%).

> *"My age is an enabler … my life experience is beneficial in being able to*
> *manage my time effectively as well as handle the stresses of handling study and*
> *deadlines." [Participant A11]*
> *"Going straight from one study (high school) to another (tertiary environment)*
> *meant that I hadn't got out of the headspace for learning and that things are still*
> *fresh in my mind." [Participant A18]*

These apparently contradictory accounts may illustrate the influence of an individual's view of the resources, mind-sets and skills they bring with them (or what Bourdieu (1986) terms, cultural and social capital). Thus, whether they were school leavers or not, the pre-service teachers in our study may have chosen to frame their situation as a strength rather than a deficit as they entered university study. Transition experiences are continuously shaped through the life course over time by individuals' self-perceptions (Quinn, 2010); in our study, we also suggest that pre-service teachers were continuously creating their self-identities and that this influenced the nature of their transition experience. Future research could investigate how pre-service teacher students deploy social and cultural capital in different ways to navigate their transitions into teacher preparation programmes.

Two Pertinent Findings

Given the priority placed by the New Zealand education sector on bicultural heritage (Lourie, 2016) it is pertinent to note that only one student directly discussed their ethnicity or race. None of the 15 Pākehā/NZ European students (who formed 63% of the total sample) referred to race affecting their transition, suggesting that the university context was effectively a "white space" with western norms that were so familiar as to be largely un-noticed by Pākehā/NZ European participants (Milne, 2017, p. 5). In this study, five students (21%) identified as Māori, two as South African (8%), one as Pasifika (4%) and one as Filipino (4%). While no definitive conclusions can be drawn from participant reports of racial differences in the present study, other studies in a New Zealand context have strongly identified how ethnic minority and Indigenous students report an urgent need for more inclusive practices and systems (Amundsen, 2019a; 2019b; Crosswell & Beutel, 2017; Lee-Morgan et al., 2019).

In the present study, both items in the mesosystem both related to cultural connection and commitments. As New Zealand is increasingly becoming more ethnically diverse, this further highlights the need for western organisations to place more attention and importance on ethnic and cultural connections.

Overall, the barriers and enablers identified in the present study aligned with three of the four categories of transition influences identified in our earlier review of literature on transitions into higher education (see Table 1). Students acknowledged personal/individual factors as well as factors related to the university environment and to their relationships. Lastly, we draw the reader's attention to the fact that not one of the 24 students mentioned the nature of teaching and learning as either an enabler or a barrier. Extant literature suggests teaching and learning factors are important elements in shaping student transitions into university (Ballard, 2014; Richardson et al., 2013; Sciascia, 2017; Zepke & Leach, 2010). It is possible that pre-service teacher students were less likely to consider this dimension as there were so many other over-riding factors upon which they were focused when just six weeks into their programme.

Limitations

The adoption of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) earlier theoretical perspective has been justified, but there were associated limitations. When analysing the data, it became challenging to understand each specific context (e.g. microsystem) without relating it to the whole of a person's identity, experience, and environment(s). The snapshot nature of our data also meant that we could only consider the individual, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem contexts but not the equally important chronosystem, which describes how personal and sociohistorical events and transitions have impacted an individual over time (Aubrey & Riley, 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic is a case in point. Data collection for this study occurred prior to New Zealand's stringent lockdown measures brought about by the pandemic. Our ongoing research seeks to investigate how lockdown effects and transitions to online teaching and learning have impacted the participants in this study over time.

Our study involves a relatively small number of participants from one cohort within one programme at one university campus. Some of the students' views may have been based on their experiences and perceptions of the university as a whole, while others may have related them specifically to their education programme. The results of this study reflect aspects of these constraints as well as the New Zealand context. Therefore, readers are left to determine the appropriateness and applicability of these findings for their own contexts. It is

also important to acknowledge that our participants were self-selected. It is too early to say whether these participants differed from their non-volunteering classmates (for example, whether our participants were more or less likely to remain in their programme and go on to become teachers). In addition, our study captured only a snapshot of students' perceptions at a particular moment in their transition; our ongoing research seeks to explore how these perceptions change over time.

