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PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS CROSSING BOUNDARIES:  
THE EXPERIENCES OF TRANSITIONING BETWEEN  
DIFFERENT CLASS LEVELS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS FROM A  
TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements of the degree  
of  
**Master of Educational Leadership**  
at  
**The University of Waikato**  
by  
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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

2011

## ABSTRACT

Teachers cross a number of boundaries during their teaching careers. In this study crossing boundaries refers specifically to teachers transitioning between different class levels in primary schools. The study focuses on the benefits and challenges teachers face from this boundary crossing and how the practice of transitioning between different class levels is implemented in primary schools. A key principle that underpins this study is the importance of teachers becoming *critical reflective practitioners* to improve their teaching.

A case study approach grounded in an interpretive methodology has been used for this study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers who have transitioned between different class levels. Three broad themes emerged as being central to teachers transitioning: *benefits of transitioning between different class levels; the impact of school culture and leadership on teachers transitioning; and the role of mentors in teachers' transitions.*

The major findings from the study indicate that transitioning between different class levels in primary schools is a critical component of teachers' ongoing personal and professional growth, learning and development. Transitioning between different class levels highlights a kind of horizontal development which requires a shift away from the singular vertical notion that tends to dominate in teachers' development. The study indicates that in order for teachers to become extended professionals who have a broad understanding of the learning needs of all students, schools should support and actively encourage teachers to transition between different class levels.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I wish to acknowledge a number of people who have provided professional and personal support through the writing of this thesis.

To my supervisor, Jenny Ferrier-Kerr, thank you for the positive guidance and ongoing feedback. You challenged my thinking and writing while also offering useful ideas and suggestions for me to consider. I feel extremely privileged to have you as a supervisor, mentor and colleague and sincerely appreciate all your support.

I wish to acknowledge my children, family, friends and colleagues who have shown support and interest over the last year. To my four beautiful grandchildren who were born during the writing of this thesis, you now have my undivided attention. In particular, my sincere thanks to my husband who has provided me with continuing encouragement and thoughtfulness throughout the last two years.

Finally thank you to the four teachers who were the participants for my study. Your willingness to be involved in my research and share your experiences was much appreciated. I hope I have clearly and accurately captured your voices – your commitment and passion to teaching and learning provides strong examples for others to emulate.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Crossing boundaries is something that all teachers experience in some way during their careers. Crossing boundaries has been described by Tuomi-Grohn and Engestrom (2003) as “encountering difference, entering into territory which we are unfamiliar and to some extent therefore unqualified” (p. 4) and there is certainly little doubt that in order to be effective practitioners, teachers must cross many boundaries in a range of different contexts. Crossing boundaries in this thesis refers specifically to teachers moving from one class level to another in primary schools. I have called this kind of crossing boundaries ‘transitioning’. According to Beach (2003), transition “is the concept we use to understand how knowledge is generalised or propagated, across social space and time” (p. 42). This description is most appropriate for this study as although teachers may transition between different class levels within the same school, and when they move to a different school, it is vital that they embrace the particular culture of each new setting and forge positive relationships with others. As Beach (2003) has aptly pointed out, transitioning is an activity that “exists in relation not only to individuals but to broader institution, societal and cultural forces” (p. 51) hence the differences between schools such as school decile rating<sup>1</sup>, size, culture and leadership must be considered when teachers transition.

Through my own experiences as a class teacher and school leader I have developed an interest in teachers crossing boundaries, in particular transitioning between different class levels in primary schools. In my first seven years of teaching I worked in the senior area of the school with year seven and eight students. As a beginning teacher I was committed to becoming an effective practitioner and believe I gained a sound understanding of the academic and emotional needs of the students at this level within a relatively short time. The senior class level was one that I thrived at and I embraced the unique nature of

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<sup>1</sup> A decile is a 10% grouping. A school’s decile rating indicates the extent to which it draws its students from low socio-economic communities (“Ministry of Education,” 2011).

this particular age group. I particularly enjoyed the relationships that I was able to establish with the students and the academic stimulation at this class level.

My path of teacher development was from novice to expert which Berliner (1994) has suggested is typical of the traditional vertical path of teachers' development. During this time I also embraced a number of opportunities for career development and was promoted from class teacher to associate principal and then deputy principal within a relatively short time. This was a period of considerable personal and professional growth and learning for me during which I began to develop as a critically reflective practitioner. I established the habit of daily critical reflection with a view to improve my teaching practice and to find ways of making more informed decisions about my actions. Brookfield's (1995) work on critically reflective teachers was influential on my practice during this time and has now become central to this study. I believe as Brookfield states that critically reflective teachers "have their practice grounded in a clearly understood rationale" (p. 266). The four critically reflective lenses which he suggests teachers can view their teaching through; their autobiographies as learners and teachers, their students' eyes, their colleagues' experiences and theoretical literature (p. 29) resonated with me. During the early years of my teaching as I continued with my education studies I took opportunities to analyse my autobiography as a teacher and learner. I also provided support through mentoring for a number of colleagues in my role as tutor teacher and associate teacher. Participating in critical conversation with these student teachers and other colleagues about the experiences and problems we had in common also gave me opportunities to gain new perspectives. For me, these experiences epitomised Brookfield's (1995) view that "although critical reflection often begins alone, it is ultimately a collective endeavour" (p. 36).

After becoming the lead teacher in the senior area of the school I was able to draw on my knowledge and experience teaching this class level to contribute to key decisions involving school-wide programmes, resourcing, and teacher placement in class levels. It was at this time it became apparent to the leadership team that a number of teachers in our school had been teaching in the same class level for a

significant period of time and in addition they had become somewhat complacent in their teaching approaches. The leadership team considered that some of these teachers would have benefitted from a change in class level. As a result we became more proactive about encouraging teachers to transition to other class levels thus creating a culture whereby teachers were encouraged to do so and take a risk. Developing this culture took time and effort, however it resulted in teachers becoming more receptive to the notion of transitioning between different class levels. I observed in a number of instances that teachers who transitioned to new class levels had a renewed interest in teaching. Although transitioning between different class levels required extra commitment from the teachers to learn about a new class level and make adjustments to meet the needs of a different class level, they seemed to enjoy these challenges.

As my involvement and interest in teachers transitioning between different class levels increased I became aware that a dichotomy had developed. While I was part of a leadership team that sought to actively create a culture which encouraged teachers to transition between different class levels, I had only taught at the senior class level myself. Engaging in reflective dialogue with my mentor helped me to “develop an understanding of and make use of inner restlessness” (Megginson & Clutterbuck, 2005, p. 35). My mentor, who at the time was the school principal, was skilled at reflective dialogue (Brockbank & McGill, 2006). Through this dialogue and critical reflection I began to develop a broader perspective and understand my need for new challenges, which aligns with Katz’ (1995) view that all teachers need renewal and refreshment at stage three of their development. I felt that transitioning to a junior class myself would provide this challenge and lead to more professional growth and learning.

Transitioning to a different class level did provide a new and rich context for my professional growth and learning that was an alternative to the traditional vertical path I had previously been following. This development has been described by Engstrom (1996) as horizontal development as I had to “learn how to move among and between activity settings” (Newell, Tallman, & Letcher, 2009, p. 99). The class level I transitioned to was the new entrant room where the students had

just turned five years of age as opposed to those in the senior classes who were typically aged between twelve and thirteen. The difference in age initially presented a number of challenges around communication, expectations and relationships. These challenges, and adapting to the junior school culture, caused me to experience “culture freeze” which Seah (2003) has stated that many teachers transitioning experience (p. 7).

Although I was an experienced teacher and deputy principal, at times I found the transition difficult and my prior teaching skills and knowledge did not guarantee me a smooth transition to a new class level (Bullough & Baughman, 1995). However, my colleagues who were experienced at teaching junior class levels provided me with invaluable support during my transition and I established an informal mentoring relationship with one of them. We frequently observed each other teaching. I found this peer observation to be valuable professional development for me as I learnt about different aspects of the new class level, which aligns with Brookfield (1995) who has stated that observations are “one of the most helpful sources of critical insights” (p. 83). In addition to the support and mentoring I received, *The New Zealand Curriculum* provided clear direction and guidance for me as I learnt about how to meet the learning needs of the junior class level. The transition from a senior class level to a junior class impacted on my knowledge of content and pedagogy, skills and abilities, quality of teaching, and personal attributes (Cowley, 1996).

Transitioning between different class levels provided me with some of the most enriching personal and professional growth and learning I have experienced as a teacher and leader. Engaging in ongoing critical reflection through the critically reflective lenses suggested by Brookfield (1995) enabled me to see my practice in new ways. Firstly, analysing my own autobiography helped me to become aware of some of the instinctive practices I had established as a teacher of senior students. Also, by engaging in critical conversations with colleagues and observing each other I was able to see my practice of teaching a different class level “in a new light” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 30). This critical reflection enabled me to find ways to adjust and adapt my teaching practices to meet the learning needs

of students in a different class level. It also assisted me to manage the transition to a different class level, develop my expertise further and stay interested in teaching (Bullough & Baughman, 1995).

My interest in teachers transitioning between different class levels has since increased as I have recently crossed a new boundary from teaching in a primary school to teaching in the tertiary sector. From my observations and informal discussions with colleagues in my current role as a tutor, in the Faculty of Education at the University of Waikato, there appears to be a tendency of some teachers staying in one class level and often one school. My recent research about 'what informs primary school principals' decision making around the placement of teachers in class levels each year' confirmed my hunch that there is a tendency of some teachers to stay teaching in one class level (Carlyon & Fisher, in press). The research has given me some insight into the practice of teacher placement from the perspective of leaders. While this research revealed the principals in the study all believed teachers benefitted from teaching a range of different class levels they were reluctant to compel teachers to transition (Carlyon & Fisher, in press). Instead, they preferred to create a culture in their schools in which teachers were encouraged and supported to transition between different class levels. The principals in the study all believed it was their role to provide opportunities such as transitioning between different class levels for teachers' professional growth and learning.

There is limited research about teachers transitioning between different class levels in primary schools, therefore it seems timely to investigate the experiences and motives of teachers who have experienced these transitions. By investigating how teachers transition between different class levels I am able consider the ways they impact on teachers' personal and professional growth. In addition the study looks at how the practice of transitioning is implemented in primary schools and identifies the strategies and support that teachers use to assist them when transitioning.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

Primary school teachers will cross a number of boundaries during their teaching careers. Boundary crossing for classroom teachers, as Tuomi-Grohn and Engstrom (2003) have suggested, may include transitioning between sites of professional practice which include class levels, school sectors or from country to country. This literature review is focused specifically on the transition between class levels for teachers in primary schools in New Zealand. In order to experience these transitions teachers are required to change from teaching one class level to another, either within their current school or in another school. Transitioning between different class levels can place specific challenges on teachers as they become accustomed to new settings. Even though teachers are constantly adapting and adjusting to change, Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) have highlighted how “grade levels present very different contexts” (p. 6) for them. Although there appears to be limited research about primary school teachers transitioning, specifically between different class levels, substantial research exists about other transitions. The literature from that research has been drawn on for the purpose of this literature review as it provides insights into the ways transitioning in general affects teachers, both personally and professionally.

In this literature review two themes have been identified as being central to teachers transitioning; becoming *critically reflective practitioners* and the *professional development and learning of teachers*. It would seem from the relatively limited amount of literature available on the topic of teachers transitioning that these two themes are present in teachers’ experiences of teaching a range of different class levels in primary schools. In the first instance it is important to understand that critical reflection and professional development are factors considered critical for teachers’ practice. However in the context of transitioning between class levels, there appears to be a dichotomy present where

it seems unclear whether transitioning leads to critical reflection and professional development, or if they empower teachers to transition in the first instance.

## **Understanding Transitions**

To further support this critique of the literature it is important to know what is meant by transition in educational contexts. Any period or phase of change such as transition has been described by Fullan (1993) as complex and requiring new skills, behaviour, beliefs or understandings. This resonates with Beach's (1999) assertion that transitions are significant when they are "consciously reflected on, often struggled with, and the eventual outcome changes one's sense of self and social positioning" (p. 114). It is apparent that transitioning between different sites of professional practice may challenge teachers and subject them to differences in organizational and pedagogical cultures, which may in turn affect their teaching effectiveness. As Beach (1999) has pointed out, transitions can be challenging and frustrating as developmental change in relationships can occur within the individual, the social context or both.

Furthermore, Beach (1999) claims there are four consequential transitions (lateral, collateral, encompassing and mediational) which involve the "construction of knowledge, identities and skills, or transformation, rather than the application of something that has been acquired elsewhere" (p. 119). He has outlined that lateral and collateral transitions require teachers to have to come to terms with shifts between different activity settings, such as between different schools. In encompassing and mediational transitions, the leading activity such as teaching different class levels can lead to reversals in the normal conceptions of teacher development. It would seem important then to understand these transitions in the context of primary school teachers transitioning between different class levels as they too "require the construction of new knowledge, new ways of teaching and new relationships" (Newell et al., 2009, p. 91). In addition, Bullough and Baughman (1997) have argued that teachers are required to adapt their expectations and practices to very different educational contexts when transitioning between schools. Thus teachers transitioning may need to develop their pedagogical knowledge, widen their repertoire of strategies and teaching

techniques while at the same time develop new relationships within their new school or class level. However, Seah (2003) has pointed out that teachers who transition between different sites of professional practice are often expected to simply fit into the host culture as it is represented by the new school or class level, which suggests that some teachers may struggle as they transition between different class levels in primary schools.

