Senior leaders' approaches to transition to primary school: A discourse analysis

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Abstract

For most children in New Zealand, starting school is a significant life event. The move from early childhood education (ECE) to primary school has been well documented and researched internationally and locally. The current body of literature draws on the voices of children, families, ECE teachers, and primary school teachers. However, the experiences of school leaders, who frequently direct a school's approach to transitioning students in their first year, are rarely addressed in the literature. My research addresses this gap by investigating the practices and underpinning beliefs of five primary school senior leaders (team leaders, syndicate leaders, and associate or deputy principals) with responsibility for the transition to school at large primary schools in Auckland, New Zealand.

Underpinned by a post-structural conceptual framework, my research draws on interviews with school leaders to examine discourses that constructed these leaders' approaches to the transition from ECE to primary school. Three post-structural concepts were critical to the conceptual framework: identities (understood to be fluid and continuously renegotiated), contexts (situated, professional, material and external), and discourse (language in use). The main research question asked *How do school senior leaders discursively construct approaches to transition to school and their own and others' identities within their contexts?* Semi-structured interviews yielded rich data on how participants build their own identities and those of others, including children and whānau, in the transition to school process.

Four localised discourses were identified in the interview data: structural, relational, pedagogical and achievement discourses. Leaders drew upon these and other broader, big "D" Discourses including those of school readiness, neoliberal policies, and conceptualisations of senior leadership roles in New Zealand primary schools, in interplay with many others. The interview data showed evidence of school leaders both resisting and submitting to discourses. School-specific contexts shaped participants' (conscious or unconscious) reproduction of discourses in their decisions and practices. Participants used many common transition-to-school practices. However, how those transition practices and relationships with stakeholders were discursively constructed and enacted in their school-specific contexts varied.

The range of discourses drawn upon and reproduced by school leaders demonstrates the complex and deeply contextualised nature of constructing transition to school approaches. This study privileges the voices of school leaders to add a fresh perspective to the body of literature about

children's transition from early childhood education to primary school. The findings reveal opportunities for leaders to critically examine the discourses that shape their constructions of reality within their schools, both in their leadership in general and, more specifically, in their leadership of the crucial first moments of children's school lives.

This thesis is dedicated to

Ethel Robinson

1916-2019

Who has inspired my journey in education and life

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List of Terms

Ākonga	Māori word meaning learner (Biggs, 2012)
Aotearoa	Māori word for New Zealand
Early childhood education (ECE)	Non-compulsory education sector for children aged 0-6 in New Zealand. Most children start school at age 5.
Junior school/junior classes/junior team	Names commonly given to classes of children in their first two years of school. Also called Year 0, 1 and 2 classes.
Kāhui Ako	A New Zealand government initiative consisting of voluntary collaborations of early childhood, school, and post-compulsory education providers who work together to address local educational challenges (Kamp, 2020)
Kindergarten, or kindy	Kindergarten is one form of early childhood education in New Zealand.
Mana	Māori word meaning prestige or influence (Biggs, 2012)
Māori	The indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand
New Entrant	A child who has just started at primary school in New Zealand. Generally, children who turn 5 during Terms 2, 3 or 4 enter a "new entrant" or "Year 0" class and move into Year 1 the following calendar year. Children who turn 5 during the summer holidays or during Term 1 enter Year 1.
Play-based learning/Learning through play	A pedagogical approach to learning that includes a child's active involvement in play (Blucher et al., 2018)
Tamariki	Māori word meaning child (Biggs, 2012)
Team leader	Teacher with leadership responsibilities within the school, usually for a team of teachers.
Te Whāriki	The early childhood education curriculum of Aotearoa New Zealand. (Ministry of Education, 2017)
Whānau	Māori word meaning family (Biggs, 2012)

Chapter 1: Introduction

Transition to school is a significant occasion in a child's life. There is established international and local research to inform those guiding children into school, including whānau[1] (family), early childhood education (ECE) services, schools, teachers, and school leaders. The existing literature highlights the significant impact of relationships between stakeholders (Peters, 2010).

In this thesis, I present a study exploring how school leaders discursively construct their approaches to transition to school within their school-specific contexts. With responsibility for staffing, resourcing, school culture and values, and engagement with families, school leaders have a complex role in approaching transition to school that warrants further analysis. Despite recognition that effective leadership has a significant role in transition to school (Education Review Office, 2015), there is a lack of evidence about how leaders and their practices influence transitions (Boyle, Petriwskyj, et al., 2018). The current study gives voice to school leaders engaging with the complexities of transition to school within their contexts.

The thesis is presented in seven chapters. This introductory chapter briefly describes the context, rationale, design, and significance of this study.

1.1 Transition to school in New Zealand

Although the legal school starting age in New Zealand is six years old, it is a social custom for children to start on their fifth birthday (Boereboom & Tymms, 2018). In 2020, 91.5% of four year olds transitioned to school from a licensed early childhood service (Ministry of Education, 2020b). These include home-based, parent-led centres such as playcentre, Māori-immersion programmes such as kohanga reo[2], Pasifika-language playgroups and centres, and teacher-led centres including kindergarten and private ECE.

All licensed ECE services in New Zealand use one of two curriculum documents: *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa early childhood curriculum* for English or *Te Whāriki mō ngā Kohanga Reo* for Māori services (Ministry of Education, 2017). *Te Whāriki*'s metaphor of a woven whāriki, or mat, is based on a socio-cultural discourse (May & Carr, 2016). The curriculum weaves together four principles (empowerment, holistic development, family and

[1] Whānau is a Māori word often translated as "family". Whānau is a concept not so easily translated (see https://teara.govt.nz/en/whānau-Māori-and-family/page-1 for more information). In this thesis, I use whānau to mean family, including extended family.
[2] Kohanga reo is a Māori language immersion "language nest" for children aged 0-6 with the purpose of revitalising the Māori language, or te reo Māori. See https://www.kohanga.ac.nz/en/

community, and relationships) with five strands (wellbeing, belonging, contribution, communication, and exploration). Traditional, explicit curriculum areas such as literacy and numeracy are holistically woven through the curriculum. *Te Whāriki* devotes considerable attention to theoretical underpinnings: notably Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and a philosophy of developing children's identities (May & Carr, 2016).

New Zealand primary schools use one of two curriculum documents: *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) (NZC), or *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 2008b), used in Māori medium schools. It can be argued that neo-liberal ideology underpins the NZC (Benade, 2011; Ovens, 2010; Wood, 2021). Education is positioned as an economic necessity, in comparison with the child-centred pedagogy and sense of belonging in *Te Whāriki*. A neoliberal approach is evident in one of the four visions given in the NZC: for young learners to "seize the opportunities offered by new knowledge and technologies to secure a sustainable social, cultural, economic, and environmental future for our country" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 8). The first opportunity for young learners to "seize the opportunities" of the NZC is in the transition from ECE to school.

The policy landscape impacting on transition to school was complicated by the implementation of National Standards from 2009 to 2019 (Thrupp & White, 2013). National Standards included achievement standards for the end of the first year of school and involved compulsory reporting to whānau about their child's achievement against the standards. Supplementary documentation published by the Ministry of Education in recent years that impacts on children's experiences on arriving at school includes *The Literacy Learning Progressions* (Ministry of Education, 2010a), which details the expected progress of a child at the end of each year of school. The definitive language used in such supplementary texts, combined with reporting to parents and providing data to the Ministry of Education, shaped and continues to shape teachers' and leaders' expectations of learning during children's transition to school.

The differing discourses underpinning *Te Whāriki* and NZC point to one potential mismatch between children's experiences in ECE and school. Additionally, the enactment of the sociocultural and neoliberal discourses underpinning both sectors may be expressed in the environments, structures, relationships, and pedagogies children experience in the transition to school. Therefore, exploring the experiences of those who translate policy into practice to lead transition to school approaches within their school-specific contexts has the potential to bring valuable insight.

1.2 My interest

Although I have spent 20 years as a teacher, mostly in new entrant classrooms, the real refinement of my practice and a deep curiosity about the needs of five-year-olds during their transition to school did not really begin until my oldest daughter started kindergarten. There, seeing relationships and teaching that were deeply respectful, heartfelt, and guided by the needs of children, I began to wonder: *Why is my pedagogy not like this?* The NZC describes elements of a successful transition to school such as positive relationships, respecting the child's prior knowledge and experiences, and considering their whole school experience. However, I felt my teaching practice had lost sight of these elements and was weighed down by the minutiae of a narrowed curriculum. I was not alone in this, as Fisher and Ussher (2014) discovered in their analysis of New Zealand primary schools' strategic goals, which showed that schools had become increasingly focussed on reading, writing, and mathematics.

As my pedagogy and thinking grew, I had conversations about my discoveries with the associate principal in charge of transition at my school. She experienced many leadership dilemmas because of the number of stakeholders involved in an effective transition to school and the demands of the contextual features of our school. With dozens of feeder early childhood services, staffing considerations, and roll numbers to manage, discourses of achievement and child readiness circulating, balancing instructional leadership with the need to manage systems and processes was a challenge. These conversations led me to consider whether it was the same at other schools in Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland).

Just as transition to school can be conceptualised as a journey, so can my exploration of how the experiences of children starting school are shaped. My journey has developed through the experience of my own children starting school and my involvement in the ECE and primary sectors. Understanding that leaders are influenced by many different discourses within and beyond their contexts has led me to the current research project, the rationale for which is outlined in the next section.

1.3 Research problem and rationale for the study

Transitioning to school is significant for children, and school senior leaders (such as team leaders, syndicate leaders, and associate or deputy principals) have an essential role to play in ensuring successful transitions (Petriwskyj, 2013). Given the complex contexts in which many schools operate, it is not a simple task to design coherent and responsive transition approaches. School leaders are underrepresented in literature (Boyle, Petriwskyj, et al., 2018), and authentic voices of current New

Zealand school leaders are missing. School leaders construct their approaches to transition to school in complex and diverse contexts.

Throughout this study, I sought to understand how school leaders discursively construct transition to school approaches: how their school-specific contexts shape their leadership practices, and how they in turn shape their contexts. Research involving the direct stakeholders in transitioning children to school – teachers, whānau, ECE services, and the children themselves – is plentiful. In contrast, the current study focusses on the ways in which leaders are influenced by discourses inside and outside of their school contexts in their construction of transition to school approaches. What do they see as their role? How to they create identities for themselves, and others in their contexts? Examining discourses constructed and reconstructed by school leaders in approaching transition to school adds a critical perspective to the current body of literature.

1.4 Research questions and design

The overarching question for investigation is:

How do primary school senior leaders discursively construct approaches to transition to school and their own and others' identities within their contexts?

Specifically, the research investigates:

> *How are transition to school approaches discursively constructed by school leaders in school-specific contexts?*
>
> *How do school leaders discursively construct identities of themselves and others through their transition to school approaches?*

The conceptual framework, which consists of a post-structural discourse analysis approach examining leaders' practice in context, is described in Chapter 2.

1.5 Significance of the study

The movement from pre-school contexts to compulsory schooling has been widely studied. Transition to school is a nuanced and complex process involving many stakeholders. Adding the perspectives of a group of school leaders adds richness to the body of literature and grows an understanding of the challenges facing schools when welcoming new students. Using a discourse analysis approach opens space for critical examination of discourses producing transition to school approaches and shaping, knowingly and unknowingly, identities of school leaders, children, and the purpose of education. This research will help school communities to develop a critical awareness of how and why particular ways of seeing and doing within a transition to school approach are

produced. In undertaking this research, I seek to reveal whose voices are dominant, and whose are silent in transition to school approaches, and why?

1.6 Thesis outline

This thesis is organised into seven chapters. Chapter One has provided the context and rationale for the research, establishing and justifying its niche. As the post-structural discourse analysis approach taken in this research is a lens through which I will examine the literature around transition to school and leadership, I have chosen to insert a chapter describing the theoretical and conceptual framework underpinning this research (Chapter 2). Following this, in Chapter 3, I will identify prevailing discourses in transition to school and leadership literature and relate them specifically to the New Zealand context. Chapter 4 presents the research design and describes the methodology, data collection methods, analysis, and ethical considerations. In Chapter 5, key findings are presented, relating these to the conceptual framework and research questions. In Chapter 6, I critically examine and discuss the findings in relation to relevant literature. Finally, Chapter 7 highlights key findings of the research, considers implications and limitations and identifies potential areas for future research.

Chapter 2: Conceptual framework

> Everything we do is rooted in theory. Whether we consciously explore the reasons we have a particular perspective or take a particular action, there is also an underlying system shaping thought and practice. (hooks, 2014, p. 19)

Chapter 1 described the transition to school leadership context and the problem and questions that drive this research. This chapter maps out the conceptual framework that guides this research. It explores how leaders' identities, the discourses influencing them, and the complex processes of siting transition to school within individual school contexts are conceptually interrelated.

Conceptual frameworks can be understood in a range of ways (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). In my research I adopt Ravitch and Riggan's (2016) view that a conceptual framework is "a way of linking all the elements of the research process" (p. 5). The purpose of a conceptual framework is thus to align the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of my research. There are five elements in the conceptual framework: a social constructivist ontology, a post-structural epistemology, and within these, three overlapping concepts of discourse, identities and contexts, illustrated in Figure 1 below.

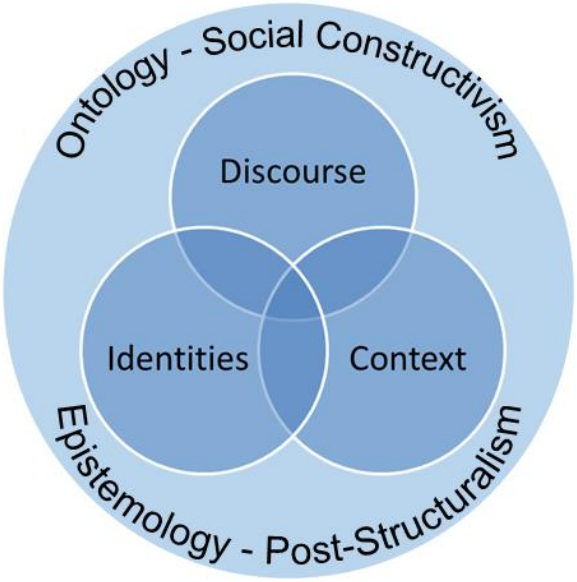

Figure 1 Conceptual framework

This chapter explains the theoretical positions that ground this study and provide a basis for the goals and questions of this study (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). The structure of the chapter is based on the above framework. In section 2.1, I describe the ontology (theory about what knowledge is) and epistemology (theory about how knowledge is understood) that guide this research project's design, analysis, and findings. I show how and why the current study is underpinned by social constructivist

and post-structural theory, and the idea that we use language to collectively create our understanding of the world.

In section 2.2, I describe the overlapping concepts of discourse, identity, and context. While post-structuralism offers a range of concepts and tools to explore ideas, I have chosen to apply these three concepts to this research.

Finally, in section 2.3, I justify using a post-structural discourse approach to answer the research question: How do school senior leaders discursively construct approaches to transition to school and their own and others' identities within their contexts? I acknowledge that different approaches could be taken to answer this question, and I contextualise the framework I have chosen to use in this thesis.

2.1 Ontology and Epistemology

Together, ontology and epistemology "provide insight into what the researcher believes to be the nature of truth, the nature of the world, and ways of being in that world; together they describe the world view of the researcher" (D. R. Berryman, 2019, p. 272). Research questions grow from ontology, which is one's theory about what exists or the nature of knowledge (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004)**.** Epistemology refers to how knowledge is gained, where knowledge comes from, and who can have knowledge (Carter & Little, 2007).

In this research, my ontological and epistemological stance is that multiple realities exist and are discursively constructed. Thus, I draw upon a social constructivist ontology to inform this research. Social constructivism holds that all reality is socially constructed through language and social interactions. Qualitative research takes the approach that "truth is revealed through social constructions, language, shared consciousness, and other social interactions" (D. R. Berryman, 2019, p. 273). That is, people construct reality (or realities) in their interactions with others. Hay (2016) contends that social constructivism encompasses a range of views about the nature of knowledge that consistently emphasize social interaction.

In this research, I adopt a post-structural epistemology, a school of philosophy that evolved in the 1960s. Post-structuralism encompasses a range of theoretical perspectives or styles of critical reasoning (Baxter, 2016; Dillet, 2017; Harcourt, 2006), evolving from structuralism.

Structuralism maintains that all processes, objects, events, and meanings are not standalone but are part of underlying structures, which are not physical, but rather metaphorical (Dixon et al., 2009). The relationships between processes, objects, events, and meanings form the structures by which

people create meaning. Structuralists believe that these structures do not exist independently. Rather, the structures referred to are created by the relationships between processes, objects, events and meanings.

Post-structural thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Giles Deleuze were sceptical that a singular reality could be fully known through the system or structure in which it resides. Instead, post-structural thinkers argue that meaning is never fixed or stable but fluid and changing (Given, 2008). In the context of post-structuralism, the prefix "post" means "with but also different" (Williams, 2014, p. 25). Post-structuralism does not reject structuralism entirely. Instead, it carries forward elements of structuralism and goes beyond (Dixon et al., 2009).

Post-structural thought acknowledges that the structures described by structuralism exist but views them as socially constructed. Therefore, structures are fluid and change according to the people and societies perceiving them (Given, 2008). Instead of focussing on the structures of meaning, post-structuralism "concentrates on the moment when we impose meaning in a space that is no longer characterized by shared social agreement over the structure of meaning" (Harcourt, 2006, p. 1). Specifically, post-structuralism concentrates on the moment that we draw upon our beliefs and theories about the world to create meaning. In terms of my research, school leaders' imposition of meanings (such as how they see particular groups of children or understand their leadership roles) has implications for school leaders' understandings of their school contexts and constructions of children's identities as they transition to school. I argue that the realities that school leaders have socially constructed, and the identities they take on for themselves and others in the process, will impact the approach they take to transition to school.

For me, there are transformative possibilities when engaging in post-structural thinking. Acknowledging that we have different identities in different settings, and that we may hold the power to choose the discourses with which we construct our identities and realities, provides agency and flexibility to experiment with new identities and ways of looking at the world. Post-structuralism actively seeks to value the "voices of silenced, minority or oppressed groups" (Baxter, 2002, p. 831), providing a social justice orientation to research projects. By questioning taken-for-granted practices, post-structuralism encourages critical thinking about alternative ways of being. These factors contributed to my selection of a post-structural approach to the present study.

Post-structuralism is not without its critics. A perceived limitation of post-structuralism's multiple socially and historically situated realities is that research conducted with this perspective is never directly applicable to other contexts (Given, 2008). The lack of applicability arises because post-

structural thinkers "invite varieties of different interpretations and resist single final and universally communicable meanings" (Williams, 2014, p. 14). Parkes et al. (2010) argue that post-structural accounts are:

> characterized by a respect of that which might be described as specific, local, different and peculiar, and a rejection of theories that propose a general, global, uniform or norm as if it was a universal, natural, or foundational fact of human existence (p. 165).

Employing post-structural techniques in my study means focussing on specific and local leadership practices, and refusing any possibility for making the research generalisable, which would be rather consistent with a positivist or post-positivist ontology (Carminati, 2018). Instead, I take the position that we all create constructions of what is believed to be "true" in particular contexts and times. While this thesis critically examines discourses that underpin five participants' practices and contexts, I hope that this work will prompt readers to similarly examine the discourses shaping their constructions of ways of being a school leader and doing transition to school.

In summary, my research is based on these ontological and epistemological assumptions: realities are constructed through language and social interactions (D. R. Berryman, 2019); multiple realities exist, and objective truth cannot be known (Baxter, 2016); discourse, truth, and power are critical concepts for examination (MacNaughton, 2005); and the universal applicability of findings is neither possible or desirable in post-structural research (Harcourt, 2006).

2.2 Discourse, context, and identities

Within the post-structural repertoire of concepts and tools, I have chosen three concepts to investigate how school leaders within New Zealand schools approach transition to school. The first concept is discourse, essential to understanding the world from a social constructivist and post-structural perspective. The second concept is contexts: socially constructed settings in which leaders use discourse to construct identities of themselves and others, but which also act on leaders to construct their realities. The third concept is identities, understood to be unstable and constantly renegotiated according to the discursive context. At the beginning of this chapter, I provided an illustration identifying the key theoretical underpinnings of this research (see Figure 1). Central to the conceptual framework, and overlapping each other, are the concepts of discourse, context and identities.

Leaders construct identities for themselves and others within their transition to school approach, through discursive school-specific contexts. Discourses influencing the wider New Zealand educational context, school-specific contexts, and leaders' identity constructions enable and

constrain leaders in their construction of transition to school approaches. In this section, I discuss discourses, school-specific contexts, and identity to complete the conceptual framework for the present research.

2.2.1 Discourses

In this thesis, I adopt the definition of discourse as “language in use” (Gee & Handford, 2012, p. 1). Discourses are closely related to post-structural concepts of power, identities, and subjectivities. As Ball emphasises, discourses explain/inquire about “what can be said and thought but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority … constitut[ing] both subjectivity and power relations” (Ball, 2010, p. 2).

Discourse has been defined in many ways. LeGreco (2014) identifies different levels of discourse, two of which are applicable to the current study: micro and macro discourses. Micro-level discourse is the examination of often short, local pieces of language in use, such as a conversation or a text (LeGreco, 2014). Gee (1989) calls this small “d” discourse. Examining micro-level discourse reveals discourse analysis's linguistic and semiotic roots (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). In this thesis, I employ discourse analysis to analyse the small “d” discourses underpinning participants’ talk about their approaches to transition to school.

Post-structuralists have developed discourse analysis to examine the function of discourse at a macro level. Macro discourses are broad, societal-level patterns of language, of “enduring patterns of talk and text across contexts” (LeGreco, 2014, p. 6). Gee (2011) refers to macro discourses as big “D” Discourses. Burman (2017) reflects macro or big “D” discourses by defining discourse as “socially constituted meanings that order objects and relationships, and those frameworks both reflect and perform relationships of power” (p. 2). For this research, discourse is not restricted to language of leaders, but also includes their actions based on the language chosen (Gee, 2011). This research uses discourse analysis to examine what leaders say about transition to school (micro or “little d” discourse) and how their language, shaped by their individual and broader socio-political discourses, influences their decision-making (macro-level discourse). Thus, the present study engages with discourse at both micro and macro levels.

Through discourse, individuals position themselves and their beliefs (Davies & Harre, 1990). This can further be extended to leadership enactment, as "bringing ... discourses to the surface allows practitioners to actively reflect, reason and choose which leadership approaches they desire and need” in a specific context and time (Western, 2013, p. 308).

From a post-structural perspective, discourse legitimates a person's view of the world, gives them authority to speak, and shapes their actions (Parkes et al., 2010). Language systems are not neutral but always exist within historical discourses (Baxter, 2016). These discourses, which are formed over time, position individuals or subjects in power relationships and offer differing views of reality (Baxter, 2016). In the context of my research, this means that the language school leaders use to describe their practice is not neutral and transparent but draws upon a range of discourses to construct understandings of what transition to school is, and how it can or should be enacted in their contexts. Thus, the questions guiding this research involve identifying discourses used by school leaders and examining how these discourses construct leaders' approaches.

The thread of discourse is woven throughout this thesis. The research questions presented in Chapter 1 centre the concept and role of discourse in leadership of transition to school practices. In Chapter 3 I identify and critically examine discourses underpinning transition to school and leadership literature. In Chapter 4, I outline how discourse is critical to the study's methodology and analysis of findings. The findings presented in Chapter 5 identify and examine discourses underpinning participants' leadership practices. Finally, in Chapter 6, I relate leaders' discursive constructions of identities and transition approaches to the discourses identified in literature.