Conclusion: Implications for Pre-Service Teacher Education

With education systems around the world and in New Zealand reporting teacher shortages (Ministry of Education, 2019a), it is important that those students who wish to become teachers experience effective transitions in order to avoid early withdrawal from study. The results of our research have highlighted both barriers and enablers to such transitions. The challenge for teacher educators, pre-service teacher programmes, and universities more widely is to consider the extent to which they can acknowledge students' lived realities, provide effective support to pre-empt or mitigate transition barriers, and promote students' experiences of transition enablers. We argue the need for pre-service teacher educators and programmes to reconceive transition practices and understand transitions in a more visible, shared and interactive way that acknowledges students whole lives. This is particularly important in a new normal Covid-19 context as lines between homes, schools, universities, and workplaces become more blurred due to online and digital technology communication. This section considers how these objectives might be achieved.

The transitions assignment that students were asked to complete in their first six weeks of their programme was to purposefully facilitate pre-service teachers in identifying, naming and understanding various barriers and enablers that impacted their wellbeing and resilience, specifically surrounding their emotional and mental wellbeing (as well as spiritual, social, cognitive, and physical dimensions of wellbeing). Encouraging pre-service teacher students to develop reflective practices about their own journey to becoming educators, and promoting their resilience capacity and a sense of agency, are ongoing goals of our wider research and we suggest, a powerful way to support early transitions into pre-service teacher programmes.

Based on the findings of our study, acknowledging students' lived realities would include recognising the varied commitments, pressures, forms of social or cultural capital, and personal or family situations that students bring. Other research (Amundsen, 2019a; 2019b; Price & McCallum, 2015; Quinn, 2010) has also emphasised the importance of such recognition. Practical considerations around timetabling and deadlines as well as support around academic preparation, identity shifts and mental health and wellbeing may all be relevant.

The majority of participants in our research were post-school leavers, disrupting traditional assumptions of university students as young, independent of family or caring responsibilities, and accessing financial and/or practical support from parents. Acknowledging and acting upon the implications of students' differing cultural backgrounds, diverse ages, as well as ways that these backgrounds position some students as insiders or outsiders relative to the institutional norms, is also important. Further exploration of discrepancies between student satisfaction and expectations would be useful to ascertain how well informed students are regarding the nature and demands of teacher education and/or how responsive teacher education is to students' preferences and needs.

The large proportion of both barriers and enablers in our study that related to the individual or microsystem contexts is encouraging as these are contexts where students can exercise much more agency than in, for example, the macrosystem. Our findings suggest that teacher educators and university support programmes could promote awareness of the power of students developing a clear sense of purpose for study, deliberately choosing strength-based framings of their past experiences and other attributes (for example, whether a student has previous life experience or not, or their cultural background), and taking steps to maintain balance, a healthy lifestyle, connections to nature and the outdoors, and positive relationships with others.

One area where students may have limited agency but institutions and policymakers may have more agency concerns students' financial situations, which emerged as important factors within the macrosystem. Universities could consider their scholarship or grant offerings and the extent to which these recognise students' circumstances and needs (rather than being solely or primarily based on academic achievement). Policymakers wishing to promote teaching as a career choice could also consider funding, scholarships, student allowances and other incentives or supports. The importance of financial support has been highlighted across the university research base (Lange & Byrd, 2012) and our study shows how this was evident as a concern for pre-service teachers very early on.

Ultimately, as teacher educators, we all seek to model the kind of student-centred, responsive, and equitable practice we hope our students will develop. It is our hope that by capturing and sharing student voice in this article, we and others will be better equipped to consider our students' life contexts. Particularly, given the Covid-19 context, it is important to better understand contextual barriers and enablers influencing our students' initial transition into pre-service programmes.