### **Transition Experiences**

It is not surprising therefore that the evidence indicates that transitioning between sites of professional practice can place teachers in positions of vulnerability, with some struggling to manage such change (Bullough & Baughman, 1995; Newell et al., 2009; Seah, 2003). For example, Cowley (1996) researched the impact of transitioning between schools on an expert teacher's professional and personal life. She revealed how an expert teacher's positive self-image was significantly reduced when he transitioned to a new school. Cowley's research focused on the dimensions of the teacher's quality of teaching, knowledge of content and pedagogy, skills and abilities and personal attributes and on what impact the transition had on these. Data gathered through interviews, observations, surveys and daily teacher logs showed that although the teacher's knowledge of content and pedagogy did not diminish, his confidence and disposition towards career satisfaction initially declined after changing schools. The teacher was "no longer as confident in his abilities, his positive self-image was taking a battering, he had lowered his standards, and he was no longer as satisfied with his career" (Cowley, 1996, p. 13). Cowley (1996) concluded that although the teacher mostly retained his expertise in the dimensions of pedagogical knowledge, and skills and attitudes, in the dimension of personal attributes his level of expertise "took a battering; that is, it was vitiated, diminished, lessened" (p. 15).

Similarly, Boreen, Niday and Johnson (2003) found that primary school teachers who transition between different sites such as between class levels are vulnerable as they face challenges such as meeting the needs of students at different levels and understanding different schools' cultures and procedures. And Bullough and Baughman (1995) have described how a teacher felt "nearly overwhelmed" by the

demands she faced after transitioning between schools and “backed off from one or another problem for a time” (p. 475). Their longitudinal case study centred on the experiences of a teacher over an eight year period as she transitioned between different levels and schools. The data was gathered from observations of teaching and meetings, and semi-structured interviews with the teacher and principals. The authors have described how the teacher grappled with three problems during her transition; diversity and mainstreaming, teaching writing, and extended learning programmes. Their findings revealed that as an experienced expert teacher, she was not always able to continue to demonstrate expertise as she struggled with the challenges that were associated with transitioning to a new setting. Some of the challenges encountered were getting to know different students, adapting to the new ways of planning and understanding the cultural differences of a new setting. Seah, (2003) concurred that not all teachers who transition between different sites are able to “negotiate all perceived value differences” (p. 8) and Bullough and Baughman (1995) acknowledge that teachers who may be excited about the possibilities of developing new approaches to teaching and pushing out the boundaries of expertise as they transition to a different site “can be worn down over time” (p. 476).

Although Seah’s (2003) research was with immigrant teachers working in secondary mathematics in Australian schools, there are interesting parallels to be made in considering teachers transitioning between class levels. Seah focused on the experiences of teachers in transition between professional cultures from the perspective of personal values in the socio-culture tradition. His findings summarized the kinds of differences teachers transitioning between different sites could expect as; discipline-specific, general educational, and organizational. These findings suggest such differences could be common to other kinds of transitioning and may also be experienced when transitioning between class levels.

### **Horizontal Development**

Transitioning between different sites of professional practice may involve what Engestrom (1996) has referred to as ‘horizontal development’. He has described

this kind of teacher development as consisting of the transformation or creation of a new relationship between individuals and social activities. When teachers transition between different class levels they are required to develop relationships with children from different age groups. However teacher development has often been thought of as vertical, which Berliner (1994) has described as being from novice to advanced beginner, then to competent, proficient and ultimately to expert. This singular or vertical developmental path has been challenged by Newell et al., (2009) who have also recommended there is a need for an alternative view of teacher development. As a somewhat hierarchically structured approach, vertical development may not always result in the most positive professional development for individual teachers and as Clark and Hollingsworth (2002) have suggested, it often constrains teacher learning by “characterizing it in a prescriptive linear fashion” (p. 965). These authors propose a model of horizontal development that encourages many different avenues for professional growth and learning and offers teachers to learn in the manner they find most beneficial. In this study professional growth refers to everything that encompasses a teachers’ personal journey, including their personal style, beliefs and values (Gibbs, 2006).

Horizontal development has been described by Newell et al. (2009) “as the transformation of new relationships between teachers and social contexts” (p. 104). These authors consider teachers become “adaptive experts willing to modify their identities, skills and knowledge as they transition across the shifting dynamics of multiple settings” (p. 104). Their four year study focused on the transition of an early career teacher from the completion of her graduate programme into teaching literature to different classes in an urban high school. The study collected data from ongoing interviews and observations with the teacher and revealed how the teacher developed strategies to successfully negotiate from one activity setting to another within the same school. Thus she learned simultaneously about the roles and responsibilities of a teacher, specific student learning needs and school culture as she learned to teach literature laterally and collaterally between settings. The authors concluded that a horizontal approach to teacher development grounded in socio-cultural theory may provide

more positive and lasting effects for teacher education and teachers' reflective practice.

The literature suggests that as teachers transition between class levels they take with them the many teaching and management strategies they have successfully implemented, and transfer these to use as scaffolding in their new setting. Cowley (1996) considers such teachers extend their knowledge as they attempt to find new ways of engaging their students. Hence horizontal development could empower teachers to take risks with their teaching techniques and subsequently provide a wider range of creative learning opportunities for their students.

### **Becoming a Critically Reflective Practitioner**

Schon (1983) has emphasized the importance for teachers to engage in ongoing, critical reflection in order to, as Palmer (1998) has advocated, understand themselves and their own 'inner terrain' (p.6). According to Fullan (1993) teachers need to develop the habits and skills of continuous inquiry and learning for positive, professional change to take place. Gibbs (2006) too has highlighted how engaging in critical reflection with others will help teachers to become critical thinkers and enable them to become more inter-connected with others. He has further outlined how what he terms 'inspirational teachers' are reflective and critical thinkers who are consciously committed to engaging in reflecting on their values and beliefs to gain deeper insights. Palmer (1998) believes too that for teachers to enhance their own wellbeing and bring more meaning into their world they need to understand their own values. Kottler, Zehm, and Kottler (2005) have also stated how the practice of self reflection assists teachers to remain fully functioning and satisfied practitioners although Brookfield (1995) does say that self-reflection is a little like trying to see the back of one's own head in the mirror. It is evident that teachers should engage in critical reflection, however as Larrivee (2000) has pointed out there are many pathways to becoming a reflective practitioner and it is important that each teacher finds their own pathway.

According to Bullough and Baughman (1995) not all teachers have the motivation or desire to take risks with their teaching and may prefer to remain "settled and

secure” (p. 475). Teachers such as these “seek to make themselves invulnerable or immune to the possibility of failing” (Bullough, 2005, p. 23). As such school leaders have a responsibility to ensure teachers develop the dispositions which allow them to be adaptable and responsive to transitions such as those between class levels. Such dispositions, according to Carr (2006) are “developed through experience, practice and immersion” (p. 2). It is important therefore that school leaders encourage and support teachers to help them become more confident to take risks and try new approaches with their teaching without fear of failure. Teachers who demonstrate dispositions such as risk taking and engaging in critical discussion are able to manage change such as transitioning between different class levels more easily.

It has been stated by Spillane (2005) that effective leaders are those who value people and relationships, and focus on the interactions between people and their contexts such as different class levels. Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, and Meyers (2008) have suggested that leadership which moves away from teams which are hierarchically structured allows all members to feel empowered, valued and free to contribute and take risks. In addition Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, and Walumbwa (2005) hold a perspective that understanding who we are and what we value enables us to build a sense of self that gives us a firm anchor for our decisions and actions. The authors have outlined two key components of self-awareness and self-regulation in their self-based model of authentic leadership and authentic followership. This model is based on the theoretical foundations of Hoyle, Kernis, Leary, and Baldwin (1999), and Leary and Tangney (2003) which explores in more depth values, identity, emotions, goals and motives. Gardner et al. (2005) have stated that to be true to one’s values we must first have knowledge and insight of them. In their particular model they identify a sense of control as a key element in the adult learning cycle which may be useful for teachers as they transition between different sites and enable them to “know who they are” (p. 348). This is not dissimilar to Smith’s (2002) view, who suggested that teachers should reflect on their practice by seeing themselves through autobiography, students’ eyes, colleagues’ eyes, and literature. She has pointed out that as teachers engage in such reflection they gain a “sense of power in their teaching”

(p. 34). It seems fundamental that if teachers are to become critically reflective practitioners, that they must be supported and encouraged by school leaders.

The notion of becoming and being a critically reflective practitioner has been strongly emphasized by Pamela Schon (2005), a teacher educator who inspired and encouraged numerous teachers to search for answers about themselves and their journeys. She advocated taking a holistic view of teachers and described them as having mind, body and soul including culture, values and beliefs. She has told the stories of teachers she has identified as being committed to bringing wholeness and heart to teaching and learning through having the courage to “stand in our essence and operate with the intention of love as the respect for the divine in each of us” (p. 6). It may be that transitioning between different class levels enables teachers to gain such an understanding of themselves, both personally and professionally.

There is considerable evidence to support the notion that transitioning between different sites of professional practice provides teachers with opportunities for personal reflection and growth and leads to their further development as critically reflective practitioners. It seems obvious therefore, that in order to successfully transition between sites such as different class levels, teachers need to examine themselves and their practices closely. For some teachers, the discovery of gaps in their own knowledge provides them with opportunities to push personal boundaries (Bullough & Baughman, 1995). Additionally transitioning from one educational setting to another provides teachers with an opportunity to critically review their existing pedagogy (Feldman, 2005).

The literature clearly emphasizes the importance of teachers becoming critically reflective practitioners and it may be that transitioning between different sites of professional practice provides one of many contexts for teachers to engage in such reflection. In her self-study about her experiences of relocating to Australia from South Africa and teaching in a new country for instance, Feldman (2005) has revealed how moving from one educational setting to another enabled teachers to see their “new situation as ‘other’, with a stranger’s eyes” (p. 49), also described

by Brookfield (1995) as seeing our practice from the other side of the mirror. These opportunities for critical reflection enable teachers to gain insights into themselves and their teaching practice. Feldman (2005) explored the complicated nature of self, professional identity, knowledge and teaching and learning as she transitioned to a new setting. She described the early months of frustrations and challenges and how it was a time for deep inner reflection. Feldman (2005) asserts that as teachers gain a deeper understanding of themselves they have greater confidence to work openly and collaboratively with others in different contexts. These teachers are more able to engage in proactive conversations that encourage them to become more confident, reflective professionals (Feldman, 2005). Newell et al. (2009) have also claimed that moving among, and between different settings, enables teachers to develop a deep understanding of themselves and their students. They outline the positive and lasting effects of teachers engaging in reflective practice, such as having the ability to transfer their teaching tools from one setting to another. Brookfield (1995) too points out there are positive effects for teachers who have learned the habit of critical reflection and identified six reasons why learning to be critically reflective is important for teachers. According to him it helps them to “take informed action, develop a rationale for practice, avoid self-laceration ground emotionally, enliven classrooms, and increase democratic trust” (pp. 22-25). As he has convincingly stated, critically reflective teachers know that teaching well “requires a continual willingness to rethink and experiment with teaching” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 265).

Becoming and being a critically reflective practitioner is something that all teachers grapple with, however there are numerous strategies that support them in developing this important element of their practice. One such strategy is mentoring and Megginson and Clutterbuck (2005) have proposed an approach which seems to be particularly pertinent to teachers who are transitioning between different sites. It is concerned with a teacher’s ability to ‘survive’ in their new environment. These authors have described how the “holistic/ecological/person-in-environment” approach provides “a space for in-depth reflection, the exploration of broader issues and the discovery of other perspectives” (2005, p. 58). Hansman (2002) and Gardner et al. (2005) are in agreement about the

importance of mentoring approaches which aim to encourage and support teachers to engage in critical reflection.

## **Professional Development and Learning**

As teachers are able to better understand their professional selves and become more critically reflective as practitioners, they become more capable and confident in adapting their expectations and practices to different educational contexts, such as different class levels. As Brookfield (1995) has stated, when teachers take critical reflection seriously they also begin to think differently about professional development and learning. How teachers view professional development and learning has changed over time, however the current literature leaves us in little doubt that development and learning supports teaching practice (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009; Timperley, 2005). And both Katz (1995) and Moir (1999) have pointed out that teachers need professional growth and development during the different developmental stages of their career in order to stay challenged. The six developmental stages Moir (1999) has suggested that all teachers go through are: anticipation, survival, disillusionment, rejuvenation, reflection and then back to anticipation again. According to Katz (1995) teachers require 'renewal and refreshment' at different stages, describing the four developmental stages or sequences in teachers' professional growth as survival, consolidation, renewal and maturity. Although the time spent in each stage may vary greatly between teachers it is widely accepted that when teachers move into stage three and four they are ready for new challenges to gain new perspectives and embrace the broader social context of education (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005). A further distinction that Hoyle and John (1995) have made between degrees of professionalism is that of restricted and extended professionalism. These authors have stated that the latter form of professionalism is achieved through teachers furthering their own professional development from in-service work and becoming involved in various professional activities. In addition while the restricted professional tends not to see their classroom within the wider school context, the extended professional is concerned with locating his classroom teaching in a broader educational context (Hoyle, 1980). Although transitioning between different class levels may well challenge teachers it may also

significantly enhance their professional development and learning during the different developmental stages of their career.

Professional development can challenge teachers and lead to improved pedagogical knowledge and effectiveness (Hoyle & John, 1995). However professional development has been criticized by Ball and Cohen (1999) for lacking in consistency and offering few opportunities for understanding practice-based teaching. Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) emphasized that because all teachers are unique it is impossible to create a single, centrally administered and planned professional development programme that will meet everyone's needs and desires. Fullan (1993) has pointed out how many professional development programmes have failed to consider the process of teacher change and that teachers cannot be forced to think differently or compelled to develop new skills. Furthermore Clark and Hollingsworth (2002) suggest that it is important to understand the process by which teachers grow professionally and "the conditions that support and promote that growth" (p. 947).

In New Zealand there have been a multitude of different approaches to professional development over many years, some of which have been more effective than others. In response to the many trends that have occurred in education in recent years, schools have often sent their teachers to courses for their further professional development which Wideen (1992) has described as teachers being seen to be objects to be "in-serviced" (p.124). These teachers have then been required to report back to the whole staff or teaching teams in order to pass on the information and skills they have acquired. According to Evans (1999) this model of professional development has had limited success because it "feels abstract, too distant and too theoretical" to teachers (p. 63). Unfortunately these and other programmes often tend to assume teachers need information from outside experts (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). Subsequently the term professional development for some time had negative connotations for teachers and also become a rather negative experience (Ferrier-Kerr, Keown, & Hume, 2008). However as a result teachers have become more outspoken about which models of professional development they prefer and find most useful.