2.2.2 School-specific contexts

The second core concept in my conceptual framework (see Figure 1 on p. 6) is context. Social constructions of realities, from a post-structural perspective, are inextricable from context. When examining language, the context in which words are spoken create situated meanings (Gee & Handford, 2012). For example, "achievement" at kindergarten might mean getting across the monkey bars for the first time; "achievement" at primary school might mean the level at which a child is reading. Discourse analysis "involves studying language in the context of society, culture, history, institutions, identity formation, politics, power, and all the other things that language helps us to create and which, in turn, render language meaningful in certain ways and able to accomplish certain purposes" (Gee & Handford, 2012, p. 5). However, such a broad definition of considerations of context could be problematic within the constraints of a study such as this one.

In addition to discourses circulating in school-specific contexts (micro discourses), this study is also interested in broader educational policy discourses (macro discourse) and the intersection between the two. LeGreco (2014) refers to links between micro and macro discourses as the "meso" level of discourse analysis, and Gee (2011) includes micro/macro discourse interaction in his big "D" Discourse tool: linking up wider societal discourses with those enacted in specific social contexts. In

the context of this research, this approach to understanding context enables me to explore the links between wider educational policy discourses and discourses circulating in school-specific contexts.

Individuals can draw upon many discourses at any one time; therefore, there exist multiple ways of knowing, and individuals can have multiple ways of being (Baxter, 2016). In the context of this research, this means that various discourses are available and used by school leaders in constructing their approach to transition to school. In this manner, some school-specific discourses, such as school values and ways of viewing achievement, and wider policy discourses such as accountability and performativity may hold the power to produce "accepted local logics" (Renshaw, 2007, p. 241) or taken-for-granted ways of being within a school context. In the context of my study, I refer to these discourses as big "D" Discourses, as they shape the "accepted logics" related to transition to school and participants themselves. Examining discursive contexts "foregrounds consideration of the taken-for-granted times and spaces through which particular types of classroom pedagogies and identities are made possible" (Renshaw, 2007). The aim of this research is to examine discourses leaders use to approach transition and construct identities of themselves and others, and why.

2.2.3 Identities

While "identity" is often used to describe a culture that people belong to (e.g. someone who is Māori), or a group of people that they share something in common with (e.g. a netball fan), in a post-structural sense identity refers to "parts of a self that are composed of meanings attached to the roles people play in society" (Tooms et al., 2010, p. 108). These identities are fluid and change according to context; my children, for example, call me "Mum" at home and "Whaea[3]" at school.

Post-structural approaches reject the idea that there is a stable and unchanging self. Instead, discourses and knowledge act on subjects to create different identities in different discursive contexts (Given, 2008). As Baxter (2016) says "In the context of language and identity, individuals have continually to make sense of conflicting 'ways of knowing' and, hence, competing 'ways of being', which are constructed and performed through language and discourses" (p. 36). The implication is that depending on the language used in a situation, and the discourses being drawn upon, individuals construct their identities in different ways. Sometimes, these identities conflict with each other. For example, in kindergarten an almost 5-year-old child may feel capable and independent. Their capable and independent identity may be challenged in a school setting, where the language of learning may differ greatly from what they have experienced before. The notion of unstable identities has implications for the study of transition to school leadership in that identities

[3] Māori word meaning teacher (Biggs, 2012).

constructed by leaders for both themselves and others may not be consistent with the identities that other stakeholders in the transition to school construct for themselves elsewhere.

Identities are seen (within post-structuralism) to be constantly reconstructed according to social relations, discursively constituted experiences and an individual's biography (Given, 2008). Additionally, because identities are constructed within discourses, "we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). In the context of my study, Hall's quote means that participants' identities are constructed within their context, through the words that they use and the way that they use them. The shape and content of their language forms the discursive construction of their identities, at least at the time of the interview. The instability of identity means that since I interviewed participants, they have continued to further form their identities through discourse; interviewing them today would result in a different set of data. Although the instability and reconstitution of identities means that they could be referred to as subjectivities (Baxter, 2016), for consistency in this thesis, I refer to individuals and identities.

2.3 Summary

In this chapter, I have described the conceptual framework underpinning this research. Post-structural concepts of context, identity and discourse are crucial to the analysis of interview data in this study. These concepts sit within the wider social constructivist ontology and post-structuralist epistemology that guide the study.

Taking a post-structural perspective to examining leadership has many benefits for this research. They include the opportunity for researchers and readers to disrupt dominant narratives about leadership and question taken-for-granted practices (Gobby, 2016); opportunities for silenced discourses and alternative views to be put forward (Gobby, 2016; Niesche & Gowlett, 2015); an opportunity for deeper understanding (in this case, about transition to school) (Tzuo et al., 2011); and a way to examine how "knowledge, truth and power operate to silence particular ways of being [a leader] and privilege others" (Karina Davis et al., 2015, p. 138). Post-structuralism offers exciting potential to examine themes of agency, power, and identity within school contexts.

I acknowledge that other conceptual frameworks or theoretical approaches could have been taken to answer the research questions in this thesis. At times, I have found post-structural thought challenging to understand. However, I believe that leading transition to school is a complex and multifaceted process. When working within their contexts, leaders are constantly balancing different needs and priorities. Providing multiple perspectives on transition to school reflects the "requisite

level of diversity in both the way we interpret the world and the way we act in it" (Snowden, 2005, p. 46). Examining discourses influencing the construction of leaders' perspectives and identities within their contexts honours the challenging task participants in this research are undertaking.

Chapter 3: Literature review

My research takes a post-structural perspective to explore school leaders' discursive constructions of transition to school approaches, including the impact of school-specific contexts and the discursive identities constructed within their approaches to transition. This chapter reviews literature related to transitioning to school, then educational leadership in the context of transition to school, and highlights discourses identified in both bodies of research and practice. The review concentrates on research from the last 20 years, particularly more recent publications and those relating to New Zealand and Australia.

The chapter is in two main sections. Section 3.1 outlines theories and concepts related to transition and identifies big "D" Discourses present in the transition to school literature and relevant broader educational discourses that may shape transition practice in New Zealand. In Section 3.2, I examine educational leadership with reference to the New Zealand primary school context. I identify big "D" Discourses in the leadership literature and apply these to the context of transition to school. Finally, in Section 3.3 I identify a lack of research about and with leaders constructing their approach to transition. I argue that transition to school is a complex process during which leaders may draw upon competing discourses to construct their approaches.

3.1 Transition

3.1.1 Theoretical lenses for understanding transition

Transitions occur at many stages through the human life cycle. Multiple researchers agree that effective or otherwise, early life transitions have long-term implications for children's development and success later in life (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Margetts, 2009).

Theoretical perspectives about transition result from different understandings of children and their societal role (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Major human development theories and paradigms underpinning transitions research shed light on how school leaders draw upon their understandings to rationalise decisions and justify ways forward in assisting the transition to school (Peters, 2003). Table 1 presents three human development theories and three paradigms that have implications for the understandings underpinning transition to school approaches.

Table 1 Theories influencing transitions research

Theory	Theorists	Focus	Possible implications for transition to school
Developmental	Piaget, Steiner, Montessori	Discrete and/or continuous stages of development	Transitions "portrayed as an individual change experience" (Boyle, Grieshaber, et al., 2018, p. 172)
Ecological	Bronfenbrenner	Children construct their experiences and growth in a system of relationships, roles activities and settings (Shelton, 2019)	Transitions are socially constructed practices and involve a change in role or setting; relationships and context are significant (O'Toole et al., 2014)
Sociocultural	Vygotsky	"Development and learning occurs in the contexts of children's communities" (Nolan & Raban, 2015)	Transitions involve children as active participants building identities in a social, historical and cultural world (Boyle, Grieshaber, et al., 2018)
Critical	Habermas, Freire	Power can be unequally distributed according to social class, gender, race, disability, culture and language (Petriwskyj, 2014)	Transitions are experienced differently by children and educators must challenge assumptions and taken-for-granted practices (Nolan & Raban, 2015; Petriwskyj, 2014)
Māori[4]	Mason Durie, Elkington	A holistic view of human growth, development, and wellbeing	Transitions occur cyclically and are connected to children's hauora, whānau and wairua[5] (I. M. Evans et al., 2008)
Post-structural	Foucault Bourdieu Baxter	Children, and people, construct their own realities and truths through language and social experience. Power dynamics occur through discourse.	In the transition process, educators explore the ways in which power relationships exist in their practice and the perspectives of other stakeholders

The theoretical perspectives outlined above are present to varying degrees in transition literature. Some, including Māori theories of development, are not widely represented. Theoretical perspectives on human growth and development inform curriculum and popular thinking about transitions. Regarding the current study, leaders are likely to have accessed theories such as those above through their school experience, professional development and initial teacher training to construct their theories of children's development. These theoretical constructions then impact on their approach to transition to school.

3.1.2 Conceptualising transition to school

The transition from early childhood education to primary school has been conceptualised in a range of ways in research, including through metaphors such as borderlands (Carr, 2013; Peters, 2014), bridges (Huser et al., 2016; Peters & Sandberg, 2017), journeys (Peters et al., 2015; Wilder & Lillvist, 2018) and braided rivers (Te One et al., 2021). I have identified three key conceptual themes within

[4] I have included Māori human development theory as it is relevant to the New Zealand context.
[5] Hauora is a Māori word meaning health. Wairua is a Māori word meaning soul or spirit (Biggs, 2012).

the literature relevant to the current study: rites of passage/liminality, continuity and change, and complexity.

Firstly, starting school can be viewed as a rite of passage constructed by adults and involving experiencing a transition at the same time as peers (Garpelin, 2014). While the socially constructed practice of children in New Zealand starting school on or around their fifth birthday means children may or may not move to primary school on the same day as a group of peers,[6] their experiences are likely to be similar to those in their class. Vogler et al. (2008) break rites of passage into three stages: preliminal (in the context of my research, separating from the early childhood context), liminal (an ongoing period rather than a moment, poised on the threshold between ECE and school), and postliminal (feeling a sense of belonging in the school context). A liminal process of constructing new identities (from being a ECE child to a school child) relates to the post-structural concept of socially constructed identities. Although transition to school encompasses all three stages, the current study concentrates on the liminal and postliminal states because the participants all came from school rather than ECE settings.

A second theme is the combination of continuity and change. Boyle, Petriwskyj, et al. (2018) argue that transition to school should be framed as "continuity practices": a set of processes and practices that occur over a longer period, which recognises individual children's experiences (Krakouer, 2016). Continuity practices have gained prevalence in transitions research over time (Vogler et al., 2008). Favouring continuity in the New Zealand context could lead to common ECE pedagogies such as learning through play being employed in the new entrant classroom. Other sources of continuity in transition include environments, relationships with peers and adults, and assessment practices (Fletcher, 2018).

Notwithstanding continuity of environment, practices and experiences, change is inherent in transition processes (Dockett et al., 2017). From an ecological perspective, change in the form of appropriate challenge is necessary and desirable for growth (Shelton, 2019). However, problems with challenge can occur when children's unique worldviews and the funds of knowledge they bring with them to school are not valued in their new school context (Dockett et al., 2017). Issues of diversity, inclusion, and deficit thinking, which result in unequally distributed challenges for children

[6] For more about the relatively new Ministry of Education policy of "cohort entry" where schools can choose to accept enrolments of new entrant children at predetermined times, see Boereboom, J., & Timms, P. (2018). Is there an optimum age for starting school in New Zealand? *New Zealand International Research in Early Childhood Education, 21*(2), 32-44. and Te Ihuwaka – Education Evaluation Centre. (2022). *Starting school together: What do we know?*

entering school, raise questions of power and equity (Petriwskyj et al., 2014; Rietveld, 2008). A post-structural perspective offers opportunities to examine these.

The third theme is the socially constructed complexity of transition (Jahreie, 2022). The interaction between many factors such as school, family, peers, ECE experiences, culture and language shapes children's transition experiences (Ma, 2019). When starting school, children make vertical transitions that involve a shift from one institution (ECE) to another (school), and horizontal transitions within their everyday lives between formal social networks (such as school) and their home (Johansson, 2007). For some children, this may involve a shift in language, culture and social organisation between their home contexts and their new school contexts. Perspectives such as post-structuralism offer opportunities for those leading transition to school approaches to recognise, examine and cater for such complexities within their approach.

In summary, the transition from early childhood to primary school is a complex rite of passage that involves a shift in children's status, roles and identities (Johansson, 2007). Inherent in the transition to school process are both continuity and change. Cultural and linguistic discontinuities exist for some children when making horizontal transitions in conjunction with vertical transitions. Children's transition experiences vary according to their context and how continuity and challenge are balanced in their ECE and school settings. Post-structural perspectives provide the opportunity to examine issues of power and equity in transition to school approaches.

3.1.3 Discourses surrounding transition to school in the New Zealand context

This section identifies and explores discourses evident in transition to school literature. During my literature search, common themes within the research emerged. Some of these are related to the conceptualisation of transitions described above. However, others were recurrent ways of framing and discussing the transition to school process. This section identifies multiple big "D" discourses of "enduring patterns of talk and text across contexts" (LeGreco, 2014, p. 6) throughout transition literature. Many of the discourses identified in Table 2 below are interconnected or overlapping. For example, readiness discourse can be an expression of neoliberalism, or play could be linked to sociocultural approaches to transition to school. Although not perfect representations of all the nuances of the identified discourses, a summary of discourses is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Discourses identified in transition to school literature

Discourse	Focus	Implications for transition to school practice	Examples of related literature
Contextualisation	Educational practice and leadership need to be adaptive and open to change to meet the needs of the school community.	Seeking viewpoints of multiple stakeholders in designing transition to school approaches may help to provide a contextualized approach. Children's experiences of transition may differ according to contextual factors.	Rietveld (2008); Sanagavarapu and Perry (2005); Dockett and Perry (2021)
Continuity	Education is ongoing and iterative, building on children's life experiences and knowledges.	Transitions may be considered as ongoing, not a moment in time, and must consider and build on children's experiences before school.	Babić (2017); Bellen (2016); Boyle, Petriwskyj, et al. (2018); Dockett and Perry (2012); Education Review Office (2015); Fletcher (2018)
Deficit	Children's lack of inherent capability, cultural appropriateness or lack of resources are viewed as responsible for educational difficulties (Bishop, 2003)	Responsibility for a child's transition could be shifted to the children instead of educators critical thinking about culturally sustaining pedagogy.	Colegrove and Adair (2014); Comber and Kamler (2004); Rietveld, 2008; Taylor (2011)
Neoliberal	The purpose of education "is the production of subjects with the knowledge and dispositions which are appropriate for servicing the economy" (Gray et. al, 2018).	Transition to school approaches may focus on enabling children's independence and self-reliance, and subject them to performance measurement (Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2022)	Haggerty (2019); Haggerty and Alcock (2016); Haggerty and Loveridge (2019); Press et al. (2018); Sardoč (2021)
Play	Play is seen as a legitimate pedagogy.	Play can be used as a bridge between early childhood education and primary school.	Aiono (2020); Aiono et al. (2019); Bellen (2016); Blucher et al. (2018); Briggs and Hansen (2012); Broström (2005); Keryn Davis (2018); Hayes (2013); Maguire (2020); Westbrook and Hunkin (2020)
Readiness	Children are viewed as having varying levels of readiness for school. The onus is on children to display their capabilities and manage themselves.	A risk of push-down of academics into ECE; justifying the prioritisation of an academic focus in transition to school processes; viewing children who are deemed "not ready" with a deficit mindset.	Belfield and Garcia (2014); Carlton and Winsler (1999); K. Evans (2015); Jahreie (2022); Mashburn et al. (2018); Mashburn and Pianta (2006); Noel (2011); Perry et al. (2014); Roberts-Holmes (2021); Snow (2006); Wickett (2017)
Relationships	Collaborative and effective relationships between professionals, families and children are important for effective learning.	During transitions, relationships between ECE, schools, families and children may be prioritized.	Cartmell (2017); Hohepa and McIntosh (2017); Peters (2010); Webb et al. (2017); Wickett (2016)
Sociocultural	Learning is contextually and culturally situated; children's previous funds of knowledge and how they fit into their new context must be considered	Transitions may be marked through rites of passage. A holistic view of transition practices, including children's other learning contexts	Peters (2014); Te One et al. (2021); Vogler et al. (2008); Yang et al. (2022);

I have chosen to explore three big "D" discourses (continuity, readiness, and play) in more depth as they are relevant to the New Zealand context, where children enter school with a range of skills, knowledges, and cultural understandings. I also outline wider discourses of neoliberalism and cultural responsiveness that have the potential to influence the first years of primary schooling in the New Zealand context.

3.1.3.1 Discourses of continuity

In the previous section, I identified continuity as a key concept in theorising transition to school. In a discourse of continuity, education is positioned as ongoing and iterative, and continuity between environments, experiences and expectations is valued (OECD, 2020). A discourse of continuity is evident in the New Zealand Curriculum which suggests that schools need to "[build] on the learning experiences that the child brings with them" through "[building] upon and [making] connections with early childhood learning and experiences" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 41).

Within continuity discourses, children are positioned as bringing funds of knowledge, experiences and cultural understandings with them in the transition to school (Hartley et al., 2012). As explored in Chapter 2, post-structural approaches view identities as socially constructed, which means a children's identity at ECE is different from their identity in the school environment. Going from a "big kid" at ECE to a "little kid" at school is a possible source of discontinuity for children.

Collaboration between a non-compulsory sector and a compulsory one is complex and influenced by historical contexts, positions of power, and pedagogical practices (Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; Nolan et al., 2021). The enactment of continuity practices in the New Zealand context has been identified as problematic due to structural discontinuity between the ECE sector and compulsory schooling in New Zealand (Wright, 2010). Discontinuity arises due to curricular differences (McChesney & Carr, 2021), or differing pedagogical beliefs and practices (Wright, 2010).

In discourses of continuity, cross-sector collaboration and sharing of information about children are prioritised (Dockett & Perry, 2014). A discourse of continuity implies an imperative for schools to engage with early childhood services to develop school-based practices and pedagogies similar to those in the pre-school sector. However, an alternative construction of transition still within a continuity discourse is the "schoolification" of early childhood, meaning a push down of academic learning and formal environments into the ECE sector, which is an issue linked to policy development in New Zealand (Alcock & Haggerty, 2013; Bellen, 2016).

3.1.3.2 Discourse of readiness

The contested notion of child readiness in the context of transition to school is debated widely in literature and can be understood as a "predefined spectrum of knowledge, skills and identities" (K. Evans, 2015). Although the emphasis on child readiness has shifted somewhat towards the readiness of schools to receive children (Dockett & Perry, 2021; Noel, 2011; Petriwskyj & Grieshaber, 2011; Petriwskyj et al., 2014), discussion and problematisation of the readiness discourse still exists in recent literature (K. Evans, 2015; Jahreie, 2022; Mashburn et al., 2018; Pan et al., 2019; Roberts-

Holmes, 2021). Within a spectrum of knowledge and skills, "the 'ready-child' is constructed as a normative identity towards which the 'unready' child is expected to progress" (K. Evans, 2015, p. 33). The readiness discourse is constructed and perpetuated within the ECE and school sectors through policy documents and government-funded research (K. Evans, 2013; Walsh et al., 2020).

Given that the literature reviewed earlier showed the importance of continuity during transitions, a child readiness discourse is a potential source of discontinuity. Boyle (2021) problematises practices founded in a readiness discourse, such as checklists provided by primary schools, as a hierarchical positioning of ECE (and families) as the "sender" and school as the "receiver". ECE is placed in a subordinate role of preparing children for school (Sisson et al., 2020). Practices like readiness checklists highlight discontinuities between sectors such as philosophy, expectations, and curriculum (Boyle, 2021). *Te Whāriki* rejects the notion of a singular pathway to learning and by implication, the concept of definable school "readiness", instead focussing on children's individual strengths (Jacobs et al., 2021). A strengths-based approach directly contrasts with one that presents an idealised school child identity. Constructing transition to school practices within a readiness discourse, therefore, risks damaging cross-sector relationships and children's experiences of continuity as they transition to school.

Readiness discourses are problematised in literature as producing deficit perspectives on children. Two examples are privileging English language competence (Jacobs et al., 2021), or focussing "negatively on children's non-normative characteristics, rather than considering school and community inputs to educational success" (Petriwskyj et al., 2014, p. 359). In a super diverse Auckland, school leaders using readiness checklists or framing communications with parents and ECEs from a readiness perspective risk ineffective transition experiences for large proportions of tamariki entering their school.

3.1.3.3 Discourses of play

Play is a potential source of continuity between early childhood experiences and school, or a "transitory activity system" (Broström, 2005). A critical pedagogy in *Te Whāriki*, learning through play has become more common as a set of pedagogical practices in primary school and has been examined more recently in research in primary schools (Keryn Davis, 2018; Peters et al., 2015). Play is described as a "powerful" method of learning with "well-documented" benefits to learning (Aiono et al., 2019, p. 59), and seen as a "more appropriate way for children to learn and develop" than approaches focused on academic achievement (Maguire, 2020, p. 9).

Within a discourse of play, children are positioned as agentic and capable of constructing their own learning (Westbrook & Hunkin, 2020). Teachers are positioned as creators of play opportunities, yet also trying to deliver an achievement focussed curriculum and maintain continuity of learning from early childhood (Aiono et al., 2019).

Different perspectives and implementations of play in new entrant or kindergarten classrooms have been identified in literature. Pyle et al. (2018) suggest that teachers' understanding and implementation of play in junior school classrooms is on a continuum from adult-led, highly structured classrooms at one end, to unstructured, child-led classrooms with little adult interaction at the other. Somewhere in the middle lie classrooms employing a play-based learning approach with a combination of adult and child led experiential activities. Barriers to implementing play in the new entrant classroom are described in the literature as including professional development, resources, classroom space, and play valued by leadership (Baron et al., 2016). For the current study, how leaders perceive the value of play may impact on the balance of curriculum and pedagogy within their contexts.

3.1.3.4 Wider educational discourses

The previous sections discussed three discourses evident in the literature on transition to school. In addition, I also identified two discourses that are part of wider New Zealand educational discourse and have the potential to impact on transition to school practices.

Neoliberal discourse

Over the last thirty years, New Zealand education has been subject to a succession of neoliberal educational policies focussing on (amongst others) individualism, choice, performativity and accountability (Starr, 2019). In educational policy, neoliberal discourse "promotes business approaches to school policy, rational management of school organizations, calls for greater efficiency, demands for accountability standards related to curriculum outcomes, and increased performance" (Tucker & Fushell, 2021). One such policy was the National Standards framework (Browne, 2022; Ritchie et al., 2014). This framework was introduced in 2009 and directly impacted new entrant classrooms, requiring schools to report on the reading, writing and maths achievement of children who had been at school for as little as six months.

Research into the impact of National Standards on transition to school approaches is limited. However, it is widely accepted that the implementation of this standards-based policy narrowed the curriculum, which would have had an inevitable impact on a child's first year of schooling (Aiono, 2020). The Ministry of Education's Advisory Group on Early Learning noted a "pressure on educators

to adopt more formal literacy and numeracy approaches" with the introduction of National Standards (Advisory Group on Early Learning, 2015, p. 53). There is research evidence that the curriculum has remained narrow since National Standards were removed in 2017 (Browne, 2022; Thrupp, 2018). I hope to contribute some understanding of the lasting impacts of this policy on the transition to school in the current study.

Cultural responsiveness discourse

Culturally responsive practice in education is a response to growing diversity in schools, focused on embracing cultural differences to sustain student and community ways of being (Khalifa et al., 2016; Shiller, 2020). Culturally responsive pedagogy is an approach that requires educators to understand that learning is "deeply embedded in the types of relationships that exist between ourselves, our learners, and their whānau" (M. Berryman et al., 2018, p. 8). Persistent educational inequities experienced by Māori and other minoritized communities make culturally responsive practice an imperative (Bishop et al., 2014).