References

Amundsen, D. (2019a). *Māori Transitions to Tertiary Education.* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand).

Amundsen, D. (2019b). Student voice and agency for Indigenous Māori students in higher education transitions. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 59*(3), 354-383.

Anthony, G., & Ord, K. (2008). Change-of-career secondary teachers: Motivations, expectations and intentions. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 36*(4), 359-376. https://doi.org/10.1080/13598660802395865

Aubrey, K., & Riley, A. (2019). *Understanding and using educational theories* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Ballam, N., Perry, B., & Garpelin, A. (2017). International perspectives on the pedagogies of educational transitions. In N. Ballam, B. Perry, & A. Garpelin (Eds.,) *Pedagogies of educational transitions: European and antipodean research* (pp.1-14). Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43118-5

Ballard, K. (2014). *Inclusive education: International voices on disability and justice.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Beatty, L., & Campbell-Evans, G. (2020). School leaders and a culture of support: Fostering student social emotional development. *Issues in Educational Research, 30*(2), 435-451.

Berry, J. (1997). Immigration, acculturation and adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review, 46*(1), 5-68. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x

Bishop, R., & Berryman, M. (2015). The Te Kotahitanga observation tool: Development, use, reliability and validity. *Waikato Journal of Education, Special 20th Anniversary Collection*. doi: 10.15663/wje.v20i3.241 https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v20i3.241

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education.* (pp. 241-258). New York, USA: Greenwood Press. Translated by Richard Nice. Retrieved from https://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/

Bowden, J. (2013). Consequential transitions: A developmental view of knowledge propagation through social organisations. In T. Tuomi-Grohn & Y. Engestrom, *Between school and work.* (pp. 19-38). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group.

Box, G., Callan, N., Geddes, T., Kemp, H., & Wojcieszek, J. (2012). University first year advisors: A network approach for first year student transition and retention. Practice Report. *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education, 3*(1), 91-100. https://doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v3i1.107

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Briggs, A., Clark, J., & Hall, I. (2012). Building bridges: understanding student transition to university. *Quality in Higher Education, 18*(1), 3-21. https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2011.614468

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development.* Cambridge, United States of America: Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (2005). *Making human beings human: biological perspectives on human development.* New York, United States of America: Sage.

Bronfenbrenner, U. & Ceci, S.J. (1994). Nature-nurture reconceptualized in developmental perspective: A bioecological model. *Psychological Review, 101*(4), 568-586. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.101.4.568

Bronfenbrenner, U. & Morris, P.A. (2006). The bioecological model of human development. In W. Damon & M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology, Vol. 1: Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed., pp. 793-828). New York: Wiley.

Charteris, J., & Dargusch, J. (2018). The tensions of preparing pre-service teachers to be assessment capable and profession-ready. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 46*(4), 354-368. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2018.1469114

Chauvel, F., & Rean, J. (2012). *Doing better for Māori in tertiary settings: review of the literature.* Wellington, New Zealand: The Tertiary Education Commission. Retrieved from http://Māori-lit-review2013.publications.tec.govt.nz/uploads/TEC-Doing-Better-For-Māori.pdf.

Chinlund, E., Shaw, A., McKay, J., Appleby, P., Davis, K., Manderson, M. & Kirkland, G. (2011). *Regional collaborative development of a degree preparation programme.* Retrieved from: https://akoaotearoa.ac.nz/regional-degreeprep.