In Nieto's (2003) study, based on an inquiry group of excellent teachers who told their stories about why they remained in teaching, she found that teachers feel a "need to keep learning throughout their careers if they are to improve" (p. 76). Nieto (2003) retold some of the stories of a group of high school teachers she worked with for twelve months. The teachers outlined how they saw a need to engage in writing both individually and collectively through research projects, attending conferences and workshops that teachers themselves presented. This aligns with Robinson (2003) who has suggested that effective professional development requires teachers to be skilled inquirers.

Kitchen (2009) has suggested that professional development needs to be responsive and sensitive to the challenges and needs of individual teachers. He has also highlighted the importance of the support of sensitive and skilled mentors to help teachers cope with the challenges of teaching in a time of change. In his four year narrative inquiry he focused on the experiences and professional renewal of one teacher within different educational contexts including different schools. A relational approach to teacher development is recommended which includes the following seven characteristics as essential to teacher development: understanding the landscape, helping the teacher face a problem, respecting and empathizing with the teacher, conveying respect and empathy, understanding one's own personal practical knowledge, improving one's practice in teachers' development and receptivity to growing in relationship (Kitchen, 2009). The findings align with Stoll's (1992) work from which she reported how self-chosen and self-directed teacher development has considerable benefits for teachers.

The literature does seem to suggest that transitioning between different sites of professional practice will provide opportunities for teachers' personal and professional growth to be enhanced through professional development. However the importance of providing skilled and supportive mentoring for teachers throughout these transitions has also been acknowledged. Authors such as McIntyre and Hagger (1996) have suggested that mentoring may provide the necessary support for teachers transitioning into a new environment. Newell et al.

(2009) have also stressed the importance of mentoring teachers who are transitioning and explained how it is impossible for teachers to “go it alone” (p. 106) when moving from one professional site to another. A further example has been outlined by Kitchen (2009) whose study has revealed how a teacher gained significant professional growth when he transitioned between schools through receiving support from mentors which addressed his individual needs. Mentoring has been described by Robertson (2005) as a way to support teachers to embrace change, direction and develop in a new area. In addition to providing support to teachers who transition between different sites of professional practice Palmer (1998) has outlined that, “the power of mentors is in their capacity to awaken a truth within us” (p. 21).

A further model of teacher professional growth that also recognizes the individual nature of teacher growth has been proposed by Clark and Hollingsworth (2002). This model highlights the significant impact the school context and change environment has on teacher growth. The non-linear structure of this model recognizes the individuality of every teacher’s learning and practice. They suggest the model “allows us to give recognition to the idiosyncratic and individual nature of teacher professional growth” (2002, p. 965) and allow teachers to learn in the manner that they find most beneficial.

It has been recommended by Ferrier-Kerr et al. (2008) that schools plan and structure professional learning activities based on the needs of the staff and provide time and support when implementing change. These recommendations have come from the Ministry of Education Curriculum Implementation Exploratory Studies (CIES) project which studied eight schools implementation of the revised *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). All schools in the study advocate as being critical to the success of professional learning; teachers’ ability to be reflective, the importance of a common vision, and sound leadership. In addition, Mitzberg (2004) has highlighted how highly effective leaders energize others to do better things and Harris (2003) that successful leaders seek ways to nourish supportive, meaningful and collaborative relationships with their staff. Furthermore the considerable research into the

benefits of leadership advocates teachers working in collaboration and sharing a common vision (Fennell, 2005; Harris, 2003; Storey, 2004; Timperley, 2005; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2008). According to Fennell (2005) schools having a common vision is central to developing a professional learning community. She claimed it is imperative that schools work in a collaborative manner to enable teachers to be heard and develop professionally. Harris (2003) agrees and stated that a common vision can provide rich and diverse opportunities for continuous professional development and the improvement of teachers' self-confidence.

Palmer (1998) too suggests that “the growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it” (p. 144). And according to Brookfield (1995) analyzing ourselves and talking to colleagues are two integral aspects of the critical reflection process that teachers should practice in order to become critical reflective practitioners. However Brookfield (1995) cautions there are barriers to critical reflection such as: the culture of silence, the culture of individualism, and the culture of secrecy. He has stressed the dangers of the “anti collectivist culture” in some schools and stated how critical reflection will only occur within a trustful atmosphere where teachers know that sharing of information won't adversely affect their school standing (p. 249). Thus it seems clear that although transitioning between different sites of professional practice such as between class levels may provide the context for teachers to engage in critical reflection, this may only occur within a positive school culture with a common vision.

The literature has revealed that transitioning between different sites of professional practice may well provide teachers with an opportunity to gain a firm understanding of their values and beliefs, through self-examination and reflection. It is apparent too that such transitions could provide teachers with the necessary platform to engage in professional development and learning. Further research of primary school teachers crossing boundaries, such as teaching a range of different class levels, might reveal additional benefits for teachers. These may include an increase in teacher use and knowledge of essential documents such as *The New*

*Zealand Curriculum* and the National Standards in reading, writing and mathematics. Additional research into teachers transitioning between different class levels in primary schools may also reveal a greater willingness from teachers to take risks and embrace change in other areas of their practice.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

This chapter comprises an outline of the methodology for this study, the research methods, and issues pertaining to ethics, such as how quality will be maintained.

In order to gain an understanding of the methodology considered appropriate for this study it is important to first explore ideas about research methodology more broadly. An important consideration of a researcher's work is the paradigm or philosophical perspectives that they bring to their study. Three key paradigms are positivist, interpretive and critical theory (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007), in addition to others such as complexity, post-modern and feminist that should not be discounted. More recently some theorists have referred to the paradigm a researcher works in as their *worldview*. For instance, the term *worldview* has been chosen by Creswell (2009) to describe the basic sets of beliefs that guide researchers' action. Also referred to as epistemologies, ontologies or research methodologies by a number of authors (Burton & Bartlett, 2009; Cohen et al., 2007) these beliefs guide the researcher and permeate the research process. They underpin the researchers' theoretical stance, approaches that may be taken and the methods used to gather, analyse and interpret data.

Although over the past three decades a trend towards more interpretive, qualitative research in education has emerged, (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) historically much research occurred in a positivist paradigm. Researchers working within a positivist paradigm often use methods that involve working with two identical groups: one control and one experimental group to show cause, and effect and measurable outcomes (Burton & Bartlett, 2009). Much of this research Bishop (1997) describes as structured, predictable and measurable and often denies any personal involvement. This scientific approach involves testing an idea or theory through experiments and making generalisations from the findings.

According to Cohen et al. (2007) the positivist researcher regards “human behaviour as passive, essentially determined and controlled thereby ignoring intention, individualism and freedom” (p. 18). However these authors suggest that as researchers often strive towards more open research and focus on interpreting “the world in terms of its actors” (p. 26), they move more closely towards working within a more interpretive paradigm.

According to Radnor (2001) the purpose of interpretive research is to “clarify how interpretations and understandings are formulated, implemented and given meaning in lived situations” (p. 4) suggesting that interpretive researchers “generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). Notably, Borko, Liston, and Whitcomb (2007) have identified that since the early 1980s there has been a significant increase in the number of studies carried out using the interpretive approach in the field of teacher education. Moreover researchers such as Radnor (2001) advocate taking an interpretive stance towards the social world because it can deepen “one’s sense of basic interpretability of life itself” (p. 16). Nevertheless critics of researchers working within an interpretive paradigm believe that they may have gone too far in abandoning scientific measures of substantiation and many of their reports may in fact be inaccurate and misleading (Cohen et al., 2007).

However, while positivist and interpretive paradigms fundamentally try to make sense of phenomena through different lenses (Cohen et al., 2007), critical theory advocates for reform and change (Creswell, 2009). Those researchers operating in the critical theory paradigm who are not aiming to simply understand, retell or give accounts of participants’ situations, are actually seeking to change them (Kemmis, 2001). Neuman (cited in Mutch, 2005) states that a critical approach is a “critical process of inquiry that goes beyond surface illusions to uncover the real structures in the material world in order to help people change conditions and build a better world for themselves” (p. 64). Thus the aim of critical theorists is to assist practitioners to “arrive at a critique of their social or educational work and work settings” (Kemmis, 2001, p. 92). There have been a number of criticisms of

critical theorists, in particular that their focus is on a deliberate ideological political agenda (Cohen et al., 2007).

Whichever paradigm researchers may be working in it is imperative that they have a clear understanding of the theory and complexities of research.

### **Approaches to Research**

Three approaches to research described by Mutch (2005) and others are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods. Quantitative research uses deductive logic which involves the researcher starting with an idea or hypothesis and then gathering evidence to prove or disprove the idea. Qualitative research differs as it uses inductive logic whereby the key idea or theory arises out of the data. Research such as this is commonly called grounded theory and uses systematic procedures to generate a theory at a broad level to explain a process or action (Creswell, 2008). Finally, mixed-methods refers to research that includes a combination of both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell, 2009; Kervin, Vialle, Herrington, & Okely, 2006; Mutch, 2005). Theorists such as Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2006) advocate using a mixed-method approach even within the same study as they state a combination of both approaches will more fully answer research questions.

These approaches to research are also categorised by the type of data gathering methods each employs. For instance quantitative research deals primarily with statistics and involves gathering numerical data through experiments, tests, surveys, questionnaires and so on (Mutch, 2005). According to Creswell (2009) quantitative research is “a means for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables” (p. 4). With its origins in the natural sciences, quantitative researchers argue that the approach is more valid and reliable (Mutch, 2005).

In contrast, qualitative research which arises from social science research uses methods that gather data through methods such as participant observations, open-ended interviews and the analysis of documents. Eisenhart (2006) describes

qualitative data as powerful and able to “evoke vivid images and recapture remarkable events” (p. 567). Researchers who favour a qualitative approach argue they are able to gather rich descriptions and full pictures of what events are really like in lived situations and interactions (Mutch, 2005; Bishop, 1997; Cohen et al., 2007; Yin, 1981). As Cresswell (2009) has stated, qualitative researchers prefer a focus on individual meaning and “the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation” (p. 4).

While there has been much debate around these two research approaches Creswell (2009) cautions viewing them as opposites or dichotomies and suggests they are not as separate as they first appear. He claims they should be viewed on a continuum with the mixed-methods approach being in the middle as it includes elements of both. For instance data gathered from a questionnaire which is analysed quantitatively together with information gathered through several open-ended interviews is described by Kervin, et al. (2006) as mixed mode. These authors suggest many educational research projects now draw on both approaches to answer different questions within the research topic. In addition Gorard (2001) emphasises how “the supposed distinction between quantitative and qualitative evidence is essentially a distinction between the traditional methods for analysis rather than between underlying philosophies, paradigms, or methods of data collection (p. 85). Yet Lincoln (2010) points out that even now colleagues in the “hard sciences cannot understand why a bunch of social scientists would label a set of methods *a field*” (p. 8) despite researchers using qualitative approaches providing a considerable amount of “deep, analytic, provocative, rich material for social policy analyses and formulation” (p. 5). It is clear that whichever approach researchers select, it is important that decisions are made early in the research and that a clear planning framework is used to allow the researcher to have a clear understanding of the intent of their research.

### **Methodology: Interpretive Case Study**

For the purpose of this study a case study approach grounded in an interpretive methodology is appropriate because this will allow the researcher to gain an understanding of how the participants have experienced transitioning between

different class levels in primary schools. A case study approach has been proposed as suitable for an interpretive methodology when an in-depth investigation is needed such as for this study (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991). Importantly, authors such as Stake (2003) and Yin (2003) have designed guidelines for researchers who choose case study as an approach or methodology. Case study has been described as a “reliable methodology when executed with due care” (Tellis, 1997, p. 14) therefore I will ensure the correct guidelines and protocols for case studies will be adhered to throughout this study.

Case studies have been described by Yin (1981, 2003) as a research strategy and Creswell (2009) as a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores a programme, event, activity process on one or more individuals in depth. Yin (1981) advocates that researchers use case studies as they attempt to examine a phenomenon in its real-life context, as opposed to experiments which “deliberately divorce a phenomenon from its context”(p. 59). The literature suggests that researchers choosing a case study approach are focussed on providing a rich description of a bounded case such as a person, setting or concept (Mutch, 2005). Cohen et al. (2007) concur and point out that case studies provide researchers with unique examples which enable them to understand situations and ideas more easily than by being presented with abstract theories or principles. These authors also state that case studies aim to portray “participants’ lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for a situation” (p. 254). From these experiences theoretical statements can be made, however Cohen et al. (2007) do caution that these statements must be supported by evidence which has been derived from generalisations. Furthermore, Eisenhart (2006) points out that in case studies there are always concerns about “how well the descriptions, concepts, excerpts, and quotes selected represent the people or events of interest” (p. 567).

Researchers using a case study approach have an ongoing dilemma when analysing data to decide what to represent and how to do this. It is important that the data gathered are represented in a way that is valid and reliable. This requires researchers using case studies to “establish the trustworthiness of their representations by illustrating that they had ‘been there’ in the field and had taken

seriously the sense-making systems of the people under study” (Eisenhart, 2006, p. 579).

Three types of case studies have been outlined by Stake (2003) as intrinsic, instrumental and collective. An intrinsic case study is used when the researcher wants to gain a better understanding of one particular case because it is of specific interest to them while an instrumental case study is one in which the case is of secondary interest as it is examined primarily to provide insight into an issue. A collective study, as used for this study, is where a number of cases are studied to investigate a phenomenon, population or general condition (Stake, 2003).

It has been recommended by Gorard (2001) and Stake (2003) that before deciding on a suitable methodology the topic and overarching questions should first be written. For this study the following questions are the overarching questions for the topic described as *primary school teachers crossing boundaries and transitioning between different class levels in primary schools*:

- i) What experiences have teachers had of transitioning between different class levels in primary schools during the span of their teaching careers?
- ii) Is this practice deliberately implemented in primary schools?
- iii) How is this practice implemented in schools?