In the context of transition to school, employing a culturally responsive pedagogical approach moves relationships beyond the transactional framework of interactions between home and school, such as reporting, preschool visits and parent meetings. Instead, educators need to work hard to understand the experiences, aspirations, and cultural identities of children and whānau and change practice to reflect these (M. Berryman et al., 2018). Culturally responsive practice is associated with a successful transition to school, particularly for Māori and Pasifika children (Peters, 2010).

When considering what effective transition into mainstream school would look like from a Māori perspective, the current body of transition to school research offers limited support. A lack of Māori voices in transitions research, whether it be those of children, whānau or communities, has been noted (Hohepa & Paki, 2017; Peters, 2014). However, there are glimpses into what an effective Māori transition could look like. Borrowing from the field of social work, the notion of "rituals of encounter" provides a first step towards power-sharing relationships with whānau and tamariki in the transition to school (Fulcher, 2001). An example of a ritual of encounter for Māori whānau is a pōwhiri, identified by Mitchell (2019) from a Māori perspective as tikanga, or a protocol "essential for building and sustaining new and existing relationships with others" (Mitchell, 2019, p. 81). Other research into Māori medium education transitions offers possible transition practices including ways to embrace te reo Māori, or Māori language, development (Bright et al., 2017).

Finally, another possible source for leaders of transition to school seeking Māori perspectives is *Te Whāriki*, which is influenced by Māori human development theory: a "deep respect for the life force

of the universe, where everything is interconnected, and a learning theory related to a Vygotskyan perspective with the social context as a forceful indicator for learning and development" (Samuelsson et al., 2006, p. 16). Developing continuity of learning through *Te Whāriki* in the first year of school could provide opportunities to include Māori perspectives in transition to school approaches.

3.1.4 Transitions summary

This section has provided an overview of the transition to school literature relevant to the New Zealand context. Theoretical constructions of transition, such as ecological, sociocultural and developmental theories, intersect with discourses in the transition literature such as readiness, play and continuity. The way discourses construct transition to school approaches is complex, given tension between policy and practice.

A post-structural approach is not common in transition to school literature. The current study thus offers a fresh perspective on transition to school by examining the interaction between discourses in context. The next section will examine the discourses available to school leaders in the New Zealand context to construct their approach to leadership, and the roles discourses may take in leading transition to school.

3.2 Educational leadership in the New Zealand context

This section reviews relevant literature conceptualisations of educational leadership, internationally and within New Zealand, and applies the literature to the context of leading transition to school. Educational research is a wide and growing field with many options for framing leadership practice. However, literature specifically on the leadership of transition to school or junior school leadership within New Zealand primary schools is scant. Hence, this study provides an opportunity for a new perspective on educational leadership research.

3.2.1 Defining educational leadership

Understanding how leadership is conceptualised in New Zealand schools offers insights into how transition approaches may be shaped by their contexts. This section summarises elements of educational leadership literature relevant to the current study and describes how leadership is conceptualised in different ways.

Educational leadership is a broad field of research, and its definition is open to critique. Accepted definitions involve conceptualising leaders as those who practice "influence to achieve

organisational goals" (James et al., 2020, p. 619). Educational leadership research has grown in "size, scope and impact" over the last half century (McGinity et al., 2022, p. 218).

In educational leadership literature in New Zealand and internationally, leadership has traditionally been conceptualised as relating to attributes of individuals, resulting in a "leadership style" or "leadership identity". A proliferation of models and types have become available to leaders. These include instructional leadership, which targets student learning through leaders' influence; transformational leadership, focussing on values and leadership influence; managerial leadership, which assumes that leaders influence on tasks, behaviours and functions will lead to outcomes; relational leadership which views leadership as a dialogic process; distributed leadership in which expertise across the organisation is engaged; and Kaupapa Māori leadership which commits to protecting and nurturing Māori voice (Bush & Glover, 2014; David, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2010b).

Definitions of leadership in New Zealand models show consistency with some leadership styles above. *Kiwi Leadership for Principals,* a resource document for New Zealand principals, takes a managerial perspective on principals' leadership roles, saying that "in short, principals are ultimately responsible for the day-to-day management of everything that happens in their schools" (Ministry of Education, 2008a, p. 7). *Leading from the Middle: Educational Leadership for Middle and Senior Leaders* identifies middle and senior leaders roles as instructional, "with a focus on pedagogy and on the systems needed to support teachers and students" (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 6). In these official models of leadership, a hierarchical organisation is favoured, with principals ultimately "accountable to their boards of trustees for the effective conduct of … responsibilities" (Ministry of Education, 2008a, p. 7). In contrast, *Tū Rangatira*, for Māori medium education, demonstrates a relational and kaupapa Māori approach with leaders' key role defined as being "centred on the development and expansion of the kura community, and interests associated with the wider community." (Ministry of Education, 2010b, p. 7).

The first two of these three models construct the leader as the locus of educational leadership, either centred in the leadership model or at the top of a hierarchy. *Tū Rangatira*, however, positions leadership as a collective endeavour and is more consistent with the idea of leadership as "a widespread organisational phenomenon" (James et al., 2020, p. 622). I argue for the applicability of this framing of leadership as practice and its appropriateness for this study in the next section.

3.2.1.1 Leadership as practice

The conceptualisation of leadership as a personal style, implying stable leadership identities, has been contested in recent years, and a shift towards defining leadership as a set of practices has occurred (Boyle & Wilkinson, 2018; Edwards-Groves et al., 2022; Jayavant, 2016; Ladkin, 2020; Wilkinson, 2021). Viewing leadership through a "site-ontological" perspective (in which practices of leadership are understood to be socially constructed within organisational contexts) shifts the focus to the interactive nature of context in shaping leadership practices, and away from the notion of leadership as stable individual identities (Boyle, Petriwskyj, et al., 2018).

Educational leadership practices are distinct from roles of formal authority in that leadership practices can be enacted by anyone in an educational setting, potentially creating a shared responsibility for leadership (Wilkinson, 2021). Uncoupling roles from practices creates accessibility for others within the school context, not only those with leadership positions. That is, to have a "leadership style", one is assumed to have an identity as a leader through occupying a positional leadership position. In contrast, conceptualising leadership as a set of practices enables anyone to enact leadership, thus raising possibilities for shared momentum within school contexts. Viewing leadership through a practice lens results in "a more fulsome, dynamic complex composition of leading practices in education" (Edwards-Groves et al., 2022, p. 2). In the New Zealand context, Robinson et al. (2009) conceptualise leadership that "includes both positional and distributed leadership; views leadership as highly fluid and sees leadership as embedded in specific tasks and situations" (p. 66).

Conceptualising leadership as practice is consistent with the post-structural approach I described in Chapter 2. That is, just as people create realities within social contexts, leaders create their identities through discursive constructions within social contexts. Focusing on the social construction of leadership identities responds to scholars' scepticism about both the basis of leadership models, and the centrality of the leader and their personal traits instead of the context in which they lead (Ladkin & Patrick, 2022). As a post-structural paradigm underpins this research, it would be inconsistent to say that individual leaders' traits remain consistent across contexts and that leadership identity is stable. Instead, I posit that leadership can be viewed as a set of practices inextricably tied to the context within which they occur.

3.2.2 Discourses of leadership in New Zealand

This section describes and problematises big "D" Discourses in educational leadership research relevant to New Zealand and relates them to transition to school. Social justice, pedagogical leadership, context, collaboration and complexity as discursive themes were ""enduring patterns of

talk and text" within leadership research (LeGreco, 2014, p. 6). These big "D" Discourses were socially constructed frameworks of leadership within literature that reflect how power relations are performed within educational contexts (Burman, 2017).

3.2.2.1 Discourse of social justice in leadership

Social justice is a "fluid and contested" phenomenon (M. Morrison et al., 2015) which can be understood to "challenge, confront, and disrupt misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on race, social class, gender, and other social and human differences" (Parkes et al., 2010, p. 173). Social justice is based in critical theory, which "draw[s] attention to unequal distribution of power" (Petriwskyj, 2014, p. 202). A social justice orientation in leadership is particularly relevant in New Zealand, where considerable educational inequities exist, exacerbated by neoliberal policies that perpetuate colonial mindsets (Milne, 2016). A social justice discourse is evident in the literature examining ECE leadership (Jacobson, 2019), transition to school (Perry, 2014), and leadership in Auckland primary schools (Jayavant, 2016).

Within a social justice discourse, leaders are positioned as examiners of power relations, advocates for equity and decision makers who reframe practices to create inclusivity. Leaders must critically examine practices to identify children whose perspectives have been overlooked and practices leading to marginalisation of groups (Petriwskyj, 2014). Social justice discourses link to transformative leadership, where leadership practices centre on the *why* rather than the *what* or *how* of leadership (Shields, 2004). Parkes et al. (2010) link post-structuralist approaches to social justice leadership, concluding that although we are all complicit in current practices, post-structuralism offers a difficult but worthwhile journey to social justice through "productive rethinking" and "perpetual problematization" (Parkes et al., 2010, p. 180): that is, constantly questioning current practices and examining them for deficit thinking and bias. In the context of leadership of transition to school, taking a post-structural, social justice approach means asking: *Who is marginalised by this transition practice?* Or: *How does our/my approach perpetuate educational inequities?* The post-structural approach of interrogating underlying beliefs is echoed by other social justice discourse literature (Karina Davis et al., 2015; Petriwskyj, 2014).

3.2.2.2 Discourse of instructional leadership

Instructional leadership, also called pedagogical leadership, is a consistent, strong body of literature and has become "increasingly accepted globally as a normative expectation" (Hallinger, 2015, p. 15). A discourse of instructional leadership is constructed and reconstructed within New Zealand through government-funded reviews such as *School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why. Best evidence synthesis iteration (BES)* which found instructional leadership to be

more effective than transformational leadership (Robinson et al., 2009). The rise of an instructional leadership discourse within New Zealand is further credited to (Hattie, 2009), who identified in a meta-analysis of education research that instructional leadership had an effect size of .42, compared to .11 for transformational leadership.

Within an instructional leadership discourse, leaders are positioned as experts in learning (Cardno et al., 2018). Expert positioning of leaders appears in policy and guidance documents, including around leader's roles as "leading pedagogical change, which involves acting as a model for effective pedagogical practice" (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 8). A broader conceptualisation of instructional leadership identified by Shatzer et al. (2014) links to distributed leadership identities, in that leaders' roles within the instructional leadership discourse shift away from managing the instructional programme themselves to identifying potential for instructional leadership in others. One pathway to distributed leadership is through learning communities, linking instructional leadership to discourses of collaboration.

Instructional leadership discourse has been criticised as placing too much focus on the leader as the centre of expertise, and being primarily concerned with teaching rather than learning (Bush & Glover, 2014). These criticisms are particularly pertinent to traditional definitions of instructional leadership that do not include the distribution of instructional leadership capacity. Kalman and Arslan (2016) identified that while instructional leadership is desirable, it may be aspirational in some contexts. Consideration of contextual factors is relevant in crises (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), where leaders' roles pivot to reflect extraordinary circumstances (Mutch, 2020) and strategic leadership may be put aside (Bush, 2021).

Within transition to school, instructional leadership is challenging since leadership of the junior school is no longer recognised in New Zealand as a specialist role (May, 2011). It is clear that effective pedagogy and practice support young children's engagement and motivation for learning (Lincoln & Cooper, 2017). However, discourses that position senior leaders as instructional experts may put this at risk: senior leaders have often been out of the classroom for some time and are often removed from daily pedagogical practice. The leadership literature also shows that pedagogical change is most effective when led close to the site of change, that is, the classroom (Maughan et al., 2012). In the transition to school, therefore, I suggest that an instructional leadership discourse should be employed with care, to ensure that the most appropriate people are positioned as "experts" in transitioning children to school.

3.2.2.3 Discourse of collaboration in leadership

In the New Zealand context, collaborative leadership and involvement of stakeholders such as parents, whānau, communities and iwi emerge as discursive themes in the literature (Kamp, 2020; Kitchen et al., 2016; Notman & Henry, 2011). Collaboration is a key component of the professional growth requirements for school leaders (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, n.d.). Collaboration "conceptualizes leadership as an organizational property aimed at school improvement" rather than as a result of formal position (Hallinger & Heck, 2010, p. 656). Discourses of collaboration are linked to relational leadership through co-construction of approaches and to distributed leadership by allowing others to share expertise. Collaborative leadership practices have been promoted in New Zealand by forming clusters of schools called Kāhui Ako[7] (Kamp, 2020).

Within a collaborative discourse, leaders are positioned as "nodes" within a network, creating and building professional development networks (Kamp, 2020, p. 187). Leaders within this discourse view their purpose as constructing collective approaches to educational improvement or growth (Education Review Office, 2016). This work may involve aspects of distributed leadership as leaders share power with others who have expertise. Leaders are positioned as creating buy-in to shared values and vision through their interpersonal skills (Notman & Henry, 2011).

Collaboration as a leadership practice brings challenges, particularly when considering power relations in across-sector collaboration (Kamp, 2020; Sinnema et al., 2020). In the context of transition to school, power differentials may exist between the compulsory and non-compulsory sector and the history of engagement between the two sectors can bring challenges. However, there are successful examples of collaboration between sectors when working on transition to school practices in New Zealand (Bond et al., 2019; Te One et al., 2021). Collaboration required flexibility of thinking from participants: "enabling systems change requires a commitment to equity and the courage to let go of unhelpful organisational structures" (Te One et al., 2021, p. 47). For leadership of transition to school, genuine collaboration requires school leaders to view ECE leaders as equals and co-construct contextually appropriate transition practices.

3.2.2.4 Discourse of context in leadership

Leadership in context is a growing discursive theme in leadership literature (K. Morrison, 2010; M. Morrison, 2019; Noman & Gurr, 2020; Rubie-Davies et al., 2012; Wedell, 2009). Ladkin (2020)

[7] For more about Kāhui Ako, and the controversy that surrounded introduction of the policy of creating communities of schools to lift achievement, see Thrupp, M. (2019). To be 'in the tent' or abandon it? A school clusters policy and the responses of New Zealand educational leaders. In J. Wilkinson, R. Niesche, & S. Eacott (Eds.), *Reconceptualising educational leadership, policy and social justice as resources for hope* (pp. 132-144). Routledge.

suggests that as leadership cannot exist in a vacuum, examining only leadership traits to understand how leadership works is illogical. Instead, she advocates studying the phenomenon of leadership by asking questions about the context in which leadership occurs. Sanga et al. (2020) describe the contextualisation of leadership practices as "[referring] to the adoption of ways of understanding, thinking and working recognisable and coherent within local practice" (p. 18). Adapting leadership practice to context includes considering situated contexts such as the school setting and history; professional contexts such as values, policy, and teacher experience; material contexts such as staffing, property and budgets; and external contexts such as broader policy and legal responsibilities. These contexts are interrelated and interactive (Braun et al., 2011).

A discourse approach to examining context views it as "multi-layered, co-created, contestable, and locally achieved" (Fairhurst, 2009, p. 1607). Leaders, therefore, need to closely examine each leadership context to select appropriate approaches to leadership and recognise their role as constructors of context. Without contextualising leadership practices, school leaders may fall into the trap where "the workings of school become so habitual that individuals fail to recognize the ways in which their leadership actions, identities and relations are products of these spaces" (N. W. Arnold & McMahon, 2019, p. 2). Leaders must continually re-examine practices and approaches that may have historical origins and are taken for granted within a contextual leadership discourse.

Within a contextual leadership discourse, leaders are positioned as adaptive and flexible, effective communicators, and able to draw upon a range of appropriate leadership practices (Brauckmann et al., 2020; S. Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017). The way context is positioned, however, can be problematic. In official context discourses in New Zealand, leaders are exhorted "to adapt or adjust their leadership practices to meet the particular demands of school context" (Ministry of Education, 2008a, p. 13). Leaders are at the mercy of school contexts, which appear to be placed on a continuum of least to most challenging: "The greater the challenge of the school context, the greater the need for a deliberate leadership focus on student learning and well-being" (Ministry of Education, 2008a, p. 16). Although sharing leadership roles is "desirable and achievable", the locus of control resides with the principal to "turn around" a "troubled school" through effective strategy (Ministry of Education, 2008a, p. 16). School contexts are positioned as a constraint or enabler, and principals need to draw upon their skills to make up for difficult contexts. In this way, discourses of context interact with discourses of deficit, and do not view community settings as a strength. Context discourse in this form is problematic for leadership of transition to school, a process to which relationships and upholding mana are fundamental to success.

3.2.2.5 Discourse of complexity in leadership

The multiple factors influencing leadership—including the various facets of context, the identities available to leaders within their contexts, and the conceptualisation of leadership roles within official discourse and everyday practice—lead to some scholars drawing upon complexity theory to examine and explain leadership. Using a complexity discourse in leadership has been proposed as "a set of challenges, proposals and tenets that also offer school leaders and managers alternatives to linear ways of thinking and acting" (K. Morrison, 2010, p. 375). Complexity in leadership recognises that educational contexts are non-linear, difficult to predict and cannot be viewed in a reductionist manner (K. Morrison, 2010). In particular, complexity discourses reject notions of universal "best practice" and instead focus on "emergent practice": that is, recognising that cause and effect are not clear in many decision-making processes and that it is often more appropriate to probe, observe patterns and then respond (Snowden & Boone, 2007).

Within a complexity discourse, leaders are positioned as dynamic decision-makers who make sense of emerging patterns in their leadership environments (Da'As, 2022; Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Mawdsley, 2018). Dynamic leadership has been very apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, as school leaders have been required to adapt practice in situations where the future is unpredictable (Netolicky & Golledge, 2021). Within a complex environment, "predictions based on past practice are not always possible" (Mawdsley, 2018, p. ii).

The implications of complexity discourses for my study are that the findings cannot be decontextualised, as the leadership practices participants describe will result from multiple complexities within their unique context.

3.2.3 Summary of leadership discourses

My review of literature led me to identify five discourses of educational leadership that are apparent within the New Zealand context: social justice, instructional leadership, collaboration, context, and complexity. It is important to note that these discourses are not a menu that leaders select from. Rather,

> Individual leaders … are drawn to [leadership discourses] unknowingly. They follow the discourse that is normative to them. All discourses are always present, but which ones are more dominant depends on personal and social contexts, history, geography and culture, and also the specific demands of the workplace. (Western, 2013, p. 318)

Given the availability of leadership literature and professional development opportunities, I would contend that leaders are not always "unknowing" (as Western's quote suggests) about their

construction and reproduction of discourses within their leadership practices. However, some discourses will be more dominant within the "specific demands" of the school-specific context. In some contexts, certain discourses will be less subject to resistance for leaders: for instance, a school that has espoused values of collaboration and distribution of leadership practices is likely to be dominated by different discourses than a school that has a strong hierarchy and clearly defined roles focussed on achievement. Having outlined some of the prevalent discourses circulating in educational leadership literature, I will now look specifically at the leadership of transition to school.

3.3 Leadership of transition to school

When I embarked on this literature review, I expected to find many articles about leadership and the transition to school. However, after many months of searching, I came up with very few. A perspective on leading transition could be built from understanding (separately) discourses of transition and discourses of leadership and then combining the two; however, studies of the leadership of transition to school are few and far between (as noted by Boyle, Petriwskyj, et al., 2018; Dockett & Perry, 2021; Noel, 2011). Evidence within the general transition to school literature does identify that "designated leader[s], fill major roles in building understanding of the importance and nature of transition and committing to developing responsive transition programs" (Dockett & Perry, 2021). Therefore, my study offers an opportunity to better understand the influence of those leading transition to school.

The intersection of the discourses prevalent in transition literature and those in leadership literature offers insight into effective leadership practices that may support transition. Firstly, collaboration, particularly between sectors, is not only a leadership discourse but has also been identified as a hallmark of effective transition to school approaches. Collaboration is evident in continuity discourses around transition, through enabling communication about children and their experiences (Hartley et al., 2012) and identifying and acting on opportunities to align pedagogical practices (Broström, 2005). Secondly, instructional leadership, whether by the senior leader in charge of transition or another teacher in the school, is necessary for effective transition to school. Thirdly, discourses of context were identified in both transition and leadership literature. Leaders of transition practices need to consider aspects of the situated, professional, material and external context (Braun et al., 2011) that are relevant to the transition from ECE to school. In practice, this includes considering links to local ECEs and the community (Hartley et al., 2012); the experience, knowledge and professional development of the new entrant teaching team (Education Review Office, 2015); the physical classroom and school environments, and resource allocation to transition to school; and the wider educational policy context impacting on the transition to school (for

example, policy that provides checkpoints for achievement and labels children in relation to standards (Perry, 2014).

Hartley et al. (2012) state that "there are no simple recipes" for effective transitions; rather, transitions are "dynamic, multi-faceted and complex" (p. 92). In their decision making framework, Snowden and Boone (2007) offer a method to define complexity against which we can assess transition to school approaches. Features of transition to school approaches that meet the criteria of complexity include:

- Large numbers of interacting elements: these include experiences of children transitioning; multiple stakeholders including teachers, ECEs, whānau and community; and situated, professional, material, and external contexts to consider;
- Solutions cannot be imposed: what works in one school may not work in another, and approaches to transition arise from context;
- Elements of the system evolve: changes to transition approaches occur over time and have a historical element (for example, taken-for-granted practices like preschool visits on Wednesdays);
- External conditions and systems constantly change: for example, there are new children coming in all the time, and how they respond to their transition is unpredictable;
- The agents and system constrain each other: from a discursive perspective, leaders and their contexts are intertwined and discourses both produce and reproduce leadership practices and identities.

It is clear that under Snowden and Boone's (2007) definition, transition to school is a complex system; therefore, the transition leadership is also complex. The complexities of the transition to school are likely to lead to contradictions, and leadership practices that draw upon multiple discourses. By using a post-structural perspective, the current study offers an opportunity to unpack these complexities and surface discourses underlying transition practices using interview data from participants in this study.

3.4 Conclusion

The literature reviewed has highlighted that transition to school is complex. A summary of the key findings regarding transitions is as follows:

1. Educational transitions can be conceptualised and theorised in multiple ways, and major theories such as developmental, ecological, and sociocultural theories underpin the discourses prevalent in transitions literature.

2. The “rite of passage” that is transitioning to from ECE to primary school involves continuity, challenge, and complexity.
3. Discourses underpinning transition to school literature relevant to the New Zealand context include readiness, continuity and play, and children’s identities at school are constructed through these discourses.

The literature review then moved onto educational leadership, and the findings can be summarised as follows:

1. Educational leadership can be conceptualised as personal leadership styles or as sets of practices, the latter of which is an appropriate framing for the current study.
2. Discursive themes in educational leadership research relevant to the New Zealand context include social justice, collaboration, complexity, context, and instructional leadership.

Finally, I reviewed the intersection between transition to school and educational leadership, arguing that more research into transition to school from school leaders’ perspectives is needed. The ways in which school leaders enact leadership can impact on transition to school practices and the experiences of children and whānau (Boyle & Wilkinson, 2018), and the voices of school leaders are underrepresented in transition literature. The present research responds to this gap in the available literature. Chapter 4 describes the methodology used to explore leaders’ discursive constructions of their approaches to transition.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter describes the design, methodology and instrumentation of this qualitative, post-structural discourse analysis research into school leaders' approaches to transition to school. Following the description of the conceptual and theoretical framework of the current study in Chapter 2, this chapter describes and justifies the research design of the qualitative discourse analysis undertaken.