Coertjens, L., Brahm, T., Trautwein, C., & Lindblom-Ylänne, S. (2017). Students' transition into higher education from an international perspective. *Higher Education, 73,* 357-369. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0092-y

Crosswell, L., & Beutel, D. (2013). A bridge over troubling waters: A snapshot of teacher graduates' perceptions of their ongoing professional learning needs. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 41*(2), 144-158. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2013.777022

Crosswell, L., & Beutel, D. (2017). 21st century teachers: How non-traditional pre-service teachers navigate their initial experiences of contemporary classrooms. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 45*(4), 416-431. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2017.1312281

Curtis, E., Wikaire, E., Jiang, Y., Mcmillan, L., Loto, R., Fonua, S…Reid, P. (2017). Open to critique: Predictive effects of academic outcomes from a bridging/foundation programme on first-year degree-level study. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 42*(1), 151-167. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2015.1087463

Dockett, S., Petriwskyj, A., & Perry, B. (2014). Theorising transitions: Shifts and tensions. In B. Perry, S. Dockett, & A. Petriwskyj (Eds.), *Transitions to school - International research, policy and practice* (pp. 1-18). London, United Kingdom: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7350-9_1

Donnison, S., Edwards, D., Itter, D., Martin, D., & Yager, Z. (2009). Reflecting on improving our practice: Using collaboration as an approach to enhance first year transition in higher education. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education,* 34(3) https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2009v34n3.2

Dunlop, A. (2014). Thinking about transitions: One framework or many? Populating the theoretical model over time. In B. Perry, S. Dockett, & A. Petriwskyj (Eds.), *Transitions to school - International research, policy and practice*. London, United Kingdom: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7350-9_3

Gerrtisen, J. (2020). Principals want foreign teachers exempted from border restrictions. Retrieved from: https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/420290/principals-want-foreign-teachers-exempted-from-border-restrictions

Gibbs, S. (2011). Self-efficacy and resilience in teachers. *British Psychological Society Division of Educational and Child Psychology Newsletter, Debate, 140,* 13-16.

Gibson, S., Grace, A., O'Sullivan, C., & Pritchard, C. (2019). Exploring transitions into the university world using a student-centred framework. *Teaching in Higher Education, 24*(7), 819-833. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1511538

Giorgi, A. & Giorgi, B (2015). Phenomenology. In J.A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (3rd ed., pp. 26-52). London: Sage.

Gorinski, R., & Abernethy, G. (2007). Māori student retention and success: curriculum, pedagogy and relationships. In T. Townshend, & Bates, R. (Ed.), *Handbook of teacher education: globalization, standards and professionalism in times of change* (pp. 229-241). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-4773-8_16

Hall, M., Rata, A., & Adds, P. (2013). He manu hou: the transition of Māori students into Māori studies. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal, 4*(4), 1-19. https://doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2013.4.4.7

Hartig, T., Mitchell, R., De Vries, S., & Frumkin, H. (2014). Nature and health. *Annual Review of Public Health,* 35, 207-228. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-032013-182443

Jeffries, R. (1998). *Māori participation in tertiary education. Barriers and strategies to overcome them*. Wellington, New Zealand: Te Puni Kokiri, the Ministry of Māori Development.

Kantanis, T. (2000). The role of social transition in students' adjustment to the first year of university. *Journal of Institutional Research, 9*(1), 100-110.

Langdridge, D. (2017). Phenomenology. In B. Gough (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of critical social psychology* (pp. 165-183). London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-51018-1_9

Lange, C., & Byrd, M. (2012). The relationship between perceptions of financial distress and feelings of psychological well-being in New Zealand university students. *International Journal of Adolescence & Youth, 7*(3), 193-209. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.1998.9747824

Lee-Morgan, J., Courtney, M., & Muller, M. (2019). New Zealand Māori-medium teacher education: An examination of students' academic confidence and preparedness. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 47*(2), 137-151. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2018.1539214

Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry.* Sage Publications, Newbury Park, CA. https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(85)90062-8

Lourie, M. (2016). Bicultural education policy in New Zealand. *Journal of Education Policy, 31*(5), 637-650. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2016.1159339

Madjar, I., McKinley E., Deynzer, M., & van der Merwe, A. (2010). *Stumbling blocks or stepping stones? Students' experiences of transition from low-mid decile schools to university.* Auckland: Starpath Project, The University of Auckland.