These overarching questions will form the basis of the case studies in order to find out more about teachers’ experiences and gain an understanding of their individual interpretations of transitioning between different class levels in primary schools. This methodology is deemed suitable in seeking to understand and portray the participants’ thoughts and ideas (Burton & Bartlett, 2009).

## **Ethical Considerations**

### **Maintaining Quality**

There is much to be considered from the beginning of any research project to ensure quality is maintained including in particular the reliability, validity and

credibility of the research. It is important that ethical approval is gained and the researcher understands that “in research, benefits to some do not justify burdens on others” (Wilkinson, 2001, p. 15). To maintain quality and trustworthiness in the study I will adhere to the ethical regulations and guidelines as set out in the Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations (University of Waikato, 2009). This document clearly sets out the ethical responsibilities of the researcher towards the participant. Ethical guidelines such as these are designed to help researchers understand the importance of ethics in research.

### **Cultural Considerations**

For researchers to have a real understanding of these and other key elements which relate to the notion of respect of both parties, they should be reflexive in their practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). The researcher must critically reflect and be alert to the understanding of competence, voluntarism, full information, comprehension, and other ethical issues such as privacy, honesty and reporting back. There may also be significant cultural issues that need to be considered and fully understood to ensure there is a high level of respect maintained between participant and researcher. Reflexivity requires the researcher to be aware and sensitive to each participant’s culture and values and how the researcher in turn may respond to these (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

This study may have cultural and social implications for some or all of the participants. During the semi-structured interviews participants will be asked to respond to questions about their teaching experiences across a range of different class levels within their current or previous school context. There may be reluctance from some participants to expand on or make comments about specific issues, especially if they consider such comments could be construed as criticisms of school culture, leadership or have the potential to affect their relationships with school colleagues. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest it is important that researchers gain a deep understanding of both the cultural context and ways the participants have experienced the world. I will be sensitive and respectful towards

the participants and assure them their responses and identity will be kept confidential.

### **Selection of Participants**

For this study a list of teachers who have taught a range of different class levels will be generated as possible participants. My knowledge of Waikato schools which has been established from my own teaching experience, University of Waikato liaison work and recent participation in another research project will be drawn on to generate the list. Four teachers will be selected and contacted by phone or email and invited to participate in this study. Once each participant has given verbal consent they will be formally invited to participate by letter (Appendix A) and asked to complete and sign a consent form (Appendix B). As Bell and Cowie (1999) found when the research purpose has been clearly outlined and the information is clear, people will be positive about participating.

### **Informed Consent**

In this study it is imperative that the autonomy and dignity of the participants is maintained throughout and giving informed consent is an integral part of this (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Participants will be well informed and provided with detailed information in the letter of information (Appendix A). This will ensure they are aware of the nature of their involvement and any possible implications of being involved in the study. It is important that participants are given all of the relevant information about the research process, are able to make informed decisions about their role and are under no pressure to participate (Cohen et al., 2007). To ensure the participant's rights are being considered Cohen et al. (2007) suggest the following four key elements be present: competence, voluntarism, full information and comprehension. Competence refers to researchers' ethical responsibility to include only those participants who are capable of making up their own mind about participating. It is important too that the participants who have volunteered to participate in a research project have chosen to do so freely. Ensuring participants have full information means the researcher must outline all information about the research and participants must have a full understanding or

level of comprehension around what they are agreeing to and what the study entails in order to give their informed consent (Cohen et al., 2007).

### **Researcher – Participant Relationship**

It has been stated by Kervin et al. (2006) that any power relationships between the researcher and participants should be neutralised. One way of achieving this suggested by Crossley and Vulliamy (1997) is for researchers to reveal as much as possible about themselves before the research begins. They state this “starts the process of familiarity which makes conversation – rather than interrogation possible” (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1997, p. 154). Avoiding any harm to the participants should be paramount in researchers’ minds (Burton & Bartlett, 2009). In addition Kervin et al. (2006) recommend that participants are assured anonymity or confidentiality. Anonymity is “when the identity of the participant is unknown to anybody, including the researcher” and confidentiality is “when the researcher is aware of the identity of participants but does not reveal their identity in reporting data” (p. 5). In this study, although I will know the participants professionally they will be assured confidentiality by the use of pseudonyms throughout the study and in the final thesis.

Throughout all parts of a research project there may be challenges placed on the relationship between researcher and participant. In particular the reporting back stage may be where challenges and tensions arise and need to be considered and addressed. Ball (1984) discussed some of the challenges in maintaining positive relationships during his research and outlined that although the participants were given information and gave their consent it became apparent that the majority of them had very little understanding of what the findings would produce. This led to tensions in the relationships between researcher and participants and is an example of how in some instances problems may arise even though prior informed consent by the participant is given (Cohen et al., 2007). Although more comprehensive discussion about sociological research may have avoided this from occurring, in some cases it may be unavoidable. As Ball (1984) asserted, “any case study which taps into these facets of institutional life would seem to stand little chance of consensual agreement” (p. 91).

## **Research Process**

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Interviews can vary between highly structured and very formal to being quite unstructured and almost like an everyday conversation (Burton & Bartlett, 2009). A structured interview is where the researcher has a set of questions to ask all the participants and does not deviate from those (Lodico et al., 2006). In a semi-structured interview the researcher also has a prepared a list of questions, however they often probe further to clarify and gain a better understanding from the participant. Finally in a non-structured interview, the researcher may have a few topics they wish to cover and the interview takes on a more conversational approach (Lodico et al., 2006). Desimone and Carlson Le Floch (2004) point out that the strengths of cognitive interviews allows participants to “think-aloud” or talk through their thoughts processes as they answer questions (p. 4). In addition, Bishop (1997) pointed out that the interview can be used to construct and develop stories from shared experiences, particularly in indigenous contexts. These stories are developed through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in a reflexive manner that encourages the “construction of meaning/explanations about the lived experiences of the research participants” (Bishop, 1997, p. 41).

For this study, when considering the semi-structured interview as a method of gathering information I understand my role as the interpreter (Cohen et al., 2007) around the notion of teaching different class levels. The semi-structured interview was chosen as the most suitable method for gathering information because it will allow the participants to construct, clarify and develop their ideas and stories (Cohen et al., 2007).

Mutch (2005) points out it is advisable to conduct an interview in an environment that is quiet, comfortable and free from interruptions as do Cohen et al. (2007) who state that researchers should ensure the interview is a “positive, pleasant and beneficial experience” for participants (p. 365). Therefore for this study I will ensure the participants are given the opportunity to choose where they would like

the interview to take place. I will also ensure that a positive and respectful relationship is established with participants and I am always open and honest (Robinson-Pant, 2005). Alternative methods of gathering data such as telephone interviews or questionnaires do not give the participants and researchers the adaptability to investigate motives and feelings (Bell, 2005).

According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990) informal interviews are a way of collecting narrative data where both parties have a voice. This research method is becoming more prevalent in educational research as it is recognised that people have stories to tell about the ways they have experienced the world. One of the strengths of interviewing as a method of collecting data is that researchers are able to pick up non-verbal clues and “follow hunches and different unexpected lines of enquiry” as they arise during the interview (Robinson-Pant, 2005, p. 94). This is also described by Radnor (2001) as “going with the flow” of the interview (p. 62). Furthermore interviews allow researchers to take responsibility for the dynamics of the situation such as motivating participants to “discuss their thoughts, feelings and experiences” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 362).

A number of weaknesses have however been identified in the use of interviews to gather data. One example is the researcher’s perceptions of the research topic. It could be easy in an informal interview for the participants to “provide information based on what they think the interviewer wants to hear” (Best & Kahn, 1998, p. 254). For instance, I am aware that my own experience of teaching different class levels has shaped my own ideas on this topic, therefore it will be important I ensure I do not hold any preconceived ideas on the outcomes of the research (Best & Kahn, 1998). Another weakness of interviews is that a significant amount of time can be required to ensure the questions are appropriately worded (Bell, 2005) which may restrict the number of participants I am able to interview in order to make my interviewing manageable. As the interviews for this study will be semi-structured this means there will be a variation between each interview, which may make collecting data more time consuming than using a more standardised or quantitative method of data gathering.

Each participant will be involved in one semi-structured interview of no longer than 60 minutes. The interviews will be digitally recorded for two reasons. Firstly it will allow me to be fully focused on the interview (Kervin et al., 2006) and secondly I will have the ability to listen to the interview at a later time to check on responses I may be unclear about (Burton & Bartlett, 2009). I will also take notes during the interview because as Bell (2005) and Radnor (2001) state, this allows the researcher to read at a later date what has been said to clarify any responses they are unsure about. Bogdan and Biklen (cited in Mutch, 2005) describe these as field notes and explain them as; descriptive, reflective, and analytic. Descriptive field notes which are particularly important in case studies help the researcher to set the scene and add to the rich description of the data. Reflective field notes help the researcher to respond to the data gathering in a more personal manner and incorporate body language for instance, that recordings cannot. Finally analytic field notes help the researcher to begin to form patterns and themes during and immediately after the interview (Mutch, 2005).

Semi-structured interviews require researchers to practice what Radnor (2001) describes as active listening skills. The researcher needs to create an atmosphere in which the participant will feel able to talk freely and be understood. In addition the researcher must be focused on what the participant is saying and “encourage examples, explanations and expansion of what is initially said” (Radnor, 2001, p. 60). This will allow the researcher to gather rich data from the participants that will enable them to build up a clear picture of their experiences in context.

### **Interview Questions**

In an interview there are various ways of asking questions such as direct or indirect and different kinds of questions such as general or specific (Cohen et al., 2007). There are also questions that ask for a factual answer and those that invite an opinion from the participant. It is important that researchers are clear about what information they require from the participants and ask questions that have a purpose, are specific and give the appropriate data (Burton & Bartlett, 2009). Fowler (1998) urges researchers to evaluate questions routinely and states there is little to be gained by “designing questions in haphazard ways” (p. 372).

Open-ended questions are often used in interviews because they allow the interviewer to probe further to get clarification (Lodico et al., 2006). In addition, as Bishop (1997) has stated, open-ended questions within semi-structured, in-depth interviews encourage free interaction and discussion. For this study however, it will be necessary to include some closed demographic and background questions early in the interview, such as years of teaching, class levels taught and for how long. The interview questions (Appendix C) will be provided to the participants before the interview to allow them time to reflect on them.

For any interview trialling the questions first will give the researcher the opportunity to receive valuable feedback, eliminate difficult wording and increase the reliability and validity of the interview (Cohen et al., 2007). In this research, before the data gathering commences, a trial of the interview questions will be used. This has been suggested by Lodico et al. (2006) as an effective way to improve the quality of data. The trial will be carried out with participants similar to those who will be interviewed in the study. It is intended to provide important information such as how long each interview may take, in addition to any questions that lack clarity.

### **Data Analysis**

Creswell (2009) points out that after deciding on a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approach a design plan should be undertaken to include the methods for gathering and analysing the data. Similarly Cohen et al. (2007) propose researchers include how they intend to analyse data when they are in the planning stages of how the data will be gathered and Gorard (2001) suggests researchers first consider in some detail how they will analyse their data before they set out to collect it.

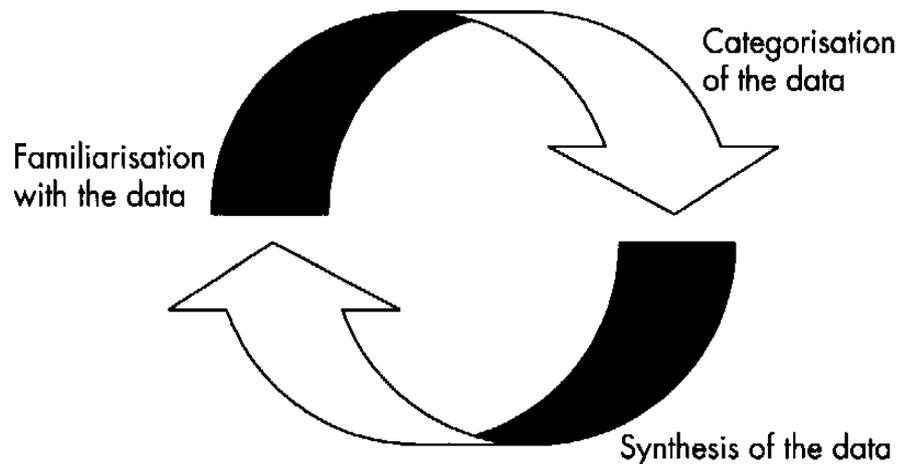
Bell (2005) asserts that raw data taken from an interview needs to be recorded, analysed, categorized and interpreted before it means anything. The priority for any researcher Burton and Bartlett (2009) stress is to ensure they have “taken the meaning ‘fairly’ from the interviews (p. 93). In addition, Cohen et al. (2007) state

that analysing and interpreting data involves making sense of the “participants’ definitions of the particular situation, noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities” (p. 184). It is important that the researcher decides on a method that is efficient. It is important to note there is no one correct way to analyse or interpret data, however Cohen et al. (2007) cautions researchers to abide by the issue of “fitness for purpose” (p. 461). This refers to the researcher being clear about their purpose for gathering the data and about the way in which they want the analysis to be written up. In addition, the tools for analysis of data are mostly determined by the methods used to collect the data (Kervin et al., 2006).

This study adopts an approach which is described by Mutch (2005) as “thematic analysis” (p. 176). Unlike quantitative strategies, which pre-determine categories, the thematic analysis is a qualitative strategy that takes its categories from the data. The key idea of the thematic analysis is to examine the data in a way that looks for patterns and themes (Mutch, 2005). This approach is almost certainly interpretive as Cohen et al. (2007) points out it is not a totally accurate representation as would be found in positive approach using quantitative data. While gathering data through semi-structured interviews I will be working in an interpretive paradigm to interpret how the participants make choices (Burton & Bartlett, 2009) about teaching different class levels.