Firstly, I remind the reader of the research questions investigated in the current study and explain the research design approach. Secondly, I outline the research data gathering, including a description of the participants and how I conducted the interviews. Thirdly, I explain the data management and analysis and describe the discourse analysis process undertaken. Finally, I discuss the quality of the research, ethical considerations, and researcher reflexivity.

The literature review in Chapter 3 revealed an underrepresentation of school leaders' roles in transition to school research. Therefore, I chose to take a post-structural discourse analysis approach to a qualitative study giving an authentic voice to leaders in their approach to transition to school.

The study seeks to examine these questions:

How do school senior leaders discursively construct approaches to transition to school and their own and others' identities within their contexts?

Specifically, the research investigates:

> *How are transition to school approaches discursively constructed by school leaders in school-specific contexts?*
>
> *How do school leaders discursively construct identities of themselves and others through their transition to school approaches?*

4.1 Research design

This section describes the qualitative research approach, interactive research model, and discourse analysis approach taken in this study.

4.1.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research assumes that there is more than one version of reality or construction of knowledge and uses words as data to investigate contextual realities (V. Clarke & Braun, 2013). It evolves from research questions that ask how and why phenomena occur (V. Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Consistent with a qualitative approach, the research questions examine how school leaders constructed their transition approaches and identities through discourse.

Qualitative research "seeks to understand and interpret more local meanings [and] recognises data as gathered in a context" (V. Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 3). The conceptual framework of this research (see Chapter 2) uses a post-structural perspective to understand meanings as socially constructed, consistent with an interpretive approach to contextual data. A qualitative approach provided a way to examine how underlying discourses shape school leaders' identities, activities, and relationships in school-specific contexts (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Although the research is conducted within specific contexts, employing a discourse analysis approach allows the investigation of beliefs and understandings underpinning leaders' practices and relates these contextual constructions to Big "D" Discourses circulating in external contexts.

The purpose of the research questions is not to predict or generalise (as in quantitative research) but to interpret and, compatible with a post-structural paradigm, deconstruct phenomena (Bhattacharya, 2017). Examining the discursive constructions of school leaders' approaches to transition to school assumes that there are many ways that approaches could be constructed. Unpinning leadership practices or transition activities are beliefs that lead participants to choose particular practices and activities. The qualitative purpose of this research is to identify and problematise the discourses underpinning practices and activities.

Qualitative research views those engaged in research not as subjects but as participants (D. R. Berryman, 2019). The participatory nature of research is an essential understanding of post-structural thought: realities are socially constructed. Undertaking research from this point of view means that it cannot only be systematic but also create a deep form of engagement that weaves together the knowledge of the participants and researcher (Punch & Oancea, 2014). I acknowledge my role as the researcher in constructing shared understandings during the interview process.

4.1.2 Interactive research model

Chapter 2 outlined and justified the concepts and theories underlying this research. To briefly recap, through the conceptual framework, I employ a social constructivist ontology and a post-structural epistemology to examine the interplay between discourse, context, and identities. The components of the conceptual framework are interactive. The interactive nature of the research extends to the goals, methods, research questions and validity of the research design.

To illustrate the interactive and iterative nature of qualitative research studies, Maxwell (2013) offers a structure that can assist in the design of research projects and bring clarity to crucial

components of the research. I have chosen to use the model proposed by Maxwell (2013) as it supports a post-structural approach where "theory and method [are] seen as flexible and iterative in the research process emerging from the data but also from the very process of the personally transformative research act itself" (Thomas & Corbett, 2018, p. 176). An interactive model for this research is in Figure 2 below.

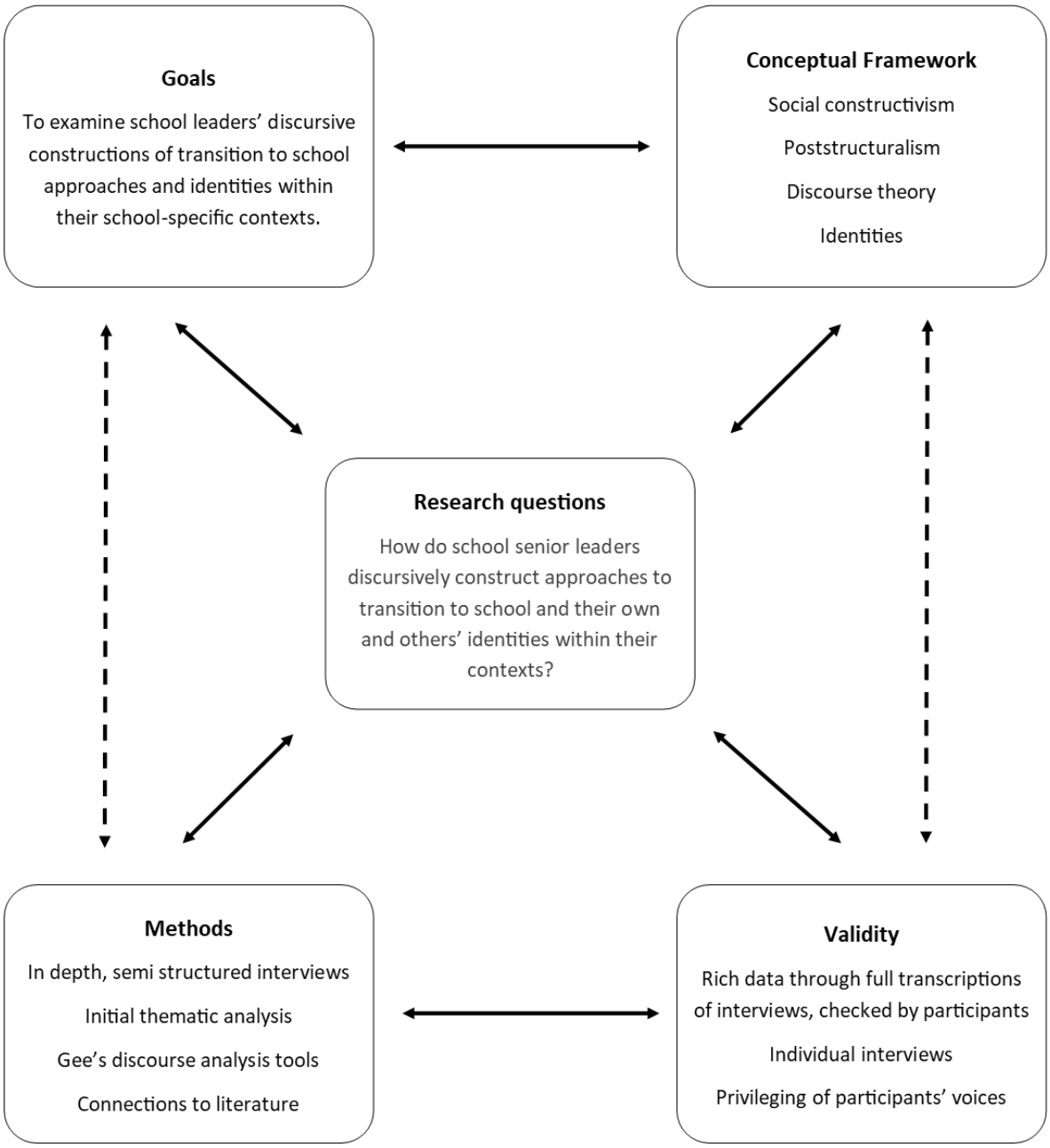

Figure 2 Research design adapted from Maxwell (2013)

This model connects five elements of the research design: research questions, conceptual framework, goals, methods and validity (Maxwell, 2013). The arrows illustrate that aspects of the research framework are conceptualised as one part of a whole; to be robust, these five parts of the

research design must be integrated and consistent (Maxwell, 2013). The current study has a strong theoretical basis for building methods and validity through a tightly linked triangle of goals, research questions and conceptual framework.

4.1.3 Discourse analysis approach

In Chapter 2, I defined discourse for this study as "language in use" (Gee & Handford, 2012, p. 1). Through explanation and inquiry, discourse analysis offers an opportunity to interrogate who can speak and with what authority within particular contexts, in this case, school-specific contexts in leaders' descriptions of approaches to transition to school, and examine subjectivity and power relations (Ball, 2010, p. 2).

Discourse analysis seeks to examine the links between statements/language and the social actions in which they are embedded (Cohen et al., 2018). Foucault (1972) described how discourse could be used to analyse systems of knowledge and the power relations that make certain systems more important than others. He held that the "statement" was particularly important and that statements are meaningless without context or something to which they refer. The discourse analysis in the current study surfaces small "d" discourses circulating within leaders' talk, which are linked to big "D" Discourses (identified in Chapter 3) circulating in the wider educational context.

An "unrelenting scepticism" towards absolute truth, or any explanations founded on the concept, is a methodological imperative when undertaking discourse analysis (Hook, 2001, p. 524). This scepticism has the effect of making the researcher aware of possibilities and encourages the examination of power relationships. Ideas in leadership and institutions such as schools often become entrenched as "the way we do things around here". Discourse analysis allows researchers and participants to critically examine beliefs underlying constructions of realities (Henze, 2001, in Arriaza, 2015).

4.2 Research data

Discourse analysis can be completed on a range of language forms such as texts, documents, policy, and movies (and many discourse analysis research studies examine more than one form). For this research, the interview transcripts form the empirical data for analysis (Cruickshank, 2012). This section describes the specific processes and instruments, including the form, participation, and conduct of the interviews.

4.2.1 Interviews

I used semi-structured interviews as a method in this study. This interview form is consistent with the paradigm underpinning this research, working on the premise that knowledge is rooted in immediate experiences, and the researcher's task is to interpret these experiences (Cohen et al., 2018).

4.2.1.1 Participants

Most participants in the study were deputy principals responsible for overseeing the junior school. One participant was an across school leader with a Kāhui Ako, working on transitions across several schools. Two participants had responsibility for coordinating provision for children with special needs across the school (a role known as a SENCo).

Any information that may cumulatively lead to the identification of participants, such as other school and ECE names or professional development providers' names, has been excluded from the findings.

The cohorts of Year one students in participating schools varied from 85 to 143 as of 1 July 2020 (Education Counts, 2020). All schools draw upon diverse communities that include various cultures, ethnicities, and languages. The proportion of students identifying as Pākeha varied from under 3% to almost 48%. Students identifying as Asian varied between 29% and 63%; as Māori varied from approximately 5% to 16%; and as Pasifika, from 6% to 19%. Figure 3 shows the clear diversity of student populations in participating schools.

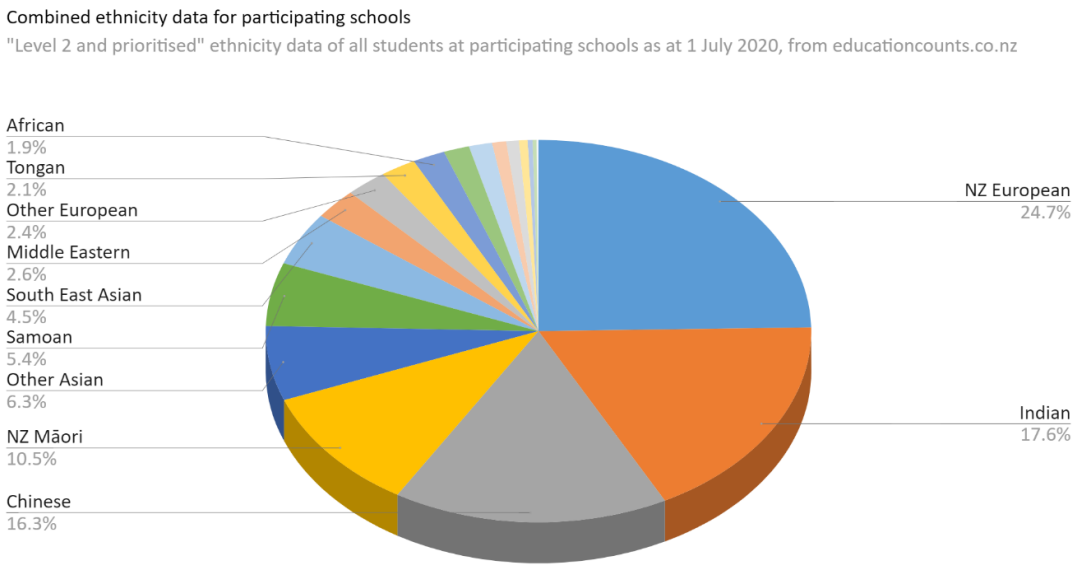

Figure 3 Combined ethnicity data for participating schools

All participating schools had a team of new entrant and year one teachers led by a team leader. These teams varied in size according to the number of students and how schools chose to structure their staffing. For example, one school started the year with multiple small classes, which all accepted new children throughout the year. Two schools had a reception class, where children spent a short period and then moved to Year 1 or stayed until class numbers grew and opening a new class was necessary. Others started with small numbers of classes and opened new classes as the roll grew. Most classrooms were single cell, but some schools had classes working in collaborative learning environments.

4.2.1.2 Gaining access to participants

This study's participants were school leaders responsible for the transition to school in their contexts, as identified by their school principal. I sent an invitation email (Appendix A) to principals of schools that were within the wider Auckland region; had a school roll of 400 or more students; with fewer than 50% of students who identified as Pākehā; and had a year 1 intake of at least 70 students as of 1 July 2020.

This information was contained in a spreadsheet downloaded from Education Counts, containing data from the 1 July 2020 roll return[8]. These criteria yielded a list of 88 schools. The rationale for approaching larger schools was to focus the study on leadership by finding school leaders who were not classroom teachers, and who were managing a team of new entrant/year 1 teachers. Included in the email was a flyer for transition leaders (Appendix B), a copy of the information for principals and participants (Appendix C) and consent forms for principals and transition leaders (appendices D and E).

I asked participating principals to share the information about the study with their Boards of Trustees. While Boards delegate the day-to-day management of the school to their principal ("Education and Training Act," 2020), setting the direction of the school and monitoring performance are within the Board's role (Education Review Office, 2017). Therefore, Boards need to be informed about research in which employees participate.

I contacted participants via email and phone to arrange an interview. Before the interview, all principals and participants signed consent forms and returned them via email. Interviews were arranged via Google calendar invitations and were held in person. All but one were held at participants' schools, by their choice. Interviews were between 60 and 80 minutes long.

[8] As data from this spreadsheet could compromise the anonymity of participants, I have not included it in the appendices.

4.2.1.3 Conducting interviews

The purpose of interviews within a post-structural discourse approach is to reveal the interpretive process interviewees engage with when constructing their reality within their particular context (Talja, 1999). Within a post-structuralist lens, interview participants' accounts are variable and context-dependent (Talja, 1999). Participants' repertoires are not only subjective but also unstable. If they were interviewed at a different time by another person, their accounts of events might differ. I recognise that the findings of this study are the result of social constructions at a particular time and place. As the interviews were conducted in July 2021, participants' discursive constructions may have changed since the interviews took place.

Out of respect for participants' time (McGrath et al., 2019), participants were provided several interview questions via email before the interview and a copy of the interview format when we met (see appendix F). Providing interview questions allowed participants to gather information from colleagues if desired and to think in some depth about any issues the questions raised for them. The questions in the study were designed to be open-ended, allowing participants to share their experiences. If necessary, prompts and supplementary questions elicited more information.

The intention of the interview process and the question guide was not to provide a rigid structure. The questions ensured some degree of common data, but a flexible approach allowed for insights from participants and depth and expansion on relevant topics (Menter et al., 2016).

To avoid the interview analysis becoming overwhelming, (McGrath et al., 2019), I started analysis during the interview when I made notes about key phrases and ideas, some of which I returned to during the interview. I also made notes immediately after the interview recording my initial impressions. I describe the data management and analysis process in the following section.

4.2.2 Data management and analysis

4.2.2.1 Managing data

The interviews were all recorded on a handheld voice recorder, and I uploaded the audio files onto a password-protected computer. As soon as possible after the interview, the audio files were uploaded to Otter.ai, a digital transcription service, to produce an initial transcript for editing. Following the orthographic transcription approach described by V. Clarke and Braun (2013), I edited the digitally produced transcripts to be as high-quality and thorough as possible before returning them to participants for checking. As I listened and transcribed, I made notes on key themes. Although V. Clarke and Braun (2013) argue that punctuation changes the meaning of the speaker's

words, some participants edited transcripts to include punctuation which I have left in excerpts quoted in the text.

I then organised the data using Google Sheets, supported by the process described by Ose (2016). This method involves transferring interview data to a spreadsheet, numbering lines and coding. However, because participants' speaking turns were in long paragraphs, I departed from Ose's method and instead used keywords and initially examined the data for themes (see Appendix G). Then I began the discourse analysis process described in the next section.

4.2.2.2 Discourse analysis

More than 40,000 words of combined interview transcripts yielded thick data that was "complex and textured" (Menter et al., 2016). Analysing qualitative data is an iterative, cyclical process through which "no defined linear format" occurs (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150). At first, I felt uncomfortable with the idea of "mov[ing] back and forth between various stages and processes" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150), having preconceived notions of a clear and logical process. Finally, however, I realised that linear, logical clarity was inconsistent with this study's conceptual framework and embraced the data's complexity and the discourse analysis process.

I took several steps in analysing the data to find discourses underpinning leaders' approaches to transition to school and identity constructions within these approaches. These included: keyword analysis and searching data for examples, identifying themes, and three discourse analysis tools described by Gee (2011). These steps are shown in Figure 4 below.

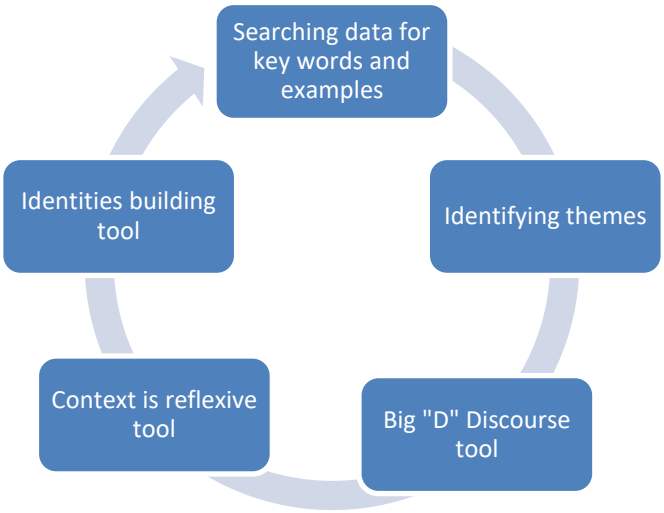

Figure 4 Iterative analysis cycle

Firstly, I took the approach of searching the data for keywords: using word cloud software and word frequency tools. Although searching for keywords assisted me in becoming more familiar with the

data, I found that some keywords did not correspond directly with the big “D” Discourses identified in Chapter 3. For example, the word “know” was used in many ways and held multiple meanings. Moreover, I found the keyword search did not necessarily reflect the nuance or complexity of discursive constructions of transition approaches. However, it was a helpful tool, and I returned to it as part of the iterative analysis cycle.

Next, I identified themes in the data. Initially, I used a mind-mapping tool to organise these (see appendix G for an example of a mindmap from early in the data analysis process). After several iterations of the analysis cycle, themes emerged as discursive patterns in the data, resulting in four small “d” discourses shaping the findings chapter. Menter et al. (2016) identify a challenge I experienced with my data: having to choose to pass over valuable and relevant data due to constraints such as time and scope of the research.

The Big “D” Discourse tool asks, “What Discourse is this language part of, that is, what identity is the speaker or writer seeking to enact or be recognised as?” (Gee, 2011, p. 181). I found this tool helpful in comparing interview data to discursive themes in the literature about the transition to school and leadership, as described in Chapter 3. Analysis emerging from this tool is found in Appendix G, in the form of a spreadsheet identifying discursive themes.

The fourth element of the iterative analysis cycle is the Context is Reflexive tool which asks, “How is what the speaker is saying and how he or she is saying it helping to reproduce contexts like this one, that is, helping them to continue to exist through time and space?” (Gee, 2011, p. 181). I found this tool particularly useful in examining elements of school-specific contexts in which leaders worked. This tool interacted with the four aspects of school context described by (Braun et al., 2011) to help produce the second section of the findings chapter, answering research sub-question 1.

The final element of the cycle is the Identities Building tool which asks, “What socially recognisable identities is the speaker trying to enact or get others to recognise?” and “How does the speaker’s language treat other people’s identities?” (Gee, 2011, p. 110). These questions assisted in answering research sub-question 2. Examples of analysis using Gee’s questions can be found in Appendix G.

Gee (2011) emphasises the adaptive nature of discourse analysis and the need for researchers to choose tools to suit the data they have gathered. While there were many options for discourse analysis tools available, I chose these three tools as they related to elements of the conceptual framework: discourse, context, and identity.

4.3 Conduct of the research

This section discusses how I maintained quality in the design and implementation of this research. I discuss ethical considerations using Allmark et al. (2009)'s five ethical themes. Research positioning and perspectives are also considered.

4.3.1 Quality of the research

Tracy (2010) identifies a worthy topic, rich rigour, and credibility as features of "qualitative quality" in research (p. 839). This section will discuss these three elements, with reference to the data collection process, thick description and member reflections, and transferable findings.

First, a worthy topic is "relevant, timely, significant, interesting, or evocative" (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). Further research into the experiences of school leaders and their role in transition to school has been called for in recent literature, creating a significant and timely basis for this research (Boyle, Petriwskyj, et al., 2018; Dockett & Perry, 2021). Additionally, the post-structural discourse analysis approach taken aims to produce interesting findings that "questions taken-for-granted assumptions, or challenges well-accepted ideas" (Tracy, 2010, p. 840).

Secondly, richness in research is created through requisite variety (Tracy, 2010). This is "the need for a tool or instrument to be at least as complex, flexible, and multifaceted as the phenomena being studied" (Tracy, 2010, p. 841). In this study, richness is demonstrated through the complexity of a post-structural framework (described in Chapter 2), and research design that is interactive and multifaceted (see Section 4.1.1). Interviews, the chosen data collection method, garner rich, complex information about participants' experiences (Cohen et al., 2018). Finally, discourse analysis is a complex process that demands examining not just language but "language *in use*" (emphasis mine) (Gee & Handford, 2012, p. 1). In other words, not just looking at the words said, but *why* and *how* the words are used to construct realities and identities.

Finally, a feature of credibility in qualitative research is "thick description" (O'Toole & Beckett, 2010) which is met through "concrete detail, explication of tacit (nontextual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling" (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). This criterion of credibility is met in this research through a careful and thorough explanation of the conceptual framework of the research, and faithful representation of participants' talk in the findings through the use of direct quotes, and contextualising discourse through including explanations of context. A fourth criteria of quality qualitative research is consideration of ethics, which is described in the next section.

4.3.2 Ethical considerations

My consideration of ethics started with the ethics approval process and continued throughout the research process. As Cohen et al. (2018) note, “Researchers should never lose sight of the obligations they owe to those who are helping; an ethical matter” (p. 137). This section explains choices made during the research using five ethical themes in qualitative interviews (Allmark et al., 2009).

Privacy and confidentiality

Initially, I offered participants the option to choose a pseudonym or for me to choose one for them. However, throughout the analysis and writing of findings, I realised that consistent identifiers (even if they were pseudonyms) could mean someone working within the education system in Auckland recognised the school's features and perhaps school leaders in the study. Although many options for maintaining confidentiality exist (Saunders et al., 2015), I have balanced the need for participants to not be identifiable by the intended audience of the study with the need to maintain data integrity. Therefore, I have chosen not to use pseudonyms to allow for a more precise description of individual discursive contexts.