Masters, J., & Donnison, S. (2010). First-year transition in teacher education: The pod experience. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 35*(2), 87-98. https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2010v35n2.6

Miles, R., & Knipe, S. (2018). "I Sorta Felt Like I was out in the Middle of the Ocean": Novice Teachers' Transition to the Classroom. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 43*(6). https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2018v43n6.7

Milne, A. (2017). *Coloring in the white spaces: Reclaiming cultural identity in whitestream schools.* New York, NY: Peter Lang. https://doi.org/10.3726/b10459

Ministry of Education. (2019a). *Cabinet paper: Addressing teacher supply*. Retrieved from https://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Ministry/Information-releases/Addressing-Teacher-Supply.pdf

Ministry of Education. (2019b). *He Whakaaro: Transitions of Initial Teacher Education graduates into teaching.* Retrieved from https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/he-whakaaro/he-whakaaro-transitions-of-initial-teacher-education-graduates-into-teaching.

Palmer, M., O'Kane, P., & Owens, M. (2009). Betwixt spaces: student accounts of turning point experiences in the first-year transition. *Studies in Higher Education,* 34(1), 37-54. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802601929

Paris, L. (2013). Reciprocal mentoring; Can it help prevent attrition for beginning teachers? *Australian Journal of Teacher Education,* 38(6), https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2013v38n6.5

Price, L., & McCallum, F. (2015). Ecological influences on teachers' well-being and "fitness". *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 43*(3), 195-209. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2014.932329

Quinn, J. (2010). Rethinking 'failed transitions' to higher education. In K. Ecclestone, Biesta, G., & Hughes, M. (Eds.), *Transitions and learning through the lifecourse*, (pp.118-129). London, United Kingdom: Routledge.

Radio New Zealand. (2020). Efforts needed to help children avoid mental health consequences of lockdown. Retrieved from: https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/416047/efforts-needed-to-help-children-avoid-mental-health-consequences-of-lockdown

Richardson, P. W., Watt, H. M. G., & Devos, C. (2013). Types of professional and emotional coping among beginning teachers. In Newberry, M., Gallant, A., & Riley, P. (Eds.), *Emotion and school: Understanding how the hidden curriculum influences relationships, leadership, teaching, and learning* (pp. 229-253). Bingley, England: Emerald Group. https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-3687(2013)0000018016

Roffey, S. (2012). Pupil wellbeing – Teacher wellbeing: Two sides of the same coin? *Educational & Child Psychology, 29*(4), 8–17.

Sciascia, A. (2017). *Māori learner success in tertiary education: highlights from Ako Aotearoa supported research projects*. Ako Aotearoa. Retrieved from http://www.voced.edu.au/content.

Shean, M., Cohen, L., & de Jong, T. (2015). Developing well-being in Australian youth: Contingencies of self-esteem. *International Journal of Child and Adolescent Health, 8* (2), 179-187.

Smith, R., & Khawaja, N. (2011). A review of the acculturation experiences of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 35(6), 699-713. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.08.004

Tajfel, H. (1981). *Human groups and social categories: Studies in social psychology.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. (2nd Ed.). University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226922461.001.0001

Tinto, V. (2006). Research and practice of student retention: What next? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 8*(1), 1-19. https://doi.org/10.2190/4YNU-4TMB-22DJ-AN4W

Yager, Z. (2009). Developing wellbeing in first year preservice teachers: A trial of a personal approach to professional education. *Journal of Student Wellbeing, 3*(1), 52-72. https://doi.org/10.21913/JSW.v3i1.419

Zepke, N., & Leach, L. (2010). Improving student engagement: ten proposals for action. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 11*(3), 167-177. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787410379680

Zittoun, T. (2008). Learning through transitions: The role of institutions. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 23*(2), 165-181. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03172743