In the case of qualitative research such as this, usually the researcher aims to generate theories and hypotheses from the data that emerge (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1997). These authors state that there are no shortcuts to thematic analysis and suggest researchers should “saturate the categories” by repeatedly reading data to identify possible recurring themes and then scrutinising to see if a theme does in fact become “saturated” (p. 158). They recommend such an approach as researchers can be tempted to select out only those quotations and themes that may match an alternative appealing framework. Thus a systematic approach should be taken to analysing data (Radnor, 2001). It has been suggested by Kervin et al. (2006) that in order for researchers to become familiar with the data they have gathered they need to spend time organising and “playing with the data they have collected” (p. 140). They also suggest researchers should read their

data over and over again to give them an understanding of it as a whole. The data analysis spiral developed by Kervin et al. (2006, p. 140) will be used in this study (see figure 1). It includes a number of considerations which have been identified by Creswell (2002) to support the analysis process. The spiral demonstrates how the analysis of data is intended to be recursive, and that researchers may find a need to go back and revisit an earlier process to support their analysis.



**Figure 1. The data analysis spiral**

For this study a draft summary of each interview will be written using notes taken in the field and listening to the recorded interviews. The participants will be sent a copy of the draft written summary of their responses and invited to read, review and make comment prior to further analysis and reporting to ensure the summary accurately reflects their responses. After all participants have confirmed the accuracy of their summary, they will be examined and labels or key words highlighted. These key words may include “repeated words, strong emotions, metaphors, images, emphasised items, key phrases, or significant concepts” (Mutch, 2005, p. 177). A method of coding will be used to group or categorise these themes or ideas to help me through this process (Burton & Bartlett, 2009). While some researchers advocate deciding on a few broad categories for the coding before the interview takes place, (which can save time) others prefer not to place any reliance on preconceived ideas before undertaking the interviews (Bell, 2005). This is what I will endeavour to do

## **Presenting Results**

Presenting of data, findings and new knowledge is an integral part of any educational research and it is important that representations of research evidence are trustworthy (Eisenhart, 2006). The findings from the four case studies in this research will reveal how the participants experienced transitioning between different class levels in primary schools. Careful attention will be taken to ensure the findings are presented in a disciplined manner and that the intended meaning or truths from the participants are accurately conveyed to the reader (Bell, 2005). Researchers such as Denzin and Lincoln (1994) stress that it is expected in educational research the presenting of new knowledge requires clear and explicit reporting of data and procedures, and adequate methodological documentation. In addition these authors caution researchers that their new findings and knowledge comes with an “added burden and greater exposure to the judgements of one’s professional peers” (p. 480). These findings may stimulate debate and discussion about whether this practice has implications in terms of student learning and teacher effectiveness. In addition, as with much educational research, there may be further opportunities for publications and additional research (Mutch, 2005). It will be important to be aware that the findings and new knowledge from this research will be public documents and subject to ongoing critical review by my peers, therefore careful planning and safeguards are required to ensure they are protected from misuse or abuse at all times (Cohen et al., 2007).

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

This study revealed interesting and at times surprising findings about teachers transitioning between different class levels in primary schools. The four participants in the study had transitioned between different class levels in primary schools. Data were gathered through a semi-structured interview of approximately one hour with each participant. An interview summary was then written and the participants were invited to comment to ensure their comments had been accurately represented. In this chapter the participants are referred to as Teachers A, B, C and D.

The number of years teaching varied from three to eighteen years for the four female participants. The schools they had taught at comprised small rural to large urban. All of the participant's transitions between class levels were significant with three of them having experience teaching across all levels of the primary school. One participant had taught at junior and senior levels but not the middle school area. The reasons why the four participants had transitioned across class levels varied and these findings are presented below.

While Teachers B and C had initiated the transitions themselves, Teacher D had been asked to transition by the school principal. The reasons for Teacher A transitioning to a new class level for were in all instances associated with her moving to a new school rather than seeking the transition itself:

*Each time I have changed levels I have also changed schools. This was not a deliberate decision to change levels. Rather I was changing school first. You are not only learning your way around a new school, but you are also learning how to work with different staff. Moving within the same school would have been easier.*

Although Teacher B's transitions to new class levels also occurred when she changed to a new school, she outlined that she was motivated by career advancement:

*In a round about way I requested the moves because I applied for new jobs or positions that came with new levels. They were my choice. Change of school, taking on leadership.*

Three of the participants believed transitioning between different class levels was easier when moving from the junior to senior level than the reverse. Teacher A described how transitioning from seniors to juniors was difficult and stated:

*If I was to do the move in reverse I think it would be easier to move up than down - younger children up to older children.*

Likewise Teacher B described how she found transitioning from the junior to senior level easier than vice versa:

*Some moves were harder than others. It kind of depended on which way I went. When I started and moved from level 2 curriculum then up to 3 and then 4 it was a kind of 'made sense progression'. I found it difficult after spending five years in that senior level to go back down. From Year 7 and 8 down to Year 3 and 4 was hard. I went from some children being 13 back down to some children who were only six year olds.*

And Teacher C gave the following example of transitioning between class levels from seniors to juniors:

*I have had to learn the nurturing aspect very quickly. I was scared I was going to be really tough on the students and I wouldn't have the patience with young children.*

Teacher D's transition from the junior level to senior was also challenging:

*I was very scared and thought I was going to fail completely. The higher level freaked me out and what the children were capable of.*

She went on to discuss her first week of teaching at the senior level and her feelings of apprehension.

*I thought they weren't going to listen to me, but they didn't say boo. It turned out they thought I was really scary.*

After summarizing and analysing the data gathered three key themes emerged: *benefits of transitioning between different class levels; the impact of school culture and leadership on teachers transitioning; and the role of mentors in teachers' transitions.* An overarching principle of teachers as *critically reflective practitioners* also emerged and became central to this study.

## **Benefits of Transitioning Between Different Class Levels**

### **Personal and Professional Growth**

The participants in the study all believed they had benefited from transitioning between different class levels both personally and professionally.

*There were definitely benefits for me from moving levels. It has been a positive experience for me. I don't think there have been any negatives or set backs for me personally or professionally from changing levels. The experiences have been huge. I don't remember it being hard. I loved the experience. (Teacher A)*

*It's been good. I think it helps you gain respect from other staff members when you are willing to change levels. It gave me a greater understanding and perhaps empathy for teachers at either end of the spectrum. (Teacher B)*

*My ideas have changed from when I started teaching, in two years I have learnt so much. I believe teachers need to move around different levels to keep their*

*professional development up. I think transitioning between different class levels is a good thing, it keeps you upskilled. (Teacher C)*

*I think it's good. It's nice for beginning teachers especially to get the experience of different levels. When you are actually there doing it, it's really not all that hard. It helps you to advance in your teaching career. (Teacher D)*

It was evident these teachers were all motivated, reflective practitioners who sought challenges through transitioning. This was apparent in the following comments by Teachers A and B:

*I am not scared to change levels because it is just another challenge. Some people don't like changing levels because it is a change, but change doesn't bother me.*

*After two years I need to either change schools or change levels, if I am doing something I like to do it properly and everything goes into doing it. I then start getting bored. At times I have said why can't I just be happy at this level because I am doing it well and could actually work a bit less, but I can't do it, I just get bored. For me it was to keep me interested in teaching.*

Similarly Teacher C stated how she needed a change of class levels and described how she felt:

*The junior class came with the opportunity to do Reading Recovery also and this appealed to me because I felt I was in a bit of a rut having done the same level for two years.*

### **Professional Development and Learning**

The participants were all very committed to the profession and felt transitioning between different class levels was just one of the many changes that they could embrace. Teacher A stated that the nature of teaching required teachers to be adaptable and willing to make many changes:

*I have to make changes with each different class and year to year they are different. A class could be boy heavy for example and I would just adjust accordingly. Some people do not cope and become very complacent and lazy and the effort levels just go down. With change you need a bit of drive and a bit of foresight. You also have to be prepared to make mistakes. For those who aren't prepared to make changes or don't like change there is a bit of a question mark anyway.*

There was a common belief among the participants that having experience of teaching different class levels was also beneficial in terms of career advancement.

*Generally if you have taught in a range of areas it would make you more employable than someone that has only taught in one area. (Teacher A)*

Teacher D agreed and stated:

*I think if you transition to different levels and do well it helps you to advance in your teaching career.*

### **Knowledge of the Curriculum**

There was clear evidence that the participants in the study felt their knowledge of *The New Zealand Curriculum* had improved significantly as a result of teaching different class levels. There was a strong feeling that teaching different class levels had required them to become more familiar with the curriculum document and the levels within it in order to meet all the children's needs. Teacher A explained:

*You broaden your whole spectrum of teaching. You understand the curriculum more. You understand where they have got to get to and where they should have come from. Now it might be a little easier with national standards that you are a bit more 'au fait' with. A bit more teacher judgement came into it then [before national standards]. You get to know the curriculum levels much better, I wouldn't have looked beyond the level 1/2/3 when I was teaching new entrants –*

*Year 4. I was probably honing in on that area and I would have seen that level 4 [of the curriculum] as the next teachers' job.*

Teacher B agreed that her knowledge of the curriculum had increased significantly as a result of transitioning between class levels and stated:

*It also gave me a greater insight into the range of what children can do than if I had stayed in one level. You see where they have come from and where they are going to. We need to understand what it is like at all levels, we cannot build a school if we only have one view or are only coming in from one aspect of the curriculum. It's the [curriculum] levels you need to know because you can have children working at all levels in your class.*

She explained by giving the following example:

*You can have a 12 year old who is working at level 2. This doesn't mean just picking up work suitable for a 7 year old because it's too babyish often for a 12 year old. You have to know the level 2 stuff but you have to know how to make it fit or appeal for the older student.*

### **Teaching Practice**

In addition to having increased knowledge of the curriculum the participants also articulated how their teaching practice had developed considerably. This required their engagement in critical reflection about their teaching beliefs and techniques. The following comment from Teacher C demonstrates her level of critical reflection about her teaching practice:

*I have really had to re-think about how I teach. I had programmed myself the last two years in a standard way - this is the way I teach, this is what I do and now I have had to re-think reading, writing, maths, everything. I had become quite confident in my teaching and now I feel a bit like, is this right, is this wrong? I have to break it down like how to actually do the basic [teaching] strategy. I am now questioning myself as everything I did and all my professional development*

*was around level 3. I now question myself and my knowledge of lower levels. I now think did I let the children down who were working below level 3? I have had to relook at the curriculum, at everything.*

She continued on to state that:

*Learning the new levels and how to teach reading for example at the new level has been really good professional development.*

In addition Teacher D discussed how she was able to transfer some knowledge from one level to another:

*What I brought with me from the juniors [knowledge] certainly helped. I had no idea how much work they [the children] could do, both quantity and quality. It gives you a good idea of teaching across the levels and a good connection and understanding of the whole school.*

She went on:

*I found it [the new level] quite challenging. There is such a wide range of levels within Year 7 and 8 and I learnt you can't just give them 'baby books'. It has made me learn a lot more things. Academically I think I have moved up. I have found the maths challenging, I have had to study it before I teach it. It has made me think I want to go and do some more study.*

The participants talked about transitioning between class levels giving them greater confidence to work with children at all age levels, particularly in terms of behaviour management. There was a general feeling among all the participants that their experiences of teaching a range of levels improved their confidence. Teacher B gave the following scenario as an example:

*I think teachers of junior children are often intimidated by older children. It is the behaviour management side that they are worried about. I thought when I taught*

*Year 5 and 6 that Year 7 and 8 children were stroppy. There is a 'stigma' attached to this level, or the 'oldest' age group in the school, whatever that happens to be. Once you are in that older level I notice the children can be quite rude to the teacher of junior children where they wouldn't be to teachers of senior children. They often don't respect these teachers, or maybe the teachers don't respect them either. Duty time is where I notice it. They [the teachers of junior children] don't want to deal with issues and will come and find the team leaders or DP to manage the situation. I don't know if the junior teachers come in too heavy or don't listen to the children or what.*

And although Teacher D said she was initially apprehensive about transitioning to a higher class level she now felt the experience had been positive:

*It turned out alright. I have now got more strategies and self-confidence to deal with challenges that are thrown at me. I still freak out a bit, but not as much.*

## **The Impact of School Culture and Leadership**

There was a common belief among the four participants that the practice of teachers transitioning between different class levels was embedded in the culture of some schools but not in others. Teacher B compared two schools that viewed teachers transitioning between levels quite differently:

*At my last school there wasn't enough movement and it became too much 'their way'. Teachers stayed in the same positions for long periods and some teachers felt frustrated because they couldn't move levels. I put it out there that I would like to try Year 2 or 3 but I was told it was not going to happen. In the school I am in now I just took it as a 'given'. There was already a culture of 'changing levels'. It was just something that I knew before I started at the school. I was even asked at my interview, 'how do you feel about teaching at different levels?'*

This culture had also been encountered by Teacher D who added how she had observed the principal transitioning teachers between class levels. She articulated

how she was expecting to be transitioned to a new level after two years at the school:

*I knew the principal would move me because he likes people to do a couple of years in a level and then he moves them. I think it's because he thinks teachers get stale. I knew this from observations and it's just 'his' thing. It's just a culture of moving at this school.*

However Teacher A challenged this practice being mandatory and felt that some teachers are best suited to specific class levels. She pointed out that it was important that those teachers who stay teaching at one level stayed professionally current and informed. She believed it could be detrimental in some cases to transition these teachers and explained this view:

*I do see some people are best suited to particular areas and those teachers transitioning and changing may have more of a negative affect than a positive one. So long as teachers are moving with the times and staying professionally updated and keeping up-to-date as a principal I would be ok with them staying in one level.*

*There are two sides to it [transitioning] – it also depends on the culture of the school. I don't believe it should be policy that you change levels every two years for example. There needs to be a balance and that is where good leadership comes in.*

Teacher B had been in a leadership position and involved in the practice of transitioning teachers between different class levels. She explained some of the factors that were considered:

*Although I have been on a management team that has told teachers they had to move levels, this was for lots of reasons. You had to look at the school as a whole. We looked at ability and behaviour of particular groups of students. The relationships between teachers and team makeup were also looked at. Sometimes as a management team we could see some teachers needed a shift for their own*

*professional development. Sometimes we could see the potential in teachers that they couldn't see themselves and they needed a 'nudge' to move level.*

She added that she was unaware of how the practice of teachers transitioning had implications on the school as a whole until she had been in a leadership team. She went on to explain how teachers experiencing different class levels helps to build school capacity:

*It wasn't until I got into the team leader and deputy principal positions that I got out and talked to other colleagues about this kind of thing and realised how differently other schools did things. To be a whole school everyone needs to be there as a team and not just worrying about their own little area.*

Clearly the practice of teachers transitioning needs to be managed carefully and this was discussed by the participants at length. There was a general feeling among all the participants that school leaders should collaborate with their teachers about the reasons for the transition. Although Teacher A had initiated the changes herself she made the following comment:

*If I was told I was being moved I would be okay as long as I knew the reasons why and I felt they were very good reasons.*

Teacher D reiterated that it was important for teachers to understand why they were being transitioned to another level and she explained how she felt unsure about why she was being moved:

*I cannot really remember the rationale being made clear to me why I was being moved. This could be done better. For example another teacher has just been moved and she is also unclear why. We think we have worked out why she has been moved, but we could be wrong. If you are not told you can think you have done something wrong or haven't been doing a good job.*

In addition to reflecting on their own experiences, the participants had also considered the practice of primary school teachers transitioning between different levels in a broad sense. Teacher A made some interesting observations about some class levels requiring teachers with specific skills:

*There are certain areas that require teachers of more skill than others. I don't believe everybody can teach Year 7 and 8. I think there are some people who would flounder and be absolutely out of their field and I have seen it happen. I also think not everyone can teach new entrants. Maybe that's why it's harder to get decent teachers at each end of the scale rather than teachers in the middle. I firmly believe that. Certainly if I was in the position of employing staff for example for Year 7 and 8 position they would have to show some really good skills to be able to teach there. I think that is where a lot of breakdowns occur before they move onto high school.*

### **The Role of Mentors in Teachers' Transitions**

In addition to the impact leaders had on teachers' experiences of transitioning between different class levels, the participants also talked at length about the importance of support through mentoring. They all described how having opportunities to share ideas, resources and be supported through their transitions was integral to ensuring they were positive experiences. Teacher A described her first transition experience as a positive one:

*I had a senior teacher and team who helped me. We worked quite closely together. We did a lot of observing of each other in the new syndicate just so everyone knew what each other were doing. It made the transition quite easy.*

In contrast she explained how her next transition was quite different due to less support:

*It wasn't quite so easy, there wasn't the whole collaborative working together feel to it like I was used to. I did feel like a bit of a 'stand alone' person.*

Teacher B agreed and stated how when transitioning between different class levels she was given a significant amount of support which she found invaluable:

*Towards the end of the year you are able to go and spend time in the level you are moving to. The teachers in the level you are moving to show you all the resources etc and make things available for you. You are able to go and spend time in the class and observe these teachers too. This is not formal in anyway but informal mentoring. Because everyone is a team it is just done and I think it is done well. It was done for me and I then did it for other teachers. When teachers feel supported through the transition it makes them willing to change levels.*

This was reiterated by Teacher C who had chosen to undertake Reading Recovery training in her third year of teaching knowing this required her to transition to another class level and explained this was because:

*I have got the support in my school to cope with the changing of levels.*

And Teacher D described the support she had from mentors prior to transitioning:

*My ex deputy principal had been a teacher of seniors and I knew her as a teacher of juniors and I thought – if she can do it so can I. I was encouraged to spend time in the Year 7 and 8 classes before I moved and I started looking at the resources and asking questions of the teachers in the area. I was probably being really annoying but it was really helpful.*

However she raised the importance of teachers having mentor support after they transition to a new class level. As her tutor teacher left the school at the same time as she transitioned to a new class level she described feeling:

*...a bit abandoned with I first moved I missed my team. I found support in another colleague and the DP which has been really important. In the initial weeks starting in Year 7 and 8 I relied on my colleague who had taught in the upper levels for guidance in regards to providing feedback to the students.*

These findings are discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

In this study of teachers transitioning between different class levels in primary schools the following three broad themes emerged: *benefits of transitioning between different class levels; the impact of school culture and leadership on teachers transitioning, and the role of mentors in teachers' transitions*. The first theme, *benefits of transitioning between different class levels* clearly emphasises the benefits that the participants gained from teaching a range of different class levels. Within this theme the following factors are discussed: *personal and professional growth, professional development and learning, knowledge of the curriculum and teaching practice*. The second theme, *the impact of school culture and leadership on teachers transitioning* highlights the ways school culture and leaders impact on teachers transitioning. In addition the differences in school cultures and the ways leaders manage the process of teachers transitioning are discussed. Finally, the third theme of *the role of mentors in teachers' transitions* draws attention to the critical role that mentors play before, during and after teachers' transition between class levels. The importance of teachers who are transitioning between different classes being given opportunities to share ideas and resources with mentors is discussed.

Transitioning between different class levels appears to require and encourage teachers to engage in the kind of ongoing critical reflection that has been identified by Brookfield (1995) about themselves and their teaching practice. The finding that the participants in this study are *critically reflective practitioners* permeates all of the identified themes. It is regarded as a key principle that underpins the study and is integrated into each theme in the following discussion.

While the findings indicate the participants in the study were at different stages they were all *critically reflective practitioners*. Brookfield (1995) has suggested

six reasons why teachers need to become critically reflective practitioners; it leads them to take informed action, to develop a rationale for practice, to avoid self-laceration, to become emotionally grounded, to enliven classrooms and increase democratic trust with students and colleagues.

The participants in this study seem to engage in critical reflection, be grounded emotionally and have what Gardner et al. (2005) have described as a sound awareness of themselves, both personally and professionally. In addition what they value as educators and the beliefs they hold gives them a firm foundation for the critical decision making and taking action phases of reflective practice (Gardner et al., 2005). It must be pointed out however, that at the outset of this study it was not clear whether transitioning between different class levels had led to a more refined level of critical reflection and therefore a greater emphasis on professional development, or whether these factors empowered the participants to transition in the first instance. This study has revealed that in fact both seem to apply. In many instances teachers decided to transition between class levels as a result of their engagement in critical reflection for a range of purposes such as moving to a new school, career advancement or their own motivation.

Using an interpretive case study methodology proved to be an effective approach for this study. The case study approach, which Cresswell (2009) has described as a strategy of inquiry was used to explore how the participants experienced transitioning between different class levels. This approach allowed the participants to share examples from their lived experiences (Cohen et al., 2007) of transitioning. Importantly, the interpretive case study methodology provided the framework for me as the principal researcher to interpret and make sense of the participants' experiences, and confirm my hunches about teachers transitioning between different class levels (Creswell, 2009).

The semi-structured interviews were used to gather rich data and enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences of transitioning between class levels. The open-ended questions of the semi-structured interviews, which were designed to encourage the participants to engage in discussion

(Bishop, 1997) with me, also allowed them to construct meanings of their experiences during the interview (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2009).

The key principle and three themes identified from the data were derived using a process which Kervin et al. (2006) describes as a “data analysis spiral” (p. 140). This systematic approach to analysing the data proved to be suitable for the study as it provided a clear process that I was able to follow. As a recursive model (Kervin et al., 2006) it allowed aspects such as the ethics application, interview questions, recordings and summaries to be revisited. For this study I did frequently return to the recordings and summaries for clarification. The data analysis spiral has been illustrated and discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

## **Benefits of Transitioning Between Different Class Levels**

### **Personal and Professional Growth**

It is essential that teachers continue to grow personally and professionally in order to remain fulfilled and effective. In the context of this discussion personal growth includes teachers’ self-confidence, motivation, enthusiasm, and self-belief while professional growth refers to teaching techniques and strategies. Many teachers have dispositions which lead them to seek opportunities for personal and professional growth while others prefer the security of the same environment, albeit it for a range of reasons (Bullough & Baughman, 1995). The findings indicate that the participants in this study became highly effective teachers at specific class levels within a relatively short time. Three of the four participants articulated that once they had become proficient teaching at a particular level they needed new challenges. Not content to teach at just one level they wanted to continue to grow personally and professionally as learners and teachers. Notably these participants viewed transitioning to different class levels as one way to keep themselves motivated for teaching. According to Bullough and Baughman (1995), teachers such as these have a “knack for locating within the school opportunities for developing their expertise” (p. 475). The fourth participant initially transitioned to a new class level because she was asked to by her principal, but she

agreed with the other participants that the experience had resulted in significant personal and professional growth for her. For these teachers, transitioning between different class levels provided many opportunities to reflect on their practice, further develop their expertise as classroom teachers, increase their professional knowledge and experience personal growth.

All four participants were clearly empowered by their experiences of transitioning between different class levels and they had benefitted in a number of ways. They felt the benefits had been significant and that there had been very few negative aspects associated with the transitions. Although their reasons for transitioning varied, the participants spoke enthusiastically about them. Teacher A for example had moved to a number of different schools for personal reasons and had applied for teaching positions at all class levels. She explained how gaining employment was her main priority each time she relocated and the class level was not really a consideration. Teacher A pointed out that when she started teaching at a new school there were a number of factors that needed to be considered in addition to teaching at a new class level. These included learning new systems, working with a new team and learning about a new school culture, which made the transitions more complex than just changing levels within the same school. Although Teacher A felt transitioning to a new class level within the same school would have been easier, she enjoyed the challenges. Experiencing different systems, teaching teams, school cultures and class levels had been empowering for her. With each transition Teacher A reflected critically on her own practice thus in her view gaining a better understanding of herself and her ability to manage change. As Feldman (2005) asserts, moving from one educational setting to another is complicated and requires teachers to engage in critical reflection in order to develop a deep understanding of themselves. Teacher A explained how she frequently reflected on her classes and her teaching. She gave the example of a class that may have significantly more boys than girls and how she would reflect about the possible implications of this gender imbalance and could then take informed action and develop a rationale for practice (Brookfield, 1995). While this is not necessarily strong evidence of critical reflection it does demonstrate

that Teacher A is beginning to develop the habit of reflection on her practice in the way that Brookfield (1995) has described.

By contrast, Teacher B had made a deliberate decision to seek employment at a specific school because she knew the school encouraged teachers to experience teaching at different class levels. She explained how she saw this as an opportunity to gain more experience (at teaching a range of different class levels) and that she also saw it as a way to advance her career. While all of her transition experiences had been very positive, in particular she felt she had gained a wider view and better understanding of the needs of students and teachers as a result of teaching a range of different class levels. Seah (2003) claims transitioning may provide teachers with an empowering tool and “sustain their positive professional health” (p. 10). For Teacher B, moving to a school that promoted teachers transitioning between class levels was a good decision. On reflection she felt it had contributed to her winning a leadership position in the same school at a later date.

The participants’ experiences support Carr’s (2006) view that those teachers who are willing and able to teach in a range of different class levels would be described as having developed the dispositions to be risk takers, agents of change and team players. The belief that teaching a range of different class levels leads to greater career opportunities was reiterated by Teachers A and D. Teacher D commented that when teachers transition successfully between levels it helps with career advancement, and Teacher A held the view that teachers were more employable than teachers who only taught in one area because “*with change teachers need a bit of drive and foresight and to be prepared to make mistakes*”. Demonstrating a willingness to transition between different class levels was also seen as giving teachers a greater empathy for teachers at all class levels. Furthermore it appears these experiences and personal and professional growth enables teachers to become more confident to work with their colleagues in different contexts and to gain greater respect from them (Feldman, 2005; Gibbs, 2006). Beach’s (1999) suggestion that transitioning between different class levels can result in a change

in teachers' sense of social positioning within their respective schools was experienced by all of the participants.

A further reason for transitioning to a different class level pointed out by Teacher C, was the desire to take up the opportunity for professional development. This involved training in Reading Recovery which comprises an intensive two year programme. The position became available within the school she was teaching in and it was a requirement that the Reading Recovery teacher taught in a junior class. Teacher C described feeling very apprehensive about working with junior students initially and thought she may experience some difficulties with class management. For example her prior firm approach to behaviour management with seniors she felt may not be as appropriate as with junior students. This view aligns with Seah's (2003) findings which show that teachers in transition can expect to encounter differences which he has suggested may be "discipline specific, pedagogical, general educational or organisational in nature" (p. 10). Although Teacher C said she didn't feel she had the necessary classroom management skills and strategies required for teaching junior students, on reflection she considered she soon developed them. This aligns with Brookfield's (1995) view that critical reflection allows teachers to gain new perspectives on their practice.

Although many teachers do choose to transition between class levels whether it be in the same school or in a new school, in some instances they may be requested to do so. Teacher D was one such teacher who was asked by her principal to transition to another class level. She described feeling initially very nervous and apprehensive about changing class levels. A particular concern was that she thought she might fail completely in a class level with older students. This was representative of Cowley's (1996) thinking that some teachers may experience feelings of self-doubt when transitioning and feel the need to re-evaluate aspects of their teaching and education. However, transitioning to a different class level turned out to be a very positive experience for Teacher D, and she now considered all teachers should transition between different class levels. This teacher too believes that transitioning leads to personal and professional growth for teachers.

The participants in the study all saw transitioning between different class levels as requiring them to engage in personal and professional critical reflection. Teachers engaging in transitions such as these have opportunities to reflect on their teaching practice before, during and after they transition to a different class levels, as the participants in the study demonstrated. This process which ultimately leads to personal and professional growth aligns with the four lenses of critical reflection suggested by Brookfield (1995). In this study reflecting on their teaching practice has clearly led to personal growth as well as professional development and learning for the participants.