Informed consent

Free consent is “the extent to which a person might be, or could feel, under pressure to consent or for that matter to refuse consent” (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012, p. 9). Duncombe and Jessop (2002, in Cohen et al., 2018) “suggest that informed consent, particularly in exploratory interviews, has to be continually renegotiated and care has to be taken by the interviewer not to be too intrusive” (p. 61). One technique to ensure participants felt comfortable and freely consented to the research process is response validation which I used in this research. Although response validation is a widely accepted tool, there are risks, such as silencing the research process and further marginalising participants if they are presented with findings and disagree with them (Hallett, 2012). In this study, response validation was limited to participants reviewing and correcting the transcripts of their interviews. Although it can be challenging to see your own spoken words in written form, most participants took the opportunity to clarify what they meant. They were able to correct terminology that I had not recorded accurately.

Harm

While the transition to school can be an emotional process for some, it is not an inherently sensitive topic, so harm is minimal in this study. Having questions available and co-constructing the course of

the interview meant that sensitive topics could be avoided. Some participants shared sensitive information during their interviews which they requested not be included. This request has been honoured in order to reduce harm and in the interests of ethical research.

Dual role and over-involvement

Dual role and over-involvement are closely linked to harm and were minimal in this research as the topic is not of a personal nature. However, the structure of the interview meant that I was careful to avoid making commentary on participants' responses. Instead, I took an inquiring tone. I disclosed my personal background to participants through the information letter and in person, as recommended by Allmark et al. (2009).

Politics and power

Power is a central concept in post-structural thought, and is understood to be inextricably linked with discourse and knowledge (MacNaughton, 2005). Michel Foucault, influential in post-structuralism, argued that power is in everyday discourse and exist from the bottom up: that is, rather than being invested in institutions and hierarchies, power exists in any unequal relationship and is expressed through discursive interactions (Given, 2008). The implications for this research are that the interview between me and each participant is a shared discursive construction. In reporting the findings of this research, I have been careful to avoid suggesting any definitive assessment of leaders' approaches: while I have my own ideas about transition to school, the purpose of this study is to use the discursive texts (the interview transcripts, which are snapshots of participants talk about their approaches at a moment in time) as prompts to invite reflection and critical examination. In this way, I place power back in the hands of participants and readers to construct their own understandings rather than vesting power in my interpretation expressed as judgement or evaluation of approaches.

4.3.3 Researcher reflexivity

Although there are varying definitions of reflexivity, a common thread is the researcher's self-awareness about why they are undertaking research (Musgrave, 2019). Reflexivity goes beyond being reflective. It is not reflecting on the content of the research, but rather how the researcher inserts themselves into the research and influences its development.

I outlined my motivations for undertaking this research in Chapter 1. My experiences as a new entrant teacher and involvement in kindergarten have shaped my point of view about transition and

leadership. Having never led a transition programme, my approach to my participants was that of a learner alongside participants.

To be a reflexive researcher, it is necessary not only to identify an epistemology or theory about the nature of knowledge but to actively adopt it (Carter & Little, 2007). I have found this challenging at some points during the research process. As the researcher, I will have a different construction of concepts underlying transition to school than my participants, built on my perceptions of processes, objects, events and meanings. It is essential to acknowledge that all analysis and interpretation in this research are subjective, and choices made are the product of my perceptions (Harding, 2015).

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter began by describing the theoretical underpinnings of this research on the basis that strong theory enables strong research. The social constructivist ontology and post-structural epistemology that underpin this study are threads that run through the entire study from conception to conclusion. They have impacted on the selection of a discourse analysis approach. This approach enables the study to dig deeper into participants underlying assumptions about transition to school and leadership and discover the discourses that influence them. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as an accessible method which balances rich data with respect for participants' time. Quality and ethics were discussed using Tracy (2010) and Allmark et al.'s (2009) frameworks of hallmarks of quality, ethical research. We now move onto the analysis of the data gained in the interviews.

Chapter 5: Findings

So far in this thesis, I have provided background information about transition to school and leadership in New Zealand primary schools (Chapter 1), presented the conceptual framework underpinning the research (Chapter 2), situated transition to school and leadership in the body of literature (Chapter 3), and outlined the methodology of this research (Chapter 4). Chapter 5 introduces the principal findings identified through the post-structural discourse analysis of five participant interviews.

5.1 Identification and reporting of findings

As discussed in the methodology in Chapter 4, the data analysis process was iterative and cyclical, consisting of numerous re-readings of the data and examining participants' language through different tools. Throughout the process, I identified multiple big "D" Discourses shaping leaders' practices in their school-specific contexts. I found that the big "D" Discourses identified in the interview data could be grouped into four specific patterns of language when talking about transition to school approaches. I refer to the four discourses associated specifically with the transition to school approaches as small "d" discourses as they consist of locally produced patterns of language consistent with the definition of micro or small "d" discourse (LeGreco, 2014)[9]. Figure 5 offers an overview the four small "d" discourses, explains what each discourse is about and its links to big "D" Discourses.

[9] For further explanation of small "d" discourses, see Section 2.2.1.

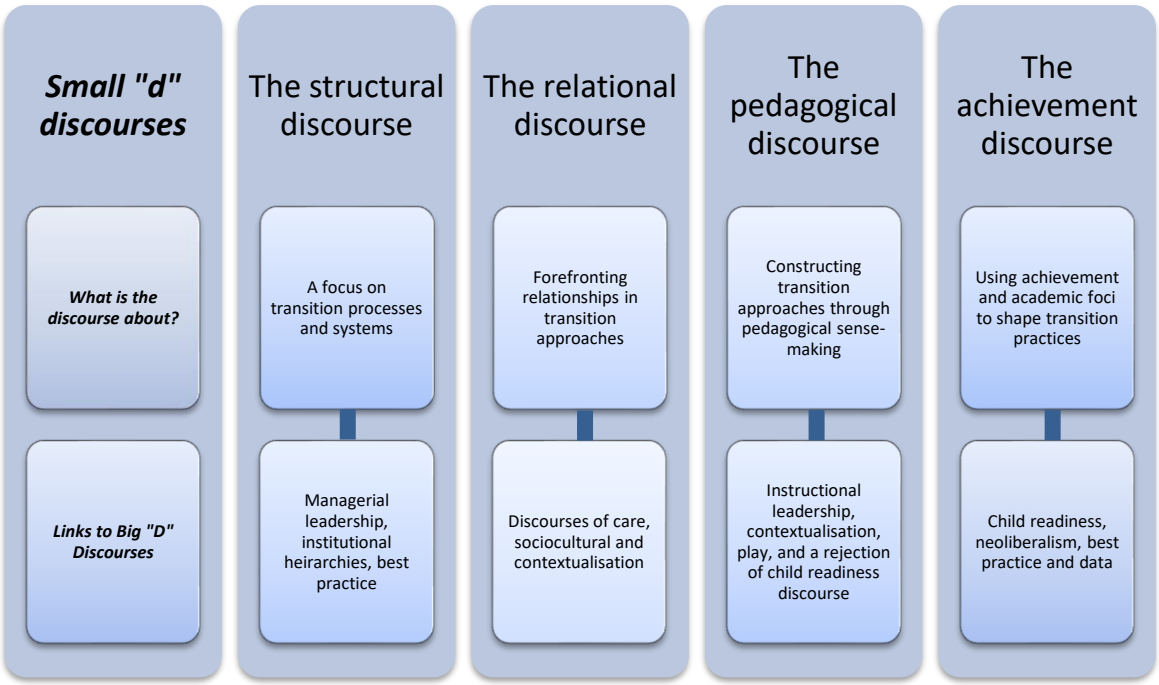

Figure 5 Discourses identified in the interview data

The data showed that participants drew upon multiple small "d" discourses in constructing their transition to school approach, and these discourses were often in tension. Therefore, there was no "pure" approach to transition to school taken by leaders and an identity construction of players involved in transition. Instead, transition approaches and identity constructions were shaped through an interplay of leaders' histories, current contexts, constructions of their roles within their contexts, and broader educational policy. In leaders' construction of transition approaches, the small "d" discourses were complex, complementing and competing with one another.

From a post-structural perspective, knowledges and understandings of transition are not fixed, but rather socially constructed. It is therefore essential to recognise that within the chosen research framework, the data gathered is only a snapshot of each leader's perspective on the transition to school. Consequently, this chapter does not examine leaders' approaches to transition to school in their totality. Instead, it reports on my analysis of interview data with five school leaders at a particular moment in time, with a particular set of questions, in a particular social context. Had transition to school been discussed in another way or by another person, a post-structural approach suggests that a different data set would have resulted.

This chapter is organised into five sections. Drawing from the interview data, in Sections 5.2 to 5.5 I offer an overview of the four small "d" discourses underpinning the leaders' transition to school approaches. Then, I illustrate how the identities of children, leaders and whānau are constructed within each small "d" discourse, addressing research sub-question 1: *How do school leaders create*

identities for themselves and others through their transition to school approaches? I summarise the discursive identities in the interview data in Section 5.6. Finally, in Section 5.7, I illustrate how contextual factors within four broad headings (situated, professional, material, and external contexts introduced in Section 3.2.2.4) shaped and were shaped by school leaders in their transition to school approaches. This section addresses the second research question: *How are transition to school approaches discursively constructed by school leaders in school-specific contexts, and why?* Throughout the chapter, I link big "D" Discourse identified in the literature review to the four small "d" discourses identified in the interview data.

5.2 Structural discourse

5.2.1 Overview of a structural discourse

In the context of my data analysis, structural discourse is a collective term that encompasses "models", "practices", "processes", and "systems" that have emerged and become accepted in transition to school within leaders' specific school contexts. Although I could have called this a systems discourse, I used the term "structure" to avoid confusion with *systems thinking,* which in leadership and organizational change is a term for analysing systems to understand complexity (R. D. Arnold & Wade, 2015). I termed this pattern in the language used as a structural discourse.

For example, one participant referred to transition to school in her context as "an amazing system to be part of". Another said, "We follow the best practice model, which has come out of the Mangere Bridge Kindergarten"[10]. Participants spoke of models and systems not only within their transition to school approaches but also in their leadership environments (for instance, when talking about leadership hierarchies and specific leadership roles within the hierarchies).

A structural discourse draws upon big "D" Discourse such as those related to managerial leadership, institutional hierarchies, and best practice. Structural discourse as identified in the leaders' specific contexts reflects the broader historical, educational, and societal contexts of transition to school within Aotearoa, showing links between small "d" and big "D" Discourses. I make links throughout this section to big "D" Discourse identified in the literature review.

A structural discourse positions a child's "successful" transition to school experience as an inevitable outcome of following a school's "systems" and "processes" correctly. For example, one participant described a robust and structured process for preschool visits, during which large groups of new

[10] The participant was referring to Hartley et al. (2012) *Crossing the border: A community negotiates the transition from early childhood to primary school.* This book is referred to in Chapter 3.

children and their families undertook a sequence of planned meetings. When asked whether children get upset when their parents leave them during preschool visits, the leader said she "honestly can't remember the last time that we had a child that we couldn't settle." "Settling", or not showing distress, was seen as resulting from a strong structure that supported children and their whānau. In drawing upon a structural discourse, leaders tended to highlight the structure of transition activities and the sequence of events (such as staged introductions to school with gradual withdrawal of parent support) that supported the "settling" of children new to their school.

Furthermore, transition to school was often understood as a structural task. Across the interviews, I identified ten common structures and activities leaders and schools undertook in transitioning new entrants into school (see Table 5). Transition activities were seen as providing security and consistency, and significant for the well-being of children, which was echoed by the participant's statement that parents realised that "we've really thought this through really well ... [and] we actually really do care about your little people"[11]. Participants described multiple activities that shaped the transition to school approach within their context.

Within a structural discourse, leaders and other school staff construct the transition to school structures, sometimes supported by outside agents such as Kāhui Ako (communities of learning) and expert advisors. The approach is constructed within the constraints and opportunities provided by the broader educational context (for example, educational policies such as school zoning) and the community in which schools are situated.

Table 3 Common transition to school tasks

	Participants identifying structured activity within their context
Preschool visits	5
Group parent meetings	4
Play-based programme	4
Individual parent meetings	2
Visits to school from ECEs	2
Transition/reception room	2
ECE visits by leaders	2
Social stories	1
ECE visits by school children	1
Cohort entry	1

[11] As outlined in Chapter 4, I am not using consistent identifiers for participants due to ethical considerations of confidentiality.

The common transition to school activities are manifestations of structural discourses that constructed transition to school approaches within leaders' school contexts. To avoid decontextualising information about specific transition activities, the next sections will include pertinent details of the school-specific context.

5.2.2 Identities constructed in a structural discourse

In a structural discourse, leaders, whānau, and children are positioned as having distinct roles and responsibilities within the transition to school system constructed within the school-specific context. The roles of leaders, whānau and children are summarised in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Summary of identity positions within a structural discourse

Leaders	Constructing and being constructed by schooling structures in general and within their school-specific context. Knowledgeable about schooling and children's development.
Whānau	Contributors to a system that, if followed correctly, will enable success for their child—learners in the schooling process.
Children	Passive subjects in structures designed to support *most* children's needs

The remainder of this section expands on the above roles and illustrates them using examples from data.

Leaders' identities

Under a structural discourse, school leaders provide systemic frameworks (such as logical processes to enrol children into school, organising school visits and organising children into classes) to support teachers, families, and children. Within a structural discourse, leaders' identities were tied to leadership positions that focussed on managerial tasks such as paperwork, resource provision and authoritative decision making.

There was a clear difference between the roles afforded to leaders and those afforded to teachers within a structural discourse. The leader's role was to take care of structures and organisation: one participant described her role as "making sure that our teachers are well supported; with effective pedagogy, resources, funding and the time to give our new learners a good start to school". The managerial role of the leader in this quote is juxtaposed with the positioning of teachers, who were "very empathetic" and focussed on "build[ing] the relationships [that] are really important". A leader's role may be removed from active teaching and interaction with children, implying a difference between her role as leader and the role of classroom teacher. A further comment

supports this: “The classroom teacher needs to build a relationship with the parents and the child. So I do the big welcome, and paperwork and then it merges into the teacher.”

The hierarchy within some schools produced distinct roles of those within the structure: “the systems have been put in place, resourcing, staffing, management of placement of children is there, so [teachers] can get on with their job of being the expert teacher”. This leader does not construe her role as directly building relationships with parents or teaching children but instead as a manager of resources.

The ability to make authoritative decisions was part of a leader’s identity within a structural discourse. For example, while collaborative decision-making was an espoused value, one participant said that at times leaders needed to be able to say, “this is what has been decided, and you do your job and we'll do our job”. This was echoed by another participant who said, “Leaders need to make decisions, and you need to be … assertive, and you need to know what you're talking about … because there's nothing worse than things that go round around in circles sometimes”. Affirmative decision-making was positively framed as an alternative to shared decision-making, which “[goes] around in circles”. In a hierarchical structure everybody needs to be recognised for a role with expertise. In a structural discourse, leaders’ expertise is making decisions about resourcing, funding, and structures shaping transition to school within the school-specific context.

Whānau identities

Within a structural discourse, whānau are positioned as followers of the school system that promises to enable success for their child. In some instances, parents were positioned as benefitting from a firmly structured transition process, such as those disallowing them to stay longer with their children on a day of transition to school, as it enabled them to meet other obligations such as going to work: “Of course, a parent could stay longer, but often parents have to go to work. So therefore, there's not a choice.”

Furthermore, whānau were positioned as needing education about the schooling process, while pre-school parent meetings were viewed as a “deliberate” activity catering to such needs:

> …they're very deliberate sessions, they're actually delivered on two levels. They're delivered on the level of the child, but with learning for the parents.

The leader’s statements could be interpreted as positioning children at the lowest level of a hierarchy, parents above them, and finally, the school at the highest level making decisions about what parents and children need to know about school. Imposing this form of structure on initial engagements shapes parents' identities in the school context. This participant goes on to say:

> We kind of do that little activity about grounding kids, making friends, having conversations, but we do it in front of the parents, so that parents can actually model that and support their child at home with the language that we've used.

This quote positions the school and the school leaders as knowledgeable about aspects of children's social and emotional needs within the school context. An implication is that the school knows the correct way to make friends and have conversations, and parents do not. The above quote constructs the parents' job as learning the proper way to make friends at school and using this model with their children.

Children's identities

Within a structural discourse, children are positioned as subject to the "strong" transition to school structures designed to support most children's needs. In this manner, one participant described the structure of the last four preschool visits in their school's transition process as "good strong process" constructed by the school and followed by families and children:

> If the children have [transitioned] really well, which generally tends to happen, because it is a good, strong process, then the children just toddle off to the library, and they're happy and the parents come in, and they've got a chance to ask questions, and so on.

A logical progression through processes to achieve success raises questions about what level of flexibility there might be for children who do not experience success under typical structures within the school; and who defines this flexibility and how? Children with specific needs were subject to alternative processes and structures within a structural discourse. Usually identified through contact from the Ministry of Education, who may have a child "on their books", different structures were enacted when transitioning a child with additional needs such as meetings with support workers and whānau. However, the experience of the child is not identified within a structural discourse beyond "being happy" and "getting to school".

5.2.3 Summary

Leaders drawing upon a structural discourse described their transition approach through "systems", "structures", "models" and sets of practices. Identities are defined within a structural discourse, and responsiveness to different needs of children and families is variable, depending on the degree to which flexibility is built into the system. Leaders' school-specific contexts impacted on the extent to which they relied upon a structural discourse, including the agency afforded to them by their leadership hierarchy and their own instructional knowledge. Whānau and children are positioned as

followers of the structures put into place by school to ensure a successful transition and children's success at school.

5.3 Relational discourse

5.3.1 Overview of a relational discourse

Echoing themes identified in transition to school literature (see Chapter 3), my data analysis showed leaders drew heavily on a discourse of relationships to construct their transition approaches. A relational discourse in the context of my data encompasses not only leaders' formal conceptualisations of relationships between parties involved in transition to school, but also their informal expressions of relational behaviours. When looking through a lens of a relational discourse to construct understandings about children starting school, leaders specifically valued shared knowledge and effective listening (Rantavuori et al., 2019), making and maintaining meaningful contact with whānau, and personal skills such as empathy and authenticity. In the context of the interview data, I define a relational discourse as "prioritising responsive relationships with others in the transition to school process".

While all participants identified relationships with others as a significant aspect of their approach to transition, they seemed to conceptualise how relationships are built and what they looked like. For example, one participant expressed that they "like to build relationships with people and get the best results". Another leader explained that building relationships "isn't just about the child, it's about that relationship that we are building with that whānau". Although both participants indicated that relationships are essential in constructing their transition to school approaches, their statements imply different reasons for doing so. The first participant positions relationships as concurrent with or a precursor to (unidentified) results. The second participant positions relationships as important to build a sense of belonging for a whānau. A relational discourse was expressed in different ways by participants, but had the common theme of viewing effective relationships as crucial in their transition to school approach.

A relational discourse seems to reflect big "D" Discourses identified in the literature review, such as discourses of care, socio-culturalism, and contextualisation. A discourse of care values the emotional well-being of others (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019) and is also foundational in building effective relationships. Socio-cultural discourse is linked to a relational discourse in that both appreciate the context in which learning occurs; children's relationships with people in their environments are valued and sometimes shape leaders' practice. Finally, prioritising relationships within a relational discourse means that leaders listen when teachers, whānau and children tell them what works for

them and what does not. Listening to stakeholders' voices links a relational discourse to one of contextualisation.

Leaders who drew upon a relational discourse described “taking people on a journey” and a collective approach to change that relied on trust and collaboration. These leaders prioritised taking the time to build relationships with their team in constructing transition to school approaches and changes of approach. Using a relational discourse showed participants rejecting individualistic leadership theories and viewing leadership as a phenomenon that occurs in social contexts (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). A socially contextualised approach was particularly applicable during change processes regarding transition to school, which occurred in three participating schools.

Leaders are positioned under a relational discourse as both constructing and being constructed by their relationships with others within the context of schooling. A relational positioning means that leaders will change practice as the results of relationships, such as altering systems to meet the expressed needs of children and whānau. The rest of this section outlines how the identities of teachers, whānau and children are construed through a relational discourse.

5.3.2 Identities constructed in a relational discourse

Through a relational discourse, leaders, whānau and children’s identities are viewed as interconnected. Leaders drawing upon a relational discourse to construct their approach to transition to school prioritise relationships with and between stakeholders. The leaders used “we” rather than “I” in their statements to describe their transition approach, implying that they all were members of an interconnected whole making decisions about transition to school. In the next section, I illustrate how leaders, whānau and children were constructed and positioned through a relational discourse. I specifically focus on the constructions of leaders as “connectors”, whānau as “knowledgeable” about their children, and children as “capable” (see Table 5).

Table 5 Summary of identity positions with a relational discourse

Leaders	"Connectors" who create and maintain relationships between stakeholders. Part of a collective identity as a community/school
Whānau	Knowledgeable about their child, share power with the school – agentic – space created for sharing responsibilities
Children	Capable, and have something to contribute. Potential members of the school community, agentic in creating connections

Leaders' identities

Within a relational discourse, leaders are positioned as "connectors" within the school environment, who create and maintain relationships between stakeholders in the transition to school process. The construction of leader identity as "connectors" emphasises the significance of leaders being open, communicative, and at times vulnerable to develop trusting relationships. For example, when discussing management of change, one participant described her workplace as a home:

> But I, this this place becomes ... like a home for the people who inhabit it. And so that's how I try and outwork [within the school environment]. And when you go into someone's home … you get to experience what it is, and it affects you. But once you're accepted into that whānau, that home, you bring who you are into that. And as a leader, you're responsible for sustaining what's important but growing it as well.

The leader's statement above indicates that vulnerability ("you bring who you are into that") and responsibility for relationship building ("growing and sustaining [what's important]") are necessary to be accepted into an organisation or "whānau" as a leader.

Furthermore, in a relational discourse, leaders' roles are to be personally involved with children transitioning and build relationships with stakeholders such as ECE, community, and families. In the interview data, leaders drawing upon a relational discourse recognised that relationships prior to school were significant for children: "children who have been in the ECE sometimes for upwards of four and a half years and they are secure, those people are their whānau, and then here is this huge change". Continuity of relationships was recognised as important, but for many participants, sustaining relationships with ECE was challenging due to the high number of ECE services contributing to their school transition. Therefore, one participant described collaborations with ECE services as somewhat ad hoc: "we keep conversations open through the ones that come regularly through personal contact". Another leader talked about putting structures in place to support ECE connections: "[a school and ECE] group where we meet and talked through things". In the interview data, ECEs appeared to engage with schools that attempted to build trust through open to learning conversations based in a relational discourse. Although building relationships and taking the position

of connector was significant in leaders' transition to school approaches, the data echoed that taking such positioning was challenging due to structures operating in ECE and schools. Contextual factors impacting on relationships with ECEs are explored further in Section 5.7.1.3.

Whānau identities

Just as children are positioned within a relational discourse as capable and contributing to transition so too are families. Families are seen as knowledgeable about their child and share power with leaders and school. One participant demonstrated power-sharing practices, drawing upon a relational discourse. Here, she described the hour-long parent meeting after an individual enrolment meeting with the deputy principal or principal.

> We're observing how the children are playing and interrelating and chatting with them. And we're confirming or adjusting the decision we've made for class placement. While that's happening, we are, us adults are sitting in a circle and we're sharing who we are … So they introduce who they are, we value the languages they speak, we support them to make connections … our goal is that they feel comfortable. We offer an opportunity to ask questions, and we explain our pathways - what might happen in the classroom and all that.