### **Professional Development and Learning**

It was clear that transitioning between different class levels had a number of implications for the participants' professional development and learning. All participants in the study viewed transitioning between different class levels as contributing to their professional development. As Teacher C commented "*it keeps you up-skilled*". This is in contrast to other kinds of professional development which has failed to take into account individual teachers' needs (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). The participants saw teaching as a profession that was always changing hence they believed teachers should be willing and prepared to make changes. This view aligns with that of Timperley et al. (2008) who claim professional development and professional learning are internal processes through which teachers create professional knowledge. The professional development that the participants in the study experienced shifts away from something that is done to teachers and acknowledges that all teachers have individual needs and develop in different ways (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002).

In some instances the participants felt that prior to transitioning, much of their professional development had been specific to a particular level which had resulted in them feeling very confident about teaching at that level but not others. However they also articulated that although teaching different class levels challenged them, the practice offered new opportunities to discover how students at different levels learn. At times they felt they were challenged academically and had to extend their own knowledge in some curriculum areas before they felt

confident about teaching it. Hoyle and Wallace (2005) claim teachers like these who seek to further their own professional learning are described as extended professionals. Teaching different class levels for example, required the participants to source, familiarize themselves and develop appropriate resources. While this took time and commitment on their part, there was no evidence of any reluctance to do so. It was seen by the participants as an important part of their professional development and learning because of their obligation and responsibility to meet the learning needs of their students (Bullough & Baughman, 1995). This kind of self-directed professional development that the participants engaged in as they transitioned to different class levels has been described by Stoll (1992) as having considerable benefits for teachers.

Teacher C saw the opportunity for professional development and learning by training to be a Reading Recovery teacher. Although she had only been teaching a short time, she felt she was able to draw on her experiences from teaching different class levels and build on these in her Reading Recovery training. As Feldman (2005) has asserted, transitioning between class levels can give teachers such as these the chance to engage in powerful self-reflection and consider their teaching practice. Although at the time of her interview Teacher C was still undertaking Reading Recovery training, she considered the experience had been a positive one and she was learning many new teaching strategies that were strengthening her teaching of reading in a junior classroom. Transitioning between different class levels provided the participants with opportunities to critically reflect on and re-evaluate many aspects of their previous teaching (Brookfield, 1995) such as content knowledge and teaching strategies (Cowley, 1996).

As the participants transitioned they were clearly willing to adapt the knowledge and skills they had already developed from one class level to another which Newell et al. (2009) describes this as developing strategies to successfully negotiate between different settings. In addition as they transitioned to new class levels the participants extended their knowledge as they actively sought to find new ways of gaining and sustaining the interest of students at different levels

(Cowley, 1996). The professional development described by the participants resonates strongly with Engestrom's (1996) notion of horizontal development discussed in Chapter 1 that it consists of new relationships between individuals and social activities. The participants' experiences demonstrate that transitioning between different class levels provides opportunities for professional development that is an alternative to what is often seen as a singular or vertical approach to personal and professional growth. A horizontal style of development, whether planned or not has required the participants to try new ideas and experiment with different teaching techniques. This has enabled them to "learn their craft within their own developmental paths" (Newell et al., 2009, p. 107).

Transitioning between different class levels gave the participants the opportunities to learn about the academic, social and emotional needs of students. However, they felt that some transitions were easier than others with Teachers A, B and C feeling that transitioning from junior to middle/senior class levels was easier than the reverse mainly because this transition seemed a more logical progression. Understanding the differences between students posed a number of challenges for the participants, particularly in relation to new levels, because as Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) have stated, the context of different levels varies significantly. The participants however had the ability to overcome such challenges as they reflectively modified and integrated their skills to fit new contexts (Larrivee, 2000). As Larrivee (2000) has suggested, teachers should be able to find their own way to becoming reflective practitioners.

Many teachers find it easier to transfer their skills, knowledge and teaching techniques from the junior levels to middle/senior than from the middle/senior to the junior class levels. Certainly adjusting to the academic, social and behavioural differences of students in new class levels is challenging for teachers and it is clear as Bullough and Baughman (1997) have pointed out that teachers who are transitioning need to adapt their expectations and practices with each new context or class level.

## **Knowledge of the Curriculum**

In my review of the somewhat limited literature on teachers transitioning between different class levels it was thought this practice may reveal an increase in their knowledge of the curriculum. The findings have revealed sound evidence that when the participants transitioned to new class levels they found themselves referring to the curriculum more frequently. They explained how before transitioning to a new class level they had mostly focused on one curriculum level from *The New Zealand Curriculum* regardless of the students' needs. However, transitioning between different class levels required them to increase their knowledge of a wider range of curriculum levels. Although *The New Zealand Curriculum* suggests that the curriculum levels typically relate to years at school, (Ministry of Education, 2007) as the participants began to use the document more widely they gained a much broader understanding of how to use them. This increased knowledge of the curriculum levels helped them to understand their students' learning needs and identify their progress. This clearly aligns with McGee's (1997) view that teachers must have a good understanding of the curriculum to be able to decide what is important for the students in their class to learn.

The participants felt that having a more comprehensive understanding of the curriculum levels assisted them with students who were working below or above the expected curriculum levels. This included understanding those students with specific needs and gifted and talented students. The participants were more confident about working with the curriculum levels and modifying activities to meet the needs of all students which is suggested in *The New Zealand Curriculum* that teachers should choose learning objectives from "each area to fit the learning needs of their students" (Ministry of Education, 2007). For example Teacher B sought to make sure activities and resources were appropriate for a child who was working well below their expected level to ensure new learning was relevant and challenging for her student. A further advantage of gaining an increased knowledge of the curriculum raised by Teacher A was that this would give greater clarity for her as she grappled with using the recently introduced literacy and numeracy standards. The participants in Carlyon, Ferrier-Kerr, Wynyard and

Yates' (2010) study claimed drawing on sound pedagogy and strategies while making sense of *The New Zealand Curriculum* provided the best learning opportunities for their students.

### **Teaching Practice**

It is critical that teachers understand what constitutes best teaching practice. The participants in the study engaged in critical reflection which led them to believe that prior to transitioning they had not always met the needs of all their students. The participants questioned themselves and many of their practices, including the teaching strategies they had previously thought effective prior to transitioning to a new level. Although they felt at the time before the transition they were effective teachers, they now considered transitioning between different class levels had given them much greater insight into what they and their students were capable of achieving. Transitioning led the participants to become extended professionals as they developed the capacity for exercising sound judgement when having to “decide between a range of pedagogical options” (Hoyle & John, 1995, p. 123).

For instance Teacher C described her teaching as quite standardized and narrow in focus prior to transitioning to a new class level. Elaborating on this, she explained how she had been focusing on the majority of the students in the ‘middle range’ of the class. On reflection, she felt she had not met the needs of the students working below or above this level. She spoke about analysing her basic teaching strategies and methods in all curriculum areas and believes she is a much more effective teacher as a result. This is an example of what has been described by Bullough and Baughman (1995) as “a context rich in possibilities but individual teachers must choose to act upon them if professional growth is to result” (p. 475). Teacher D also discussed how her knowledge of teaching students with different learning needs had increased significantly after transitioning to a new class level. She explained how from critical self-reflection she learnt it was not appropriate to give older students resources that were designed for much younger students. This increased knowledge had helped her to be much more resourceful and able to adapt and adjust material to meet the learning needs of all students. Teachers such as this are described by Bullough and Baughman (1995) as having a “knack for

finding resources needed” to achieve their aims (p. 471). The participants all talked about how they were able to transfer much of their knowledge and skills from one level to another and used this as scaffolding in a new setting to develop their teaching practice.

As the participants transitioned between different class levels they were required to form and sustain positive relationships with all students. Having the ability to relate well to all students is an important aspect of a teacher’s role as this enables them to contribute to the school as a whole. Teachers who stay teaching in one particular class level may over time become less confident at interacting with those students who are not at the class level they teach. Transitioning led the participants to feel much more confident and connected with different age groups both inside and outside the classroom. Interestingly, Teacher C explained that when she completed her initial teacher education she saw herself as a teacher of senior students only and prior to transitioning to a new class level Teacher C had thought of herself as a competent and confident teacher at this level. However after transitioning to a junior class level she had reflected on her practice and now sees herself as an effective teacher of all class levels. As Beach (1999) has aptly pointed out there is potential for transitions to be frustrating and challenging as individuals experience developmental changes in relationships within themselves and social contexts.

Fullan’s (1993) view that change can be complex is reflected in the experiences of these participants. They have talked about some aspects of their transitions being ‘hard’ and ‘challenging’ and in particular behaviour management seemed to be an area of anxiety for them as it is for many teachers, in particular beginning teachers. As Bullough and Baughman (1995) suggest, contextual events such as this can conspire to constrain teacher development. Teacher B talked at length about her observations of teachers who often lacked confidence when dealing with the behaviour management of senior students. She gave the example of how she often saw teachers of junior students become intimidated by senior students and subsequently avoided interacting with them when possible. Teacher B identified interval and lunchtimes where teachers of junior students would often

seek support when dealing with issues that involved senior students. This lack of confidence and reluctance to deal with senior students seemed to be apparent to the students who could often be disrespectful to these teachers. This view aligns with how Teacher D felt about senior students prior to teaching them. She described feeling intimidated by senior students however after transitioning to this class level she became much more confident and connected with students at all levels and feels more capable of managing difficult situations more easily.

The participants clearly developed the necessary skills to create personal solutions to the challenges and problems they faced as they transitioned between different class levels (Larrivee, 2000). The participants all felt they had gained a wide range of teaching and management strategies from transitioning between different class levels. They saw themselves as more effective teachers after they had transitioned who were capable of managing change in a broader sense, which Hoyle (1980) claims is one of the distinguishing factors of an extended professional.

## **The Impact of School Culture and Leadership**

Many school leaders have created cultures in which change is embraced and teachers are encouraged to take risks and challenges within supportive environments. In these schools, school leaders see the professional growth, development and learning of teachers as part of their role (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). School leaders who encourage teachers to take risks with their teaching such as transitioning between different class levels see this as a way of developing teachers throughout the different stages of their development (Katz, 1972; Moir, 1999). This aligns with the recent findings of Carlyon and Fisher (in press) who have found that school leaders play an integral role in the practice of teachers transitioning between different class levels. They identified a number of factors that school leaders should consider when organising teacher placement in class levels such as; individual teacher needs, career aspirations, and team dynamics. As Harris (2003) suggests it is important that school leaders know their staff well and always consider the individual needs of each teacher when making decisions that will impact on them. This view is supported by Teacher B who stated how she never really understood how important the practice and management of

teachers transitioning between class levels was until she took on a leadership position. She stated how leadership teams have to look at the school as a whole and consider everyone's needs when planning which class levels teachers will teach in. Teacher B described giving teachers a 'nudge' to transition between class levels and asserts that at times individual teachers are unable to see their own potential until they have taught another class level. In contrast, Teacher A believed it could be detrimental to transition some teachers between different class levels and felt that some teachers are best suited to specific class levels. It was her opinion that these teachers should be able to stay teaching at a particular level if they were continuing to grow professionally and stay up-to-date with current teaching practices.

All participants in the study articulated that good communication between teachers and school leaders was essential to ensure teachers were clear about the reasons for transitioning. This aligns with a number of researchers perspectives who advocate that leaders work in collaboration with their staff when implementing change of any kind (Fennell, 2005; Harris, 2003; Storey, 2004; Timperley, 2005). Both Teachers A and D believed that if teachers were being asked to transition to a different class level sound reasons should be provided. They pointed out that teachers should be involved in the decision making and planning process of teacher placement in class levels as when teachers are not involved there was the potential for misunderstandings. Teacher D gave the example of a time when she was not clear about why she was being transitioned to another class level which led to feelings of anxiety. She also explained how teachers who are not involved in the planning and decision making process of transitioning between different class levels may draw their own conclusions and assume they may not have been effective practitioners. These examples highlight the importance of establishing and maintaining positive relationships between school leaders and staff.

Carlyon and Fisher (in press) found that many principals take a strategic approach to managing teacher placement and transitioning teachers between different class levels each year. The eight principals in their study acknowledged the importance

of knowing and understanding all their staff well and considered their individual needs and career aspirations when making decisions about transitioning teachers between different class levels. In addition they demonstrated what Gibbs (2006) would describe as a humanistic approach to managing this practice by involving their staff in individual discussions and explaining the reasons behind some decisions that may impact on them.

Many schools have established a culture in which teachers experience teaching a range of different class levels as both Teachers B and D have. These participants described how they knew they would be transitioned to a new class level in their schools and Teacher B described it as “*a given*”. Teacher D said she knew she would be transitioned to a new class level and believed this was because her principal felt teachers “*became stale*”. Transitioning teachers between different class levels, as the participants described is an opportunity that principals can provide to encourage personal and professional growth for teachers which Katz (1995) has identified all teachers require at different stages of their careers.

A school culture of teachers transitioning between different class levels may suit many teachers who like to seek new challenges and find it difficult to stay teaching in one level for long periods. However, in other schools teachers may be able to stay teaching in one class level for a significant length of time resulting in little movement of teachers between class levels for a variety of reasons. Teacher B is one such teacher who became frustrated in a school when she was unable to transition to a different class level. She described how in this school teachers stayed teaching at the same class levels for long periods of time and she explained how she talked to her principal and colleagues about seeking new challenges and being eager to experience teaching at different class levels. However Teacher B quickly learnt she would not be given the opportunity to do so at that school and as a consequence she made a deliberate move to another school which she knew supported a culture of transitioning between class levels.

When schools share a vision such as teachers experiencing teaching different class levels, a myriad of opportunities for teachers to critically reflect on their teaching

practice and beliefs is provided (Fennell, 2005; Harris, 2003). The participants felt that schools having a culture of transitioning between different class levels helped to make good connections between teachers and build strong teams. Having stronger links between teams and opportunities to engage in critical reflection with other teachers gave these participants a broader view of the school as a learning community (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005).