When describing the family teacher meeting, this participant uses non-definitive language such as "adjusting", "might", "explain" and "sharing". The word "pathways" suggests multiple possibilities for how the transition might unfold for individual children. Conversations rather than presentations offer responsiveness and power-sharing with the particular group of whānau and children. Whānau are agentic in their child's transition to school through being positioned as holding shared responsibility for their child's transition, and the willingness of leaders to change spaces to enable effective relationships.

Children's identities

Within a relational discourse, children are positioned as members of the school community and needing to connect others in their environment. Leaders employing a relational discourse were deliberate about supporting children to build relationships. The interview data showed leaders employing structures to develop children's relationships within the school environment, both before and after their first day of school. One example is "big buddy" or "tuakana-teina"[12] relationships.

[12] *Tuakana-teina* relationships are a concept from Te Ao Māori, the Māori world, in which a more experienced person has responsibility for sharing their knowledge and skills with a younger person. In the context of schooling, this is often borne out as older children caring for and teaching younger children. Macfarlane, A., Glynn, T., Grace, W., Penetito, W., & Bateman, S. (2008). Indigenous epistemology in a national curriculum framework? *Ethnicities*, *8*(1), 102-126. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796807087021

One participant described the benefits of employing these structures, which allows older children to visit kindergarten before children start school:

> They'd be greeted by their big buddy, and they'd recognise their big buddy from kindergarten. And they'd know that they had somebody to go to if they felt that they needed supporting in the playground or something like that.

This leader draws on a relational discourse to construe children as connected to others and knowing other children within the school context. Children are positioned as having the relationship resources they need to feel that they belong in this new place. Another participant arranged for children from the new entrant class to attend preschool meetings: "the kids have an opportunity to play with a buddy, because we'll have some other children there who will be in their class." Initiating relationships before children start school, and placing importance on familiarity, positions children in a relational discourse as connected and belonging to the school from early in the transition process.

5.3.3 Summary

The interview data showed that stakeholders involved in transition are positioned as interconnected and contributing to the transition to school approach. Related to sociocultural discourse, a relational discourse prioritises a sense of belonging for children and whānau which comes through having effective relationships with the school community, leaders, and teachers. Leaders constructing their approach from a relational perspective valued skills such as effective listening and were willing to adapt their practice to meet the needs of children and whānau.

5.4 Pedagogical discourse

5.4.1 Overview of a pedagogical discourse

Leaders drawing upon a pedagogical discourse respond to information and theory about effective pedagogy by developing emergent practice. In my interpretation of the data, I define *pedagogical discourse* as "constructing transition approaches through pedagogical sense-making". Leaders constructing their approaches though a pedagogical discourse prioritise having strong theoretical underpinnings to their transition approach. Leaders believed that they either need to have instructional and pedagogical knowledge about children at the point of transition or seek expertise from outside or within their school context.

The interview data indicated that some leaders drew upon notions of responsive pedagogy in describing a change process in their school's approach to transition. For example, one leader described the "frustration" of previous approaches ("trying to force learning [on] them when kids weren't ready for it") no longer working. She perceived that a pedagogical practice of the school was

no longer responding to the needs of new students, and a change needed to occur. This school had an expert speaker come in, whose talk indicated to staff that "the frontal lobe of the brain not being ready for so many of those children to take that formal learning made us realise that we were pushing them towards being labelled as failures before they were ready to learn". Seemingly, neuroscience and developmental psychology discourses were entangled with discourses of learning, and thus shaped the leaders' transition to school approaches.

A pedagogical discourse draws upon big "D" Discourses identified in the literature review, such as instructional leadership, contextualisation, and play discourses. Leaders constructing their transition approach using a pedagogical discourse prioritised instructional leadership, whether that be themselves or through other leaders within or outside the school. For example, one leader indicated the importance of instructional leadership when she said, "leadership and knowledge of young children in people in significant leadership positions in school is really paramount". Furthermore, through drawing upon multiple sources and collaborative inquiries, participants led their new entrant teams to select practices which made sense for their school-specific context. In this manner, for some leaders, there was a clear moment in time where they started to investigate the theory and pedagogy underlying their transition approach. In constructing their approach to transition through a pedagogical discourse, some leaders shared:

> …basically what got us there was the fact that what we were doing wasn't working, you know trying to force [academic] learning [on] them when kids weren't ready for it.

> …we really need to change our philosophy … are we ready to receive the individuals that are coming to us. The second thing was … from what I understand … there was a lot of anxiety, a lot of crying, a lot of hiding under tables, and…that teachers had just [noticed] a lot of anxious kids.

In the statements above, leaders shared a common realisation amongst the new entrant teaching team that the approach to transition to school was not perceived as meeting children's needs. A common indicator was children's emotional wellbeing, and the leaders and/or teachers at the time believed that emotional insecurity was an indicator that academic achievement was unable to take place. The next section illustrates identity positions within a pedagogical discourse and offers examples of a shift in transition to school towards a pedagogical discourse.

5.4.2 Identities constructed in a pedagogical discourse

Leaders' identities are constructed in a pedagogical discourse as being agents of change, with instructional knowledge about teaching and learning. Taking an instructional leadership perspective towards transition to school means that leaders must either have experience in leading within the

junior school, or the willingness to open themselves to new ideas from experts within and outside their school. Through a lens of pedagogical discourse, whānau are positioned as knowledgeable about their child, while the children are viewed as co-constructors of their own learning (see Table 6).

Table 6 Summary of identity positions within a pedagogical discourse

Leaders	Leaders of pedagogy; must have instructional knowledge or access to it, agents of change
Whānau	Knowledgeable and willing to learn; or, hard to convince of new pedagogy; or, already knowledgeable about their child
Children	Agentic, co-constructors of knowledge who are resilient and capable of constructing their own learning

The upcoming section provides examples from the interview data of the ways in which identities of leaders, whānau and children are constructed within a pedagogical discourse.

Leaders' identities

Within an instructional leadership discourse (as described in the literature review in Chapter 3), leaders are positioned as being continuous learners, collaborative, knowledgeable about content and pedagogy, and able to identify the capacity for instructional leadership in others. A pedagogical discourse identified in my data echoes big "D" Discourses identified in transition to school literature (see Section 3.1.3). Key identity positions for leaders within a pedagogical discourse are as continuous learners; able to facilitate learning for teachers and themselves; and willing to enable change consistent with new pedagogical learning.

Firstly, leaders are viewed as continuous learners who encourage others to be continuous learners and make possible changes in systems because of their continuous learning. An example of this is one participant who when she arrived at her school several years earlier, undertook a review of transition to school practices when she realised the current practice was not consistent with what she perceived to be effective practice from other schools she had worked in:

> I moved to another school and then came here, bringing that thinking, and seeing how important it was ... It was one of the first things I did when I came here, was we reviewed transition.

This leader raised the profile of transition to school by sharing pedagogical knowledge ("bringing that thinking") and enabling systems change ("seeing how important it was" and reviewing transition as a first act of leadership). The review process undertaken involved leading a collaborative inquiry

team made up of the year 0/1 teachers to ask questions about current practice and take the perspective of children arriving at school. Encouraging teachers to ask questions provides space for them to challenge taken for granted practices.

Secondly, leaders within a pedagogical discourse facilitated learning about alternative approaches to transition to school for themselves and others. For some leaders, this involved bringing in outside agencies as while they had recognised there was an issue with pedagogy, they did not have the current expertise themselves. One leader described how having identified that current teaching methods were no longer meeting the needs of their new entrants ("achievement wasn't coming through, despite the fact that we saw the interventions that had always worked in the past"), school leadership brought in outside professional development organisations to facilitate. This school's new focus was learning through play, and they developed knowledge over several years to contextualise their current practice and transition to school approach:

> We started off by looking at one … but it was a bit too wishy washy then we went to … Walker Learning, and then that was too structured … so we found our own way in between it all now we've taken bits from everything.

This leader describes the process of using multiple sources such as Walker Learning, and inviting Nathan Wallis[13] to speak, to develop pedagogical knowledge, and then carefully selecting practices to form a synthesised approach appropriate to the school's specific context. Although this work was enabled by the participant as a senior leader, it was led by the new entrant team leader who was "incredibly passionate on a personal professional level" and had conducted "lectures and seminars…throughout the country." Recognising pedagogical strength within the team enabled this school to develop a contextualised approach to transition to school.

Finally, participants constructing their identity through a pedagogical discourse were willing and able to enact change consistent with new pedagogical learning. The context of the school made this possible, particularly the license from principals and other senior leaders and the community. Cohesion within the senior leadership team was recognised as important. One leader identified that pedagogical change began to happen when a fellow senior leader, who was "driven [by] data and achievement", left the school and the leadership team made a commitment to "invest in play-based learning". Besides, the notion of investment, implying a monetary component to pedagogical change, was also echoed in the data. For instance, another participant, when describing a shift to a more play-based approach to learning, said "as a school, we had to prioritise and resource, and it

[13] Nathan Mikaere Wallis is a New Zealand neuroscience educator, who often conducts speaking engagements in schools. https://www.nathanwallis.com/pages/about-nathan-wallis

took about three, four years. A process to build up to what we wanted." Similarly, two leaders described the school's commitment to pedagogy through releasing teachers to work in collaborative inquiry teams, or professional learning groups, during school hours as "expensive", but enabling "really quality conversations". Taken together, the data implied that leaders in New Zealand's self-governing schools are compelled to balance finances and pedagogy, and monetary investment in professional development and resourcing is one indicator of leaders drawing upon a pedagogical discourse to construct their approaches.

Whānau identities

In analysing the interview data, I identified that leaders drawing upon a pedagogical discourse positioned parents differently in their transition to school approaches. One leader seemed to position parents as likely to favour "a more traditional method of learning" for their children (for example, "textbook based and Kumon[14]" or "structured learning times"). Another viewed meeting with whānau as an opportunity to engage them with the philosophy of the school. A third participant indicated that whānau were knowledgeable about their child and their learning, and their feedback should be considered. In this section, I will offer examples illustrating the whānau positioning within a pedagogical discourse.

Firstly, one participant indicated that parents or whānau within her school context were unlikely to engage favourably with play-based learning. Therefore, the school had undergone a change process (prior to this leader's arrival) implementing an hour and a half of play-based learning each day. The leaders explained:

> We didn't want to call it play based learning, because we didn't want our parents to have a negative connotation. With regards to that, and thinking about our community that are very much, you know, textbook based and Kumon. You know, what do you mean, they're going to be playing? … I think that was more a challenge at the start. But now that the parents know what it's about, they come in for the new entrant parent morning, they come in for the visits, they can actually see the benefits of it … We still have the odd question. So when you do real learning?

Because this leader was not at the school during the time that the play-based learning was firstly piloted and then implemented across the junior school, her comments are based on what she understands from colleagues ("so I *think* that was more of a challenge at the start"). In the extract above, parents are positioned as favouring traditional learning methods, and needing to be carefully managed to understand the benefits of the new pedagogy. The careful management is exemplified

[14] Kumon is an after-school tutoring company teaching maths and English through repetitive methods, or rote learning.

by the alternative name given to play-based learning by the school to avoid “negative connotations”. However, the school had committed to an alternative philosophy which they believed would support children new to school. The structures of the transition to school process – “new entrant parent morning” and “visits” – were designed to be educational for parents and to gain their approval and commitment to the school’s pedagogical approach.

Another participant who constructed her approach to transition within a pedagogical discourse indicated that initial engagements with whānau were an opportunity to explain the school’s approach to learning, designed to support children new to school. The first visit by a new family was 90 minutes long, and was:

> …a delicate balance of being as much for the parents as it is for the children. So keeping the children entertained, while we tell … the parents about our philosophy on learning and how it's on a play based and why, and the research behind it, and why we do it that way, so that they come to understand that and run with it rather than against.

Facilitating parental engagement with the school’s approach to learning (“run with it rather than against”) was seen as important by this leader. “A delicate balance” also indicates that this leader does not want to patronise parents by educating them at the same level as their children, but instead using research and explanations to enable them to “understand” the philosophy.

Finally, a third participant had led a change in the school’s transition approach, which led to prioritising continuity practices and belonging. Whānau were positioned as knowledgeable, and as co-constructors of the change process. Play based learning was also a practice in this school but described by this leader as being for the purposes of providing familiarity for children rather than as a pedagogical philosophy. When talking about practices that had been changed, she described the shift away from having a “reception room”, in which new entrants spent a few weeks before moving on to a Year 1 classroom:

> Part of our review quite a few years ago, identified that that wasn't the community, the whānau, talked about how that didn't work for lots of their children. They just felt they belonged. And then, boom, let's shift to somewhere else and start that process again.

The wishes of the community and whānau drove this change and belonging is prioritised. Because whānau are positioned as partners in learning and members of the school learning community, something that “didn’t work” is seen as not a practice that can be continued. Parents were co-constructers of the change process and capable of identifying learning environments that were not effective for their children.

Children's identities

Within the discourse of play described in Chapter 3's literature review, children are positioned as resilient, capable, and active co-constructors of knowledge. Similarly, in a pedagogical discourse, children's identities are constructed as active co-constructors of knowledge, but also subject to the change processes undertaken by schools and leaders. While children are viewed as capable, in some settings their capacity was restricted by the perceived need to balance play-based and traditional schooling structures.

Firstly, children are active co-constructors of knowledge within a pedagogical discourse. In a school that had changed to play-based learning for part of the day, children were observed to be "initiating play" and being "active learners" who could describe what they were doing, and what they wanted to do next in their self-initiated learning. In this school, children's agency was reflected in the reporting structure which had changed to a "learning story" style of reporting to parents, and the use of digital tools such as Seesaw[15] that children were able to upload to themselves. Children actively constructed their concepts of what was important to communicate with their whānau, and what they wanted to do next in the classroom.

Secondly, children are positioned as capable within a pedagogical discourse. One leader problematised previous teaching practice in her school. When describing questions teachers were asked to challenge themselves with as part of previous practice, she said "Why am I doing it? What's my underlying belief? Which often it is, I don't actually think kids are capable". Children were seen by this leader as being capable, and yet they were not allowed to do things like "glue their own work in" and "use a hot glue gun", which indicated the opposite from being capable. Identifying that the belief underlying teachers practice in her school was "our babies can't do that" was a driver for pedagogical change in the approach to transition to school. This leader took the Year 0/1 teaching team to visit ECE centres with specific questions in mind. The visits challenged teachers to identify children within the ECE context as capable and using resources that they were not allowed to use at school. In this way, the discontinuity between children's identities as capable learners within the ECE setting, and their identities at school as "babies" was problematised and led to a change in practice.

5.4.3 Conclusion

The interview data showed a pattern of leaders constructing transition approaches through pedagogical sense-making, which I have called a pedagogical discourse. Influenced by big "D" Discourses of play, instructional leadership and a rejection of child readiness, several leaders

[15] Seesaw is an interactive learning platform for school/parent communication. https://web.seesaw.me/

undertook change processes in their school-specific contexts to recreate their approach to transition to school. Leaders' identities are constructed as change agents with the ability and willingness to create pedagogical change, which is made possible by their school context. Children are agentic constructors of knowledge, but also subject to change processes chosen by leaders and schools. Whānau are positioned in multiple ways within a pedagogical discourse, perhaps related to other discourses circulating within the school context. In the second half of this chapter, I explore the tensions between a pedagogical discourse and other discourses, particularly an achievement discourse which I describe in the following section.

5.5 Achievement discourse

5.5.1 Overview of an achievement discourse

This section explores how leaders drew upon what I have called an achievement discourse in constructing their approaches to transition to school. In the interview data, I identified a pattern of leaders referring to "achievement", "success", "learning", and "data". My identification of an achievement discourse emerged from participants' focus on children's achievement during their transition to school experience, and the ways in which leaders constructed the role of schooling as enabling children's achievement. For example, one participant described the transition to school as "start[ing] your 13 years of learning", indicating that whatever had happened before entering the "formal learning" context of school was not actual learning. For this participant, ultimately the job of the school was to enable children to achieve and "the board … wants to look at the data". While relationships were important, the leader emphasised that "pedagogically we still actually have to educate these children". Combined with defining children's identities through current or possible academic achievement (often the language of National Standards: below, at and above), phrases like these indicated that leaders were, at times, constructing their approach to transition to school through an achievement lens.

In the context of interview data, an achievement discourse is defined as "using achievement and academic foci to shape transition practices". Leaders constructing their transition approaches through an achievement discourse prioritise children's academic achievement at school and viewed achievement at "standard" or at a certain curriculum level as one of the end goals of transition. Transition to school approaches were described as needing to support academic achievement, while children's wellbeing and belonging served to ensure they were "happy" first in order to enable achievement.

An achievement discourse identified in the interview data was linked to big "D" Discourses of readiness, neoliberalism, best practice and datafication. In an achievement discourse, children were viewed as having varying degrees of readiness for school on entry. For example, one participant said that "most of the children are really, ready for school, there are some, you know, we've got the outliers, we've got the bell curve." Children's "readiness" for school is identified according to their current and potential levels of academic achievement. Intertwined with a neoliberal discourse, achievement was seen as a predictor of future productivity, while a goal of schooling becomes producing productive future citizens. For example, one participant talked about the school's contribution to the Kāhui Ako: "the ultimate effect is that we've got competent, confident learners that are able to be a successful contributor in society". Finally, within a datafication discourse children are sorted according to achievement data from the point of their entry into school. The requirement to gather achievement data, whether that be by the school, community, or wider policy directives, is one practice used to justify an achievement focus by participants in this study.

Like other discourses identified in the data, an achievement discourse is not evident in isolation within any of the leader's transition approaches. For some leaders, an achievement discourse was a clear driver for pedagogical change as discussed in the last section. For others, balancing the achievement focussed approach with supportive whānau relationships is a challenge. The next section provides examples of identity constructions of leaders, whānau and children within an achievement discourse. It is important to note that the identities on offer need to be understood in relation to the identities of others, and as influenced by other discourses.

5.5.2 Identities constructed in an achievement discourse

Within an achievement discourse, leaders, whānau and children are viewed as having specific roles. In this vein, leaders are positioned as experts in schooling and in achievement, those who "know" how to identify children by achievement level and can design practices that will support children to achieve. Whānau are often positioned as customers, and the product they are receiving is an achieving child. Children's identities are sometimes depersonalised, and they are positioned within the school and classroom as along a scale or as part of a group of children achieving at a certain level. Overall, there was a sense of transaction to identities within an achievement discourse: leaders provided learning, whānau were customers, and achieving children was the product (Table 7).

Table 7 Summary of identity positions with an achievement discourse

Leaders	Responsible for creating and reporting on achievement; "experts" in schooling and achievement
Whānau	Play a supportive or passive role in child's transition. Can be positioned as customers, expecting the product of an achieving child to be delivered by the school
Children	Identities are based on current or potential academic achievement; can be labelled as "below, above or at" standard.

Leaders' identities

In Section 3.1.3.4, neoliberal discourse was identified as having an impact on transition to school within the New Zealand context. Similar influence was evident in the interview data, through leaders' construction of their identities within an achievement discourse. Leaders constructing their identity when influenced by an achievement discourse viewed themselves as part of a system that prioritised and produced children's achievement. Leaders' identity constructions within the education system manifested itself in several ways. Firstly, leaders described part of their role as reporting on achievement. Secondly, leaders framed their role as creators of a system which provided conditions that supported and secured children's achievement. Finally, leaders constructed their role within an achievement discourse as being able to identify children's achievement.

Leaders constructing their approach within an achievement discourse are positioned within a hierarchy monitoring children's achievement. Leaders' responsibilities within the hierarchy include reporting on children's achievement to other groups, including the Ministry of Education, the school board, principal, and parents. Some participants described collating and communicating achievement data as part of their role in ensuring children were experiencing a successful transition to school: one participant defined her role as partly "data collection … having the data we need for the ministry" while the team leader was engaged with pedagogy. Another participant identified a tension between academic pressures and her emphasis on key competencies: "because at the end of the day, you've still got the CEO or the board that wants to look at the data." While other approaches are valued within the school context, such as pedagogy or developing children's key competencies, leaders' roles are construed as managers of data while others took on different roles.

Even when participants and schools had developed alternative pedagogies for transition to school, such as play based learning, collating achievement data was necessary in school-specific contexts. In this sense, one participant described writing a report for the school board about play-based learning: "talking with the team, we did little case studies of different kids. And so we did an early learner, an

at learner, advanced learners, and children with other learning needs." While teaching practice had shifted, the reporting structure and the way children were imagined at school by adults was still framed by achievement ("early", "at", "advanced", and "other learning needs"). It was unclear from the participant's description of this whether she experienced dissonance when reporting in this way, but the fact it had been a discussion with the new entrant team indicates that it had been carefully considered.

The data leaders reported came from teachers, who used systems created by leaders to track children, which were described as "good systems [for] … track[ing] children and the learning." Leaders within an achievement discourse constructed their identity as achievement system creators. In this way, transition to school practices were designed to enable children's achievement, or for children to begin achieving as soon as possible. One participant described how the school selected transition practices to enable achievement:

> So sometimes we need to adapt … that reception class worked really well, at the beginning of the year, it was a really good model ... the parents liked it, the children were happy, they came into the classes, knowing those classroom routines, the teachers found it quite hard. [This] was the days of national standards that the year one teachers, when they got these children had sort of forgotten that they had been to school already for six or eight weeks … When we had to do that six-month checkpoint, they're thinking, ooh, you know, they haven't had them for this long.

This leader identified changing practices in this way as a dilemma. In this situation, she needed to balance the needs of whānau and children with the need of the school to create achievement. Unsatisfactory achievement resulted from the reception class system, as teachers would "forget" that children had been at school for a few weeks and should be further along a predetermined achievement pathway. Although this participant felt disquiet about changing the reception class practice, a discourse of achievement shaped the practice in the school and resulted in systems change. This was echoed by another participant who described the transition to school process for children as "an evolved system … we feel that we're doing the right thing by the children at [our school] … because our kids do achieve." The desired result of the transition to school "system" was children achieving, and if the "system" was not resulting in achievement, it needed to be changed.

Within an achievement discourse, the leader's role is to identify what achievement for children within the school setting looks like**.** One participant described discussing children in a cohort with others in the senior leadership team:

> So there's a lot of discussion on names number needs, across the year levels about where these children are, are they at? Are they below? ... but it's more merging into

> how we're going to get them to where we want them or we'd like them to be and that progress - more about the progress than the achievement.

The statement above put an emphasis on children who were “at”, or “below” in relation to an unidentified standard. Discussing children grouped by academic achievement level was also normalised in transition to school approaches in some schools. Names were discussed, but not individual children. This participant identifies a shift away from judging children on their current achievement level and indicates that their focus is on “progress” and “where we want them”. This is still progress on an achievement journey that has been predetermined by the school and the school leaders, through their interpretation of the New Zealand curriculum. An achievement discourse positions leaders as defining achievement within the school setting for children.

Whānau identities

The interview data indicated that within an achievement discourse whānau are positioned as customers who want their child to achieve and therefore experience success. The processes of reporting a child’s achievement to parents was viewed as something that “must be” carefully managed, particularly if a child, who was newly transitioning to school was not “achieving” at an expected level. When discussing children’s progress, one participant said “there's nothing worse than feeling that from the day your child sets foot in a school that they are not achieving. That's just mortifying for parents." Describing a lack of achievement as “mortifying”, which means causing great embarrassment or shame, positions parents as believing achievement is important for their child and for them socially. Shame and embarrassment are social constructs that unlikely exist without others’ opinions, signalling that a child’s lack of achievement may result in the poor opinion of others.

Whānau were positioned as desiring academic success for their children. When talking about the environment provided by the school, one participant said “we've got a lot of parents that have high expectations. They want the child to learn, and they want to know why they're not doing that. Many want quite a formal classroom environment, as well.” The above statement echoed a positioning of whānau as consumers expecting the school to secure academic achievement, by providing an environment that needed to be “quite a formal” one. If a child did not meet “high expectations”, questions would be asked of the school as providers of achievement.

Children’s identities

Children are identified within an achievement discourse as “learners” at school. This label prioritises the academic achievement aspects of the school experience for the child and identifies their role at

school as gaining new knowledge. The notion of "learner" in the data contained several instances of children being organised into types of learners. Leaders drawing upon an achievement discourse construed children's identities based on their readiness for achievement within the context transition to school. "Soft data" such as children's oral language, sense of belonging, wonder, creativity, and empathy were seen to "drive the hard data" such as ability to write, read and do maths.

In addition, children's primary role when transitioning to school was constructed as being ready for learning, which a participant described as follows:

> We would like to think that the children who come into [our school] are in that high expectation environment. And that those little people are settled, ready to learn, and that what they're getting from us is a quality product, and that is going to set them up for the future.

The school's role in this quote is to provide a high expectation environment, and children's role within that environment is to meet the school's high expectations. Being "settled" is viewed as a precursor to learning. The prioritisation of academic learning is reiterated by another participant, who said that their school philosophy was "for the children in the class [to be] happy, settled, have a chance of learning". "Learning" is the goal of the transition process, while being "happy" and "settled" is supposed to create achievement opportunities.

Within an achievement discourse, children were subject to the schooling process but were not co-constructors of knowledge. In this manner, one participant's transition approach was influenced by an achievement discourse to the extent that "not much had changed" since National Standards (an achievement focussed policy) had been removed. This participant described conversations with parents in which she said that starting school is "a great milestone, but these children are being schooled for 13 years, this is just the start." Children are positioned as passive in the learning process – they are "being schooled" rather than active in their learning. This statement positions teachers and the school as experts in knowledge performing the act of "schooling", and children as recipients of the knowledge.

5.5.3 Conclusion

Within an achievement discourse, leaders, whānau and children have distinct roles, while learning and achievement are viewed as a transaction between the parties. Children's well-being is important insofar as it is a precursor to achievement. Whānau are perceived within an achievement discourse as having high expectations of their children's achievement. None of the participants in this study relied wholly on an achievement discourse to construct their transition to school approach, but the

wider New Zealand educational context meant that most participants took for granted the importance of children's achievement within transition to school approaches and processes.

5.6 Summary of discursive identities

In summary, my data revealed four dominant discourses underpinning the leaders' transition to school approaches and construing multiple identities of leaders, children and whānau within the school-specific contexts. The identities, formed through the small "d" structural, relational, achievement, and pedagogy discourses, reflected a varied agency and power positioning of all involved in transition, and as such reflected multiple big "D" Discourses identified in literature (Chapter 3). The next section links the four small "d" discourses identified in the data, as well as wider educational discourses, to contextual factors evident in participants' talk about their approaches.

5.7 How school specific contexts shaped and were shaped by leaders' discourse

While I have identified four individual discourses within the interview data, these discourses did not construct leaders' approaches to transition in isolation. Instead, multiple discourses interacted within school-specific contexts and were used by leaders in their approaches to leadership and transition to school. In this section, I explore the interaction between leaders' discursive constructions of transition to school with the situated, professional, material, and external contexts in which they operate. This section relates findings to my second research sub-question, which asks how school leaders discursively construct their transition to school approaches in school-specific contexts.

Through a post-structural perspective taken in this research, leaders are viewed as having agency to construct and reconstruct their context while simultaneously being constrained. For example, a school is allocated a certain amount of funding by the government. Whilst leaders can advocate and lobby for more funding at a global level and at a local level choose how to spend that funding, the amount of funding will not change in the immediate term. This section examines how leaders perceived contextual constraints and enablers within their leadership of transition to school.

While I would like to outline how the interview data gave insight into how multiple aspects of each category of context impacted on participants' leadership practices, for brevity's sake, I outline below only the most salient contextual factors constraining and impaction on leaders' approaches (Table 6).

Table 8 Contextual factors impacting on transition to school approaches

Situated contexts	Professional contexts	Material contexts	External contexts
Diverse student populations **under**-considered	Role definition within leadership structures	Allocating financial and staff to transition to school programmes	Historical policy – National Standards
Size of school led to practical challenges	Advocacy for young learners in the junior school	Changing classroom environments to reflect pedagogical practice	The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic
Relationships with ECEs			

5.7.1 Situated contexts

Within situated aspects of school contexts, such as school community, history and location (Braun et al., 2011)[16], leaders shaped their understandings of transition through relational and structural discourses. There was evidence that these discourses were in tension, which I unpack below.

5.7.1.1 Student population

Given that I chose schools in the research sample with ethnic and linguistic diversity, there was surprisingly little evidence that leaders' practices were shaped by discourses of cultural responsiveness. While several leaders drew upon a structural discourse to describe practical interventions for children with English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL), these were designed to bring ESOL children up to standard or ameliorate communications issues. Ethnically and culturally diverse children were discursively positioned in several ways in the data:

- as a problem to be solved. One participant identified that "probably over half our school is ESOL". This came with "language problems, but also cultural problems".
- to be assimilated into the English based culture of the school: "particularly our Asian parents are very concerned about the low level of English that some of their children come to school with. And we just say, don't worry about it, the children pick it up really quickly".
- that the ability to speak two or more languages is an individual resource: "you need to celebrate that you can speak two or more languages, that is a skill that is going to hold them in really good stead as they get older."
- needing teachers and staff that were also culturally diverse – which was viewed as problematic when large numbers of other cultures were part of the student population:

[16] Braun et al. (2011)'s research is set in English secondary schools, and uses the phrase "intake" to describe the make-up of the student population. As this research is in a different national context, I have chosen to use the more typical New Zealand framing of "school community".

while staff diversity in one school was developing, there was “Not as much as I'd like” because “there's still always gonna be a lot of middle-aged European women in teaching”.

While it was clear that leaders understood children speak other languages and that this would impact on their transition experience, it was unclear how the ethnically diverse contexts leaders were operating in informed their pedagogical practices around transition. One leader “[listened] carefully to the languages that are spoken at home” during parent meetings, and sought to discover the level of language capability the children had: “does the child understand the language but not speak it? Does a child understand and speak? Does a child speak a mixture of two languages?”. However, there was no evidence in the interview data of how this impacted on transition practice.

One participant identified inclusivity as a strong value within the school context. While it was unclear how this would impact specifically on the transition to school approach, children entered a school setting that visibly valued inclusivity. This leader said, “I just certainly feel that our school really … embraces cultural diversity”. This “feeling” was manifested through activities such as a restorative practice professional learning contract that had ended in feedback sought from staff and students, who “all came back 100% yes” when asked if the school valued cultural diversity. The school had recently celebrated pride week, and flew the “pride flag”; although a section of the community was acknowledged as conservative, the leader attributed the fact that they “didn't get a lot of splash back” to positive relationships with whānau: “I think it's about relationships, right?”.

Whilst participating schools had between 5% and 15% of students identifying as Māori, there was little evidence in the interview data of Māori perspectives influencing transition approaches. Two leaders identified that kapa haka (traditional Māori performing arts) groups were available outside of class time for children to join. One leader described the school values which were expressed as Māori concepts: “manaakitanga, which is kindness, whānaungatanga, which is family, whakamana, which is respect and ... pono, the honesty one". Furthermore, another leader described their transition to school approach as involving tuakana-teina relationships (see Section 5.3.2). However, aside from another participant’s use of the word whānau instead of family, no other specifically Māori concepts or words appeared in leaders’ talk about their transition to school approaches.

5.7.1.2 Size of school

The size of the school and the number of children in the Year 0/1 cohort also appeared to affect leaders’ transition approaches. Several participants referred to the logistical challenges of organising children into classrooms, such as:

> [The principal] and I regularly meet, looking at names, numbers, and needs, and what this is looking like.
>
> another challenge is numbers. I mean, we've got … 20 in your normal year one class.
>
> Occasionally, at the end of a school term, we will … humbly request that your child start the following term because our class numbers are too big.
>
> The new entrant classes are currently all on about sixteen? And I know that doesn't sound like many. But ... have you ever tried to herd 16 cats?

Contextual factors such as high numbers of children entering school appeared to result in greater reliance on structures and processes, and leaders constructing their transition approach through a structural discourse. As a result, some leaders viewed managing numbers of children and balancing class composition as a significant challenge and a constraint on their time.

5.7.1.3 Relationships with contributing ECEs

Large numbers of contributing ECEs were identified as a constraint by several leaders. One leader acknowledged that links with local ECE providers was "not something that is as strong as I've experienced in other schools" and maintaining relationships with ECEs was a "tall order" or "impossible". Another said, "children are coming from so many different ECEs, it's hard to connect with them because it's just not your local kindy anymore." Leaders named multiple ECEs contributing to their school, and had limited relationships with ECEs through school visits: "we still try and make ourselves really accessible. So when the ECEs want to visit, all we say is you have to have at least one child that's going to be coming here". Some leaders maintained a relationship with selected ECEs through the Kāhui Ako: "three, four key ECE providers who attend our transition group meetings" and "team leader network meetings every term … that includes ECE".

It was evident that a different philosophical approach could impact on the willingness of ECEs to engage with the school, which one leader described as the difficulty in "getting information" from ECEs about children transitioning. She felt that "*Te Whāriki* is different [to] *The New Zealand Curriculum*" and had "devised a questionnaire asking … simple self-managing and key competencies questions." However, several ECEs believed such an approach was "labelling the child" and declined to take part. The statement signalled that the philosophical differences between the ECEs and the school, especially the hint of child readiness discourse underpinning the questionnaire (i.e., asking "can they catch a ball etc.?") were some possible constraining factors in developing relationships with ECEs.

For children with special educational needs, leaders drew upon continuity discourses to enable effective transition. Engaging with ECEs was, for some, framed as a reciprocal relationship: "[the]

class teacher went with me to visit him at the Kindy, he's coming here on Friday and the teacher from there's coming here. So it's going both ways." Engagement with ECEs to support transition was positioned as "a great scenario" by this leader ("it's what's best for the child…us having a close relationship, understanding this stuff"), but children coming from numerous ECEs was a challenge as reciprocal relationships could not always be developed. The response from ECEs was "half and half", and "setting up that supportive environment's hard when you're not getting anything back."

5.7.2 Professional contexts

The relationship between leaders' professional contexts and their transition approaches was dynamic and reciprocal. While professional contexts shaped leaders' practices, leaders in turn shaped their contexts through their practice. Elements of professional context influencing decisions included leadership structures within the school, how the junior school was perceived in the whole school context, and professional development decisions.

5.7.2.1 Leadership structures within the school

Clear role definition within leadership structures constrained and enabled leaders in their construction of transition to school approaches. All leaders clearly identified their roles at the beginning of the interview, giving shape to the scope of their practice and agency within their context. Roles included that of deputy principal, SENCo, and across school leader. From these titles, however, leaders had differing perceptions of their roles. For some, a clearly defined role set limitations on how they approached transition and what they could do. For instance, one leader described her role as informing, but not making final decisions: "the principal … makes those decisions with consultation, and with gentle reminding, this is where we need the support to get these children up and running". A clear hierarchical position was echoed again when describing how she advocated for the junior school, but the principal "[makes] the final decision" because "he needs to see what that resourcing looks like, and what opportunities are out there to help fund the school".

In contrast, other leaders described their roles in more flexible terms: as having the "general responsibility for how [transition] looks and the outworking of it", and "participat[ing] in a hands-on way". Another leader held the title of DP and SENCo, but rather than elaborating on her formal role, outlined her "real passion for transition" and history in leading transition programmes at the school. Both leaders had taken a role of collaborative, instructional leadership of evaluating and changing transition to school approaches in their contexts. Their agency, whether it was one that they had adopted themselves through their experience and expertise or afforded to them by their principals, created their ability to enact change.

5.7.2.2 Perceptions of the junior school in the wider school context

For some, there was a need to advocate for the junior school and the importance of transitioning new entrants into school, which, at times involved resisting discourses of achievement and accountability. Some leaders described having to "advocate [for] the class numbers … be lower", and "speak with authority on [lower class numbers]". Another leader reflected on having "a professional discussion" advocating to the principal for smaller new entrant class sizes:

> He [the principal] often says well, Hattie says class size doesn't matter. But when you're on the ground, class size [matters].

In this quote, the participant refers to her principal referencing Hattie (2009), who found in a meta-analysis that the effect size of reducing class sizes from 25 to 15 was low at 0.10-0.20. Both above quotes show evidence of resisting discourses within the wider school context, namely that class size is not significant, in this case in the junior school. Both leaders drew on their "authority" and "professional[ism]", and knowledge of new entrant teaching to advocate for smaller class sizes for new entrant children, which they saw as a significant need for teachers and children.

5.7.3 Material contexts

The interview data showed that material contexts did not have a significant role in shaping leaders' approaches to transition. However, the allocation of financial resources for collaborative inquiries and professional development was discussed by some participants, and two leaders had made deliberate changes to classroom environments to provide continuity of learning from ECE to school. The next two sections unpack these further.

5.7.3.1 Financial and human resource allocation

Leaders whose schools had evaluated transition to school practices allocated financial resource to the development of shared practice. As identified in the previous section when describing a pedagogical discourse, schools demonstrated their commitment to collaborative pedagogical development through resourcing teachers to meet during class time. Being released for meetings was a whole school practice but was used to collaborate on improving transition to school. Participants described the value of collaboration as "you can do together that you can't achieve alone", and professional development being "so much more powerful if a group of people bring their best thinking together". Through collaborative professional inquiry groups, the leaders drew upon discourses of instructional and distributed leadership (included in a pedagogical discourse identified in the interview data) to shape their practice.

For some leaders and schools, Kāhui Ako have been an opportunity to develop collaborative practice and solve the dilemma of financial resourcing. These leaders constructed their approach to professional development, when reviewing transition to school practices, through a relational discourse. The difficulties of "releasing the right personnel" and "finding time to plan and execute [our] intentions" to "work more harmoniously with our feeder kindergartens" was solved through the participant becoming an across school leader with the Kāhui Ako. Another participant's Kāhui Ako had a clear structure with transition to school included in the strategic plan, and formal engagement between a group of ECEs and the participating schools which aimed to "align [what we do] so that the transition between all of our schools is a smooth one". The structures of funded engagements enabled the development of transition to school approaches.

5.7.3.2 Classroom environments

Two leaders talked about the role of classroom environments in enabling effective transition to school. For both leaders, changing the physical space of classrooms had been part of an evaluation of practices and a shift in pedagogical approach. Resourcing with equipment had been a challenge and involved "begging and borrowing and stealing things … from our own children, from under our houses, and making those classrooms reflect the early childhood centres the children were coming from." Another leader said that their school "has put huge amounts of money into making it happen", and also recognised that developing appropriate resources took some time. Sometimes, leaders drew upon a relational discourse to value whānau experiences: for example, another leader talked about receiving feedback from a parent that books in the classroom did not reflect their child's lived experience. Through conversations with the parent and the school librarian, appropriate books were purchased.

A third leader discussed the adaptation of the school environment to help new children settle into school. As the school was particularly large, consideration had been given to the transition experience at break times which could be "intimidating". Drawing upon relational and structural discourses, the team at this school had created a "junior courtyard that is completely sectioned off from the rest of the school. And if the children are uncomfortable with leaving it, that's where they stay." A large group of older children were "peer mentors", available to support new entrant children through eating lunch with them and taking them to lunchtime clubs. This leader worked in a distributed leadership structure as part of a team, who drew upon discourses of belonging and relationships to shape their transition practices.

5.7.4 External contexts

The last contextual category proposed by Braun et al. (2011) is external contexts. In the interview data, educational policy discourses such as National Standards and the impacts of COVID-19 emerged as discursive themes, which I explain next.

5.7.4.1 Historical policy directives – National Standards

Education policy discourses, because of their pervasiveness through the education system, can be normalised in educators talk about pedagogy (Alcorn & Thrupp, 2012). The findings of this research support Alcorn and Thrupp's finding, while also showing evidence of resistance to official discourses and leaders' shifts in pedagogy, which were often in tension with discourses of accountability and standards.

The achievement-based directives of National Standards, even several years after the policy's removal, were shown in the interview data to impact leaders' transition approaches. Willingly or not, school leaders still reproduce and reimagine achievement discourse within their transition to school approach. If a particular school was using National Standards, or some variation of them, it appeared that leaders were more likely to draw upon an achievement discourse to construct their transition to school approach. One school "still used [National Standards] as a guide, because there is nothing else to replace them". This leader identified tension with the school's current practice of reporting whether a child "above at or below on the report" in Year 2 and above. Although it was an "outmoded way of doing things", the student management system was identified as a constraint. Drawing upon an achievement discourse, this leader's construction of her transition to school approach echoed official discourses which "[endorse] societal expectations about the qualification levels students will attain at pre-ordained times" (Alcorn & Thrupp, 2012, p. 119)

Awareness and resistance of official policy discourse was evident in school leaders' talk about standards, particularly in the first year of school. For one participant, when National Standards were abolished, it felt like "removing some of the pressures" and the perceived ability of schools to widen their pedagogical scope "inspired more than make you feel the weight of expectation." This participant felt the school was then free to adapt achievement goals to reflect the real progress of children and the needs of new entrants:

> The dropping of national standards has made a massive difference under pressure. Not just teachers, but management … and the perception of how your school's going to look against others, but also parents. Saying "my child should be here" ... putting less pressure down the bottom end when you're taming the wee darlings as they arrive.

In other schools, despite the time passed, “releasing [the school] from the pressures of National Standards” has been a challenge, as “we have teachers who have only known national standards.” The school was “having conversations now that we need to change our pathways, we need to stop making predictions and assessments at five and a half that label children at working towards which is a euphemism for, below … we're not there yet, and we need to shift.” In contrast, other schools this leader had worked at had resisted neoliberal policy discourses and “never let go” of a broad curriculum, which she attributed to “knowledge of young children in people in significant leadership positions in school”. Although this participant’s resistance to neoliberal discourses is clear, the pathway to changing practice impacting on transition to school is arduous in her school-specific context.

5.7.4.2 COVID-19

The interviews for this study took place in the middle of 2021, by which time Auckland had spent a cumulative 10 weeks in COVID-19 Alert Level 3 or 4 since 25 March 2020. While COVID-19 had a significant effect on children’s education by this point, the long-term effects of the pandemic on education were only just beginning to emerge (Reimers, 2022). As such, while COVID-19 was mentioned as an external contextual impact by leaders, their answers may have been different if being interviewed since then.

Clear impacts of COVID-19 in the interview data were making links with local ECEs more difficult. Leaders perceived COVID-19 restrictions on visitors to schools and ECEs as a constraint on relationship development, and therefore continuity. One leader felt the impacts of COVID-19 had been “profound in our early years [education]”. As part of a discussion about achievement-based standards, the implication was that children were not coming to school with the same levels of achievement that they had pre-COVID-19.

In contrast, another leader felt that the first COVID-19 lockdown had impacted positively on relationships with ECEs and schools as the Kāhui Ako collaborated to create a learning website for children and whānau to access at home. The success of the website was perceived as an “indicator of the relationships that have been established”. A second leader had used the opportunity to develop digital portfolios as a form of continuity practice from early childhood education. Finally, a third leader felt the impacts of COVID-19 were “good and bad”. While there were financial pressures on many families, there was a “huge number of children who benefited from more quality time at home with mum and dad”. These examples demonstrate that external contextual factors can impact in a range of ways on leaders and their practices.

5.8 Summary of school-specific contexts

Elements of context clearly impacted on school leaders' practice, and the combination of their school-specific contexts and the discourses drawn upon by leaders shaped their approach to transition. Contextual factors impacting on transition to school approaches include situated, professional, material and external contexts. It is important to note that all contextual factors shift over time: for example, staff changes or COVID-19 protocols. For this reason, leaders' approaches described in their talk may be expressed differently if they were interviewed now. Table 9 provides a summary of discourses circulating within school-specific contexts, with small "d" discourses identified in interview data emphasised in bold.

Table 9 Discourses circulating within school-specific contexts

	Element of context	**Associated discourses**
Situated contexts	Student population	assimilation, **relational**, deficit (underrepresentation of cultural responsiveness and Kaupapa Māori)
	Size of school led to practical challenges and opportunities	**structural**
	Relationships with ECEs	readiness, **relational**, continuity
Professional contexts	Role definition within leadership structures	**structural**, distributed leadership, pedagogical
	Advocacy for young learners in the junior school	hierarchical, **achievement**, accountability
	Pedagogical philosophy (see Section 5.4)	**pedagogical**, **achievement**
Material contexts	Allocating financial and staff to transition to school programmes	**Pedagogical** (enabling change), collaboration, distributed leadership
	Changing classroom environments to reflect pedagogical practice	continuity, **relational**, **pedagogical**
External contexts	Historical policy – National Standards	**achievement**, **structural**, resistance to achievement
	The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic	**relational**, continuity

5.9 Conclusion

The interview data in this study revealed a complex array of discursive constructions of transition to school approaches, ranging from structural, achievement focussed approaches to relational, play based approaches. Together, the interview data highlighted how micro level discourses construct different identities for key stakeholders in the transition from early childhood to school. The findings reveal the ways in which structural, relational, pedagogical and achievement discourses interact with contextual factors to empower and constrain leaders in constructing their approach to transition to

school. Although leaders in this study identified many common transition to school and leadership practices, the meanings underpinning these practices differed within the leaders' schools. Finally, the findings identify the capacity of leaders to empower themselves and others within their contexts to evaluate how their transition to school approach is consistent with discourses they wish to embrace or resist. The next chapter discusses the study's findings considering the current literature on transition to school and leadership.

Chapter 6: Discussion

The findings of my study showed the complex and diverse discursive constructions of transition to school approaches by five school leaders within their contexts. The discourse analysis of the interview data presented in chapter 5 illustrated the influence of school-specific contexts on leaders' approaches and the way they, in turn, influence their contexts. It also presented how leaders constructed identities of children, whānau and themselves in various ways according to the multiple discourses they used to position themselves and others.

Figure 6 presents an illustration of the findings of this study, combining elements of the conceptual framework and the research questions along with specific elements identified in the findings.