While three of the participants had not yet been in leadership positions, they had clearly developed their ability to reflect on some explicit leadership practices and make some insightful observations. Teacher A explained that if she was in the position of employing staff for the new entrant and senior class levels she would be looking for teachers who demonstrated particular skills. She saw these two levels as sometimes difficult to staff and not all teachers had the skills to successfully teach them. This belief is also held by some principals who see the teacher placement in these two class levels as important to organize first as they require teachers with particular skills that not all teachers have.

It seems the impact of school culture and leadership on teachers transitioning is significant. As Newell et al. (2009) have proposed teachers need to be lifelong learners who are willing to adapt in different contexts. Leaders who share a common vision and develop a culture of collaboration with their staff leads to a school in which teachers feel confident to take risks and opportunities such as transitioning between different class levels for continuous personal and professional growth.

## **The Role of Mentors in Teachers' Transitions**

The importance of teachers having mentors throughout their careers to help provide opportunities for enhancing their professional knowledge, and personal and professional growth has long been acknowledged (Feldman, 2005; McIntyre & Hagger, 1996; Newell et al., 2009; Timperley, 2005). In this study it was evident that accomplished mentors had empowered the participants to take risks in order to develop both professionally and personally (Robertson, 2005). As suggested by Kitchen (2009) the support of skilled and sensitive mentors helped

these participants to cope with challenges throughout their careers at various stages. Their mentors included deputy principals, senior teachers, team leaders, tutor teachers and colleagues who had often previously taught the same class level they were transitioning to. The participants explained that although some of the mentoring relationships were formalised there were also some instances where the mentoring relationship had developed informally. Eby and Allen (2003) have alerted to the dangers of informal mentoring relationships that often lack clarity and Megginson and Clutterbuck (2005) recommend a more formal relationship in which the purpose of the mentoring relationship is clear.

It was evident that the participants' mentors had taken a relational approach to their professional development and were sensitive to their individual needs (Kitchen, 2009). For example Teacher B described how she was given opportunities to observe in the class level she was transitioning to and work with the teachers at this level. She said this mentoring worked very well for her and she in turn provided similar guidance for others when they transitioned to new class levels. Such mentoring had helped the participants to develop the beliefs, behaviours and skills they need to cope with the challenges of new class levels and resulted in significant professional growth for them (Newell et al., 2009).

Teachers who transition to a new class level face many challenges which may include new ways of planning, forming relationships with different age groups and understanding new cultures (Bullough & Baughman, 1995). The participants described how they were given opportunities to become familiar with different resources appropriate for a new class level and also to observe their mentors teaching the same class levels as them which they all felt were worthwhile. They were able to have conversations about what they had observed and discuss the academic, social and behavioural aspects that were pertinent to each class level. This aligns with Kitchen's (2009) suggestion that mentors may be able to help teachers who are transitioning to "develop and sustain expertise" (p. 54) when they are focused on issues such as discipline. Teacher A described how she worked closely with a senior teacher and how they observed each other frequently and engaged in what Brookfield (1995) has termed critical conversations. These

conversations provided opportunities for the participants to engage in critical reflection which Brookfield suggests is a social process and only occurs when others such as mentors are involved. The participants understood the importance of rethinking and experimenting with their teaching and engaged in ongoing critical reflection to help them make informed actions about their teaching in a new class level (Brookfield, 1995).

There is considerable evidence in the literature to suggest that teachers who transition between sites of professional practice may struggle to manage the change. This was supported by Teachers A and D who had experienced transitions where they had not had the support of mentors. They both described feeling isolated and felt the lack of support made these transitions more difficult. The experiences of these participants align with the suggestion from Seah (2003) that the support some teachers who are transitioning receive can be “skeletal, if any” (p. 9). This lack of support Cox (2003) suggests may be attributed to mentors having no experience of the context, such as a different class level. She suggests some mentors try to offer immediate practical solutions to problems that teachers are facing as opposed to issues relating to their own development. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers who are transitioning have mentors who have the relevant experience and understanding to provide support and encourage them in their new class level (Cox, 2003).

It seems that although the participants’ experiences did not indicate a large amount of mentoring it may be that this was because it was not formalized in any way. It was clear that mentors played a significant role in supporting these participants to gain an understanding of their new setting and helped them to construct new relationships, knowledge, and ways of teaching when they transitioned between different class levels (Newell et al., 2009). The participants valued the observations and critical discussions with their mentors and saw them as contributing to their personal and professional growth. Undoubtedly the role of mentors is significant even though the relationship may not be formalized, to ensure teachers’ transitions between class levels are successful.

While the schools in which the participants taught differed in terms of size and culture, and there were considerable variations between the participant's ages and years of teaching, the findings have revealed that their transition experiences did not differ greatly. Their experiences revealed that there are a number of benefits for teachers transitioning between different class levels in primary schools. These benefits include; *personal and professional growth, professional development and learning, knowledge of the curriculum and teaching practice*. In addition the factors that significantly impacted on teachers' experiences of transitioning were; *the impact of school culture and leadership on teachers transitioning and the role of mentors in teachers' transitions*. The key principle identified as underpinning this study, that the participants are *critically reflective practitioners* has been revealed throughout this discussion. Being and continuing to develop as *critically reflective practitioners* enabled the participants in the study to find new challenges and ways to keep motivated about their teaching. As they transitioned to new class levels they sought ways to ensure they were effective practitioners by being critically reflective and thus gained "a sense of power in their teaching" (Smith, 2002, p. 34).

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

This study investigated teachers transitioning between different class levels in primary schools. The benefits and challenges the teachers experienced when moving to different class levels were identified. The study also explored whether the practice of transitioning between different class levels was deliberately implemented in primary schools and if so how this was achieved.

In light of the evidence the following conclusions can be drawn, in particular that transitioning between different class levels has significant benefits for teachers. The participants in the study experienced substantial personal and professional growth as they gained a deeper level of understanding of themselves, and their values and beliefs through critical reflection. They valued the individual nature of the professional development and learning that they experienced, including an increased understanding of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Transitioning improved the participants' teaching practice considerably as they developed a wider range of teaching techniques and strategies, gained confidence in their ability to teach at specific year levels, and became skilled at adjusting resources to meet the learning needs of all students. These benefits are evidence that transitioning between different class levels can be identified as valuable professional development that is specific to individual teachers' needs. The kind of professional development that teachers experience when they transition between different class levels is personalized and receptive to teachers' individual situations and demonstrates "truly effective professional development" (Kitchen, 2009, p. 54).

A further benefit that was shared by the participants was an increase in their confidence and awareness in dealing with students of all ages in primary schools. This could be described as an element of their teacher efficacy which Woolfolk (cited in Shaughnessy, 2004) says is teachers' "perceptions about their own capabilities to foster students' learning and engagement" (p. 153). While teacher

efficacy has not been considered as a possible outcome of teachers transitioning in this study, it could be worthy of further exploration in future research about transitioning.

Transitioning between different class levels provides opportunities for teacher development that is horizontal in nature. This kind of horizontal development requires a shift away from the singular vertical notion that tends to dominate in teachers' development (Newell et al., 2009). These authors propose "horizontal development as the transformation or creation of new relationships between teachers and social contexts" (p. 17). Transitioning between different class levels enables teachers to gain a broader understanding of the learning needs of all students leading them to become the extended professionals Hoyle (1980) has talked about. Extended professionals seek to further their own professional development and develop their expertise by working collaboratively with other teachers and evaluating their own teaching (Hoyle, 1980). These teachers are committed to ensuring their students have more favourable learning opportunities as they continually reflect on themselves, question their teaching, and explore ways to improve their practice. However, although the study demonstrated how teachers become extended professionals when they transition between different class levels, the size and scope of this study did not allow the investigation to quantitatively measure the impact that teachers transitioning has on student achievement. Again this could be worthy of further research.

The study highlighted the impact of school culture and leadership on teachers transitioning. For the participants it was essential that they taught in schools that had established a culture which supported and encouraged teachers to move between different class levels. In addition it was imperative that the teachers were involved in the process and fully understood the rationale behind each transition. If teachers are to have positive experiences of transitioning between different class levels in primary schools it is paramount that schools establish cultures with teachers that support and encourage them to cross such boundaries.

While a number of significant benefits have been identified, it is crucial that teachers who are transitioning receive sound support and this can be through

effective mentoring relationships. However the study revealed that although many teachers who transition establish mentoring relationships these are often informal and can be somewhat haphazard. Even so mentoring provides opportunities for critical conversations, peer observation, and support that assist teachers to adjust and adapt to different contexts.

Engaging in critical reflection is vital if teachers are to successfully cross boundaries such as transitioning between different class levels. As a consequence teachers becoming *critically reflective practitioners* became a key principle that underpinned the study. Although it is likely that those teachers who choose to move between different class levels are already engaging in critical reflection, it is clear that transitioning requires teachers to practice this further. It became clear that teachers who move between different class levels become more adept at reflecting on their teaching practice and develop as the kind of critically reflective practitioners Brookfield (1995) describes. These practitioners become more proficient and more effective at meeting the learning needs of students in different class levels. Critical reflection enables teachers to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their teaching practice, and they become more empowered to cross a variety of different boundaries during their careers.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations have been drawn from this study to inform teachers and school leaders:

1. School leaders with teachers establish positive school cultures that support and encourage teachers to transition between different class levels.
2. Teachers who are transitioning between different class levels are provided with sound support through formally established mentoring relationships to ensure they have opportunities for personal and professional growth.
3. A model of critical reflection which drives professional development and learning such as Brookfield's (1995) four lenses is developed and established in

schools to support and encourage teachers to become *critically reflective practitioners*.

## **Concluding Comments**

The study suggests that transitioning between different class levels in primary schools is an empowering experience for teachers as *critically reflective practitioners*. It is clear that engaging in critical reflection through transitioning gives teachers a greater understanding of themselves and leads them to become extended professionals. Horizontal development such as this opens up teachers' eyes to new possibilities in their teaching. This study has demonstrated that when teachers cross boundaries such as transitioning between different class levels, they are enriched both personally and professionally through their journey to become *critically reflective practitioners*.

Any path a teacher chooses must involve a willingness to be an active participant in a perpetual growth process requiring ongoing critical reflection on classroom practices. The journey involves infusing personal beliefs and values into a professional identity, resulting in developing a deliberate code of conduct. Critical reflection is not only a way of approaching teaching – it is a way of life. The more teachers explore, the more they discover. The more they question, the more they access new realms of possibility. (Larrivee, 2000, p. 306)

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

Name:

16 March 2011

Dear

The purpose of this letter is to invite you to participate in a study that aims to investigate the experiences of teaching a range of different class levels in primary schools from a teacher's perspective. This study will provide key data that will form the basis of my thesis for a MEd Leadership at the University of Waikato and inform and guide subsequent conference/colloquia presentations and publications.

The study will enable me to gain insights into the experiences of teachers who have transitioned and taught across a range of different class levels in primary schools and the benefits and challenges they have experienced. The study also aims to provide information on how this practice is implemented in schools.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and the information you share will be treated confidentially. Should you agree to participate it will involve an interview lasting no more than 60 minutes. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of participants and schools.

You are welcome to ask any questions about the study at any stage. Once you have given your consent I will make the interview questions available to you and set up an interview day, time and venue that is suitable for you. A written summary of your interview responses will be made available to you for review and comment.

You have the right to express any concerns about the process or other matters to myself or my supervisor, Jenny Ferrier-Kerr whose contact details I have included overleaf. You may withdraw from the study at any time up to viewing the written summary of your interview responses. You will need to advise me in writing of your intent to withdraw.

It is anticipated the data gathering will commence on March 7 and conclude by March 31 2011. An electronic copy of the thesis will become widely available and lodged permanently in the University's digital repository Research Commons.

Any questions or concerns regarding the study can be directed to myself or my supervisor and I have included our contact details below.

Tracey Carlyon  
carlyont@waikato.ac.nz  
Phone 078562889 Extn 7959

Jenny Ferrier-Kerr  
jfk@waikato.ac.nz  
Phone 078562889 Extn 6665

If you are willing to participate, please complete the attached consent form and return to the Faculty of Education in the stamped addressed envelope.

Thank you for considering this request.

Kind Regards

Tracey Carlyon

Faculty of Education  
University of Waikato  
HAMILTON

## Appendix B

### Consent Form

I.....(print your name), have been fully informed about the study and consent to participate.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at anytime up to viewing my interview responses. I will advise the researcher of my intent to withdraw in writing should I decide to do so. Following notification of my decision to withdraw, any information pertaining to my involvement to that point will be destroyed.

I understand that while no absolute guarantee of anonymity can be given, the researcher will make every effort to protect my identity and privacy through the use of pseudonyms. All information shared by me will be treated as confidential. I understand that five years after the conclusion of the study any personal details which might enable the identification of participants will be destroyed.

I understand that during a semi-structured interview of no more that 60 minutes I will be asked open ended questions. The interview will be digitally recorded and interview notes will be taken during the interview to ensure my responses are accurately recorded. I may decline to answer any question during the interview and know that I will have the opportunity to review and comment on the written summary of my interview responses prior to analyzing and reporting. While ownership of the analyzed data and any subsequent publications will be the property of the researcher, my own interview data is owned by me, as a participant.

I am aware that I have the right to express any concerns about the process or other matters to the researcher. If these concerns are not resolved to my satisfaction I may withdraw from the study.

Participants Signature.....

Date: .....

Phone :.....

E mail.....

## Appendix C

### Interview questions

1. Can you tell me about the different class levels you have taught?
2. What was the experience of transitioning between different class levels like for you?
3. Do you consider there were benefits for you from changing class levels? (Both personally and professionally)
4. If so can you discuss these benefits.. Personally first then professionally secondly.
5. Were there challenges associated to changing levels for you? If so can you discuss these? If not, why do you think this was the case?
6. Did you choose/ask to change class levels and if so what were the reasons for this?
7. If there were other reasons why you changed class levels what were these?
8. Were you made aware of the factors that were taken into consideration by school leaders/by you when you changed class levels? If so what were these factors?
9. Do you hold any view on teachers transitioning and teaching a range of different class levels in primary schools that you have not already shared and would like to?