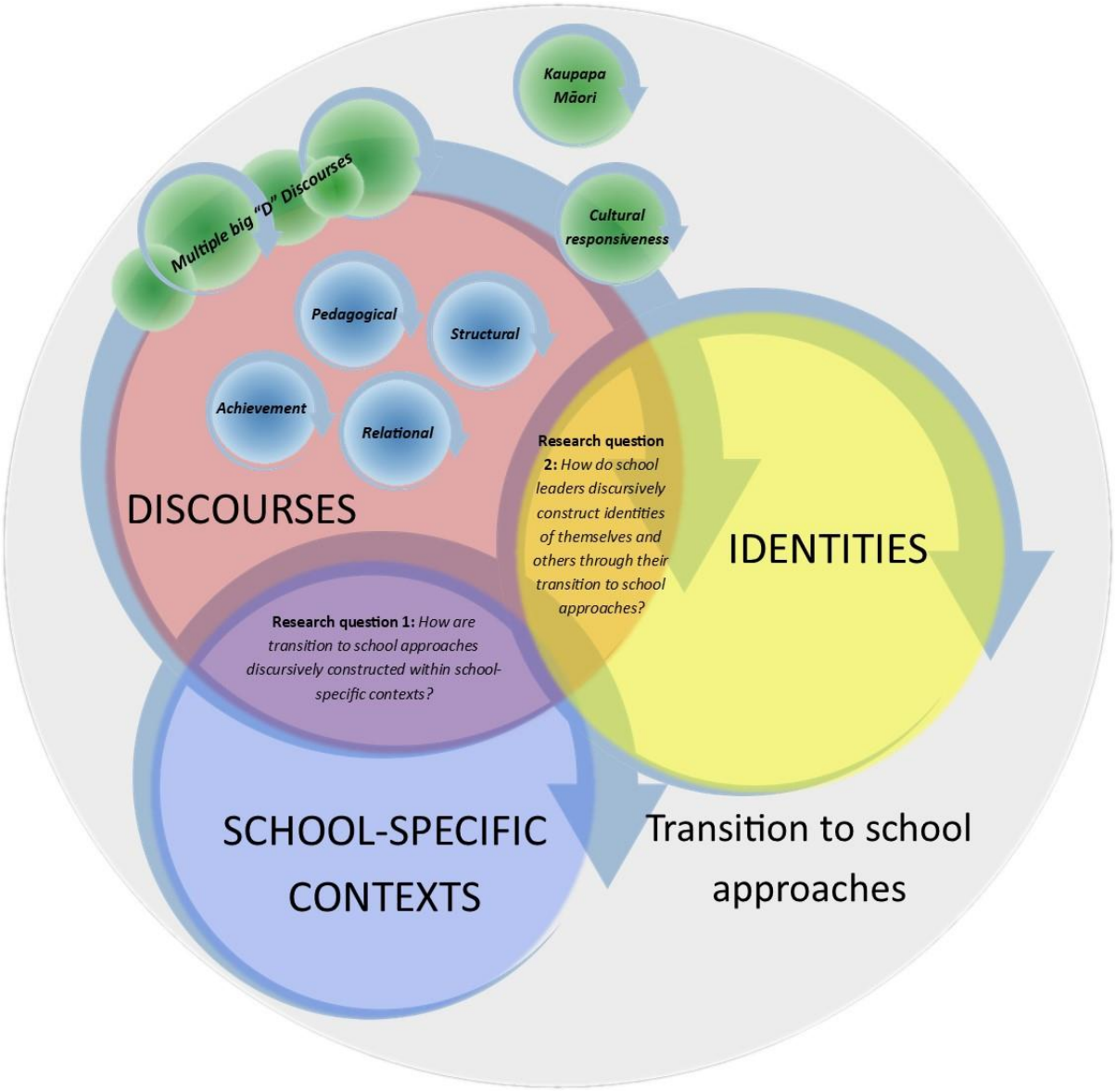

Figure 6 Illustration of findings

The findings illustrated above support the idea that transitions are "dynamic, multi-faceted and complex" (Hartley et al., 2012, p. 92). While an image on a page can never be 3 dimensional, the arrows and blurred edges in the diagram are intended to show that all elements within the diagram are constantly in orbit, dynamic and shifting, and that all elements interact with others.

This study examines the interaction between these elements at a particular moment in time, through the discursive lenses of particular people and within specific contexts. The findings of this study momentarily halt the orbit of discourse, context, and identities by taking a snapshot of how five leaders talked about their transition to school approaches and examining them. Through this examination, the intention is to illuminate the possibilities for alternative combinations of context, discourse and identities.

The findings chapter presented the four small "d" discourses I identified (structural, relational, pedagogical and achievement), identity constructions within each of those discourses, and contextual elements separately. However, the findings also show that the four identified small "d" discourses and the various big "D" Discourses do not circulate in isolation within school-specific contexts, and that there are overlaps in identity formation within leaders' discursive constructions of transition to school approaches. Therefore, having deconstructed the phenomenon of transition to school leadership to consider separate components in the findings, this chapter reconstructs and interprets the findings more holistically and in light of relevant literature (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Firstly, I discuss tensions and complexities between the four small "d" discourses within contexts, discussing identity constructions and big "D" Discourses where appropriate (Section 6.1). This section highlights the tensions evident in leaders' talk, particularly between pedagogy and achievement, and structure and relationships. Secondly, I discuss issues of power and agency within transition to school approaches: who had power within school-specific contexts, and what agency did leaders have to construct transition to school approaches? This section also discusses silenced discourses such as kaupapa Māori and cultural responsiveness (Section 6.2). Finally, I review the findings in terms of the notion of transition to school being a contextual, complex process. I look back at the construct of complexity offered in the literature review (as introduced in Section 3.3 and drawing on the work of Snowden & Boone, 2007) and discuss how this construct could be helpful to examine discursive constructions of transition approaches, and what it offers to school leaders.

In each section, I offer questions to provoke further thinking or discussion about these or other leaders' approaches to transition to school. These questions are summarised in Appendix J. The questions posed may also apply to readers in broader contexts, such as leadership or education in

general. However, I stress that these are only possible opportunities that result from my interpretation of the findings, which gave insight into a small slice of participants' experiences at a particular moment in time and space.

6.1 Tensions and complexities between small "d" discourses

The findings (Chapter 5) illustrated that structural, relational, pedagogical and achievement discourses were in interplay with one another. There was alignment between pedagogical and relational discourses: for example, both related to the big "D" Discourse of contextualisation, and children were positioned as agentic and capable. Alignment was evident between structural and achievement discourses, too: both drew upon a big "D" Discourse of best practice, positioned leaders as experts and were evident in the application of educational policy to transition to school.

There were also evident tensions between discourses, and leaders' talk sometimes positioned discourses in opposition. Two such binaries are between pedagogical and achievement discourses, and structural and relational discourses. I explore these tensions below.

6.1.1 Pedagogical and achievement discourses

In the findings, a tension between pedagogical and achievement discourses was clearly evident. This was particularly true when transition to school approaches had developed alongside discourses of continuity and play. For example, some new entrant teams were bringing play-based learning into a school context that had historically been shaped by an achievement discourse, or where an achievement discourse was still active elsewhere in the school. However, for many leaders, pedagogical and achievement discourses were still in tension. The tension between achievement and play is evident in the literature (Aiono et al., 2019; Maguire, 2020).

When pedagogical discourses shaped transition practice, at times leaders were constrained by perceptions of pedagogy within their contexts. For example, one leader described the school's limited introduction of play for an hour and a half a day and identified parental perceptions as a constraint on practice. Elements of continuity from ECE were introduced to transition practices, such as learning through play and modified learning stories as assessment tools, but these sat alongside achievement foci.

Other participants' talk suggested a continuum from "formal learning" at one end to "play" at the other. "Formal learning" was associated with traditional approaches, "getting them on that pathway to learning", and "textbooks and Kumon". In contrast, other participants talked about the financial and professional development commitments involved in changing their pedagogy towards play and

talked negatively about the constraints of an achievement discourse: “releasing the pressures” and feeling “inspired” were associated with the shift away from National Standards, which had been very much an achievement-focussed policy.

Some leaders keenly felt the pressures of National Standards, and a shift towards alternative pedagogical practices was symbolic of perceived constraints being removed. One leader identified that other schools she had worked in had not experienced a narrowing of curriculum that other schools had when National Standards was introduced. However, in most other participants’ contexts the policy had either had a significant impact during the years it was in place, or discourses underpinning the policy were still shaping leaders’ practice despite the legislative repeal. My findings thus aligned with and complemented other work that has shown that National Standards has had the effect of narrowing the curriculum (Browne, 2022; Haggerty & Loveridge, 2019; Thrupp, 2018). In particular, my findings showed how this narrowing has affected what is valued in the new entrant classroom.

The emphasis on academic achievement (particularly concerning literacy and numeracy) in the transition to school is problematic for children’s experiences of continuity and the identities constructed for them as they enter school. As demonstrated in the findings (Sections 5.4.2 and 5.5.2), different identities were available to children when achievement or pedagogical discourses were influencing their contexts. A pedagogical discourse positioned them as agentic and capable co-constructors of learning, whereas within an achievement discourse children’s identities were formed based on their current or potential academic achievement.

When using the “context is reflexive” tool for discourse analysis (see Section 4.2.2), Gee (2011) suggests asking “is the speaker reproducing contexts like this one unaware of aspects of the contexts of the context that if he or she thought about the matter consciously, he or she would not want to reproduce?” (p. 198). When considering the identities of children and transition practices within achievement and pedagogical discourses, this question invites leaders to ask: if focussing transition practices on achievement means that children form their identities based on their perceived abilities in literacy and numeracy, are these the identities I want to reproduce?

6.1.2 Structural and relational discourses

In the findings, leaders drew upon structural and relational discourses to construct their transition to school approaches. These two discourses were in balance, and sometimes in tension with one another. At times, a structural discourse made relationships possible; at other times, a structural discourse constrained relationships with whānau and children.

When structural discourses shaped leaders' understandings of transition practices, leaders described transition to school as a set of tasks, sometimes following a model, and a process for children and whānau to follow (see Section 5.2). However, the flexibility of structures varied between schools. Sometimes, structures were set by school leaders, with "feedback" accepted and taken into consideration. At other times, structures were set up with inherent flexibility: more like guidelines and a general shape to transition experiences, it was expected that each child's transition to school would be different to their classmates. In both instances, structural and relational discourses interacted in leaders' transition approaches, but in different ways. Collaboration through building relationships with whānau requires "courage to let go of unhelpful organisational structures" (Te One et al., 2021, p. 47) and draws upon discourses of collaborative and relational leadership (Bush & Glover, 2014). Therefore, when drawing upon a structural discourse, leaders must ensure that their structures are not so rigid that they preclude the ability for other stakeholders to have voice in the transition to school process.

The interview data did not show that relationships were *not* a priority for leaders drawing upon structural discourse to shape their approach; but that actively building relationships was sometimes not the participant's role. Teachers were identified as relationship-builders, who knew their children and were able to work with whānau. However, teachers may not have the positional authority to make change within their school context, depending on the school's hierarchical structure: therefore, the potential for relationships with whānau to shape their child's experience, or the transition to school approach itself, was limited if leaders themselves did not engage in reciprocal relationships with whānau and children. Discourses circulating within school contexts will afford (or not) the potential for structures to change according to the needs of children and whānau transitioning to school; if managerial or hierarchical leadership discourses circulate, leaders may feel constrained in their relations with others in their contexts (Cuban, 1988).

Additionally, the abdication of relationship responsibilities by leaders is arguably problematic because while leaders may not have identified themselves as relationship builders, they were frequently the first school staff member that children and whānau met when coming into school. Literature supports the notion that leadership is an inherently relational task (Branson & Marra, 2019; David, 2018; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). This indicates that leaders need to consider their relationships within their transition to school approaches, and ask themselves what possibilities can be created for teachers, leaders and whānau to adapt structures and systems according to the needs of stakeholders, and what relationships allow these needs to be known.

When taken-for-granted structures become available for critical examination and debate, possibilities are opened up. While schools do have legislative requirements, they have "the flexibility to design relevant and meaningful curriculum and learning programmes that meet the needs and values of their particular school communities" (Edwards, 2012, p. 34). For example, one feature of school organisation that is often taken for granted is to organise children by their birth years (Courtney & Mann, 2021). If this approach to the organisation of new entrant classrooms was open to debate, there is the potential for alternative structures to arise. What if tuakana-teina relationships (an established practice described by one participant; see Section 5.3.2) were extended through the geographical organisation of new entrant classes next door to older classes? For that matter, what if classes were mixed age? Most participants in this study described a "junior area" of the school, and therefore there may be scope to group children differently within that area of the school. Such an approach may draw upon a relational discourse and offer opportunities to develop children's identities as integral within the whole school community rather than just as a new entrant. Providing possibilities for children to be agentic in creating social connections also resonates with culturally responsive and kaupapa Māori practices (M. Berryman et al., 2018). The above is just one example of re-examining the ways that structures can support relationships rather than impede them. To apply these findings to their own contexts, readers could ask themselves what taken-for-granted structures exist within their contexts, and how could they be reimagined to meet the needs of their communities.

6.2 Power and agency

As noted in Chapter 2, power and agency are important concepts within post-structuralism. This section discusses the findings through the lenses of power and agency, and examines who had power and who had agency within leaders' transition to school approaches.

6.2.1 Power

The findings revealed a pattern of leaders and schools being positioned within discourses as knowledgeable and holding power in transition to school approaches. This was particularly evident through two of the small "d" discourses I identified: the structural discourse, where leaders and schools chose the form of transition practices and were positioned as knowledgeable about schooling and wider child development (Section 5.2.2); and the achievement discourse, where leaders defined and reported on achievement within their context and were positioned as experts in schooling and achievement (Section 5.5.2).

Unequal power relationships surfaced in transition to school practices such as highly structured preschool visits with agendas, environments and content all being predetermined by school leaders. Leaders may have reasoned that this approach was necessary because of the context of many children entering school at similar times, or alternatively they may have been continuing to enact a taken-for-granted practice whose structure had not been critically examined for issues of power and agency. Parents were invited to engage with the transition to school process, but in ways that were decided upon by school leaders. For example, parents were invited to contact the school but only at certain times; or to ask questions, but only within an assigned time slot.

These school-centric constructions of power relations within transition to school (and beyond) are problematic for several reasons. First, they run counter to research and guidance on culturally responsive practices which view whānau and children as having agency within the school setting, and which give leaders the responsibility to change practice *according to community needs* (M. Berryman et al., 2018). Unequal power relations in the transition to school have also been criticised within social justice and critical theory, which draw attention to how structural inequities resulting in unequal distributions of power amongst social groupings (Petriwskyj, 2014). Finally, literature suggests that effective whānau engagement in the transition to school includes constructing parents' identities as agentic, as well as nurturing collaborative, respectful relationships between families and schools (Cartmell, 2017; Hohepa & McIntosh, 2017; Peters, 2010; Webb et al., 2017). As identified in Section 3.2.1, New Zealand leadership models offer differing power constructions: some situating power with schools and leaders, such as *Kiwi Leadership for Principals* (Ministry of Education, 2008a), and others such as *Tū Rangatira* (Ministry of Education, 2010b) sharing power through a community development focus.

There were examples of more equal power-sharing relationships within the findings. When leaders drew upon a relational discourse to construct their approach, whānau were invited to take up identities as equal partners in relationships. In these circumstances, parents were seen as knowledgeable about their child, and although they may or may not have been experienced in the school context, whānau were able to co-construct the transition process through more individualised engagements with the school. For example, in one school parents were invited to stay in the classroom because it was important that the child saw them in the classroom context and so that knowledge of what happens at school was shared and understood by both parents and child. This increased parents' capacity to construct knowledge about school with their child, rather than the knowledge of the schooling process being withheld. Positioning children as inextricably linked with whānau and community is consistent with sociocultural approaches, such as those

underpinning *Te Whāriki* (Peters, 2014; Te One et al., 2021; Vogler et al., 2008; Yang et al., 2022) or culturally responsive and Kaupapa Māori models (Macfarlane et al., 2007).

These micro-findings support the post-structural understanding that power is socially constructed within contexts, but illustrating for the first time how this occurs in the specific contexts of transition to school in Aotearoa New Zealand. The *New Zealand Curriculum* asks schools to be "welcoming of family and whānau" during the transition from ECE to school (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 41). Examining this statement from a post-structural perspective, one wonders: *Who defines "welcoming"?* Welcoming means different things to different people, and such an ambiguous statement leads to the possibility that performative relationships may be formed through structures and processes that stop short of truly sharing power with parents. When combined with a cultural responsiveness discourse, and the active seeking of the "voices of silenced, minority or oppressed groups" (Baxter, 2002, p. 831), whānau engagement also becomes a social justice and equity issue.

6.2.2 Agency

Differing levels of agency for contributing to and shaping transition to school approaches were evident in the identity constructions explored in the findings. Within a pedagogical discourse, leaders and children were positioned as agentic: leaders were afforded the agency to shape pedagogical practice, and children the agency to co-construct their own learning. Within a relational discourse, whānau were agentic as their relationships with the school shaped their family's transition experience. As this thesis focusses on the role of leaders within transition to school, this section critically examines the agency of leaders to shape their approach to transition to school within their contexts.

Within their school-specific contexts, leaders were afforded agency and created agency for themselves in different ways. For example, leaders created opportunities for their own agency through positional hierarchies. For one leader, the Kāhui Ako had been the pathway towards enacting structural change in the transition practices within her context. Many positive practices consistent with research about how to enable effective transition to school had been enacted within the school. However, this leader's agency was simultaneously constrained through the use of a model of best practice that was intended to be "rolled out" other schools within the Kāhui Ako. The use of a model meant the change programme was strongly shaped by previous practice in another context and potentially reduced the opportunity to asking deeper questions about whether it reflected the needs of this leader's school-specific context (Schweisfurth & Elliott, 2019). Applying the notion of "best practice" models that can work in any context is discussed in Section 6.3.

Another form of agency afforded to leaders and created by was through their knowledge about transition to school and pedagogy. Through "passion for transition" or "speaking with authority" on effective practice, these leaders carved out a space for themselves to enact change, or develop practices, within their contexts. These contexts included positional hierarchies and leaders who felt capable of enacting change worked in settings in which they had authority.

A third way of identifying as agentic for leaders (and others within their contexts) was through collaboration. In school specific contexts where working together was valued, and enabled through specific practices like classroom release time to work on collaborative inquiries into practice, not only was the leader agentic but teachers and others in the context were afforded agency too. Collaborative and distributed leadership have been shown to be effective methods of co-constructing processes such as transition to school (Bond et al., 2019; Te One et al., 2021), and the findings of my study support this literature.

Some leaders identified constraints for themselves in constructing and developing their transition to school approach. Discourses circulating within school-specific contexts shaped leaders' perceptions of their agency; for example, where discourses of achievement, datification, neoliberalism and institutional hierarchies were circulating within school contexts, leaders perceived their capacity to enact change was constrained. Leaders who identified their leadership as vested in their roles, for example performing tasks such as enabling achievement, collating data and enacting managerial tasks such as resource management, were both constrained by their context, and constrained *themselves* within their contexts.

The above finding is consistent with Gronn's (2003) criticism of the conceptualisation of leadership as an individual quality. By submitting to the notion of leadership as existing within structures (In Gronn's words, "[deciding] to subject themselves to the apparatus of control and its assumptions"), leaders subjectivities "become self-disciplined … for then they have chosen to 'normalise themselves' by acting in conformity with a leadership design blueprint" (p. 284). Gronn goes on to say that "this choice is theirs [leaders'] and theirs alone" (p. 284). Gronn thereby challenges leaders to choose to create agency or embrace for themselves, as would be consistent with a post-structural approach. Arguably, one way leaders can create agency for themselves is by resisting normative structures such as hierarchies and positions. In this way, those leading transition to school could ask themselves, "*is what I perceive to be constraining me really constraining me? What capacity do I have to examine my own underpinning beliefs about transition, and create the agency for myself to change existing practices and look for alternatives?"*

Extending this post-structural way of thinking another way that leaders can create their own agency and exercise the power afforded through social constructions of realities relates to another significant discourse that was almost entirely missing from the interview data: that of Kaupapa Māori approaches. Significantly, in leaders' talk about transition, concepts relevant to Māori perspectives such as te reo (Māori language) or tikanga (Māori protocols) were almost entirely absent, aside from two leaders mentioning kapa haka as an extra-curricular or lunchtime opportunity and one leader referencing school values, which were expressed in Māori concepts. While (as discussed in the introduction to this chapter) the interview data represents only a snapshot of leaders' approaches, it would not be unreasonable to expect that the snapshot is at least an approximate representation of leaders' approaches at that moment in time. Ergo, if Māori perspectives *were* included in leaders' approaches to transition to school, we might expect that at least some practices that represented those perspectives would have been described or discussed during an hour-long interview with at least some of the five participants.

The consistent absence suggests a concerning lack of consideration not only of the cultural identities of the 5-16% of students in the participating schools who identify as Māori (see Section 4.2), but also of the identities and roles of all other children in New Zealand classrooms. Māori and non-Māori have been described respectively as *tangata whenua* and *tangata tiriti:* the indigenous "people of the land" and the non-indigenous "people of the treaty". These two groups were the and co-signatories to the foundational document of Aotearoa New Zealand, *The Treaty of Waitangi/Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (Chan & Ritchie, 2020; Wood et al., 2021). Through the requirements of professional bodies (Education Council New Zealand, 2017), the *New Zealand Curriculum*, policy documents such as *Ka Hikitia* and *Tau Mai Te Reo* (Ministry of Education, 2020a, 2020c), and the priorities legislated within the Education and Training Act (2020), all teachers and leaders in New Zealand schools have an imperative to uphold the three principles of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*: protection, partnership and participation (Wood et al., 2021). Including Māori perspectives is not only a moral imperative but a legislative one, and we should therefore expect to see evidence of Māori discourses and practices increasingly shaping all aspects of school life, including – in the context of my research – transition to school.

Leaders have the ability and the responsibility to resist dominant discourses to exercise agency within their contexts. Considering what practices might emerge from including Māori perspectives in transition to school approaches, leaders could ask themselves, *how can I enact agency within my school context to ensure our transition to school approach "support[s] the identity, language and culture of Māori learners and their whānau to strengthen belonging, engagement and achievement*

as Māori so that Māori learners can actively participate in Te Ao Māori, Aotearoa and the wider world"? (Ministry of Education, 2020a) Or, *what can we do differently to ensure that our approach to transition does not force Māori children and whānau to "leave their cultural identity at the school gate"?* (Macfarlane et al., 2007, p. 74)

6.3 The complexity of leading transition to school

The study findings revealed complex interactions between discourses, identities, and contexts, resulting in different transition to school approaches being constructed by participants. While four small "d" discourses were clearly identifiable in the interview data, the ways these discourses interacted within contexts depended on many factors.

In the literature review (Section 3.3), I used a definition of complexity from (Snowden & Boone, 2007) to argue that leadership of transition to school is a complex process. It is fitting to revisit this definition, or set of criteria, in light of the findings and to understand what implications this has for leadership of transition to school.

Snowden and Boone's (2007) first criteria for complexity is **large numbers of interacting elements**. My findings show participants balancing many factors, and in particular, the influence of multiple discourses in relation to their approaches to transition to school. Leaders all described dilemmas which Cardno (2012) defines as "complex, tension-fraught problems that arise when a leader is challenged to achieve more than one objective" (p. 64) that they had faced in leading transitions. These dilemmas often resulted from tensions between competing discourses, such as prioritising relationships for children with special needs and their whānau while simultaneously adhering to the structures set up for transition within the school. However, leadership dilemmas can be reframed as "paradoxical, creative opportunities to be welcomed and exploited" (Collinson, 2014, p. 43) through examining issues from alternative perspectives.

Secondly, complexity involves **no right answers** (Snowden & Boone, 2007) Solutions cannot be simply imposed on a complex phenomenon (Snowden & Boone, 2007). This principle is evident in the interview data, where five leaders in seemingly similar schools had different approaches to transition to school which they believed worked in their context. However, big "D" Discourses of "best practice" circulated amongst approaches that were constructed within the structural and achievement discourses. Complexity theory suggests that the notion of a singular "best practice" is inappropriate for a complex system such as transition to school (Snowden & Boone, 2007).

Thirdly, complex processes are **constantly evolving** (Snowden & Boone, 2007). The interview data indicated that this was indeed the case for transition to school approaches. Several participants

spoke of long-term change processes in which their school's approach to transition to school - and their own - evolved over time. These might have been quick evolutions, where leaders changed their approaches and tried new practices frequently, or slower collaborative processes where leaders sought multiple perspectives along their "journey" of evolving their approach. In fact, collaboration is seen as key to effectively leading in complex systems (Netolicky & Golledge, 2021; Ritchie, 2016).

In complex systems, **external conditions and systems constantly change** (Snowden & Boone, 2007) This was demonstrated in the data as being true for leading transition to school in three ways. First the external policy environment for education in Aotearoa New Zealand (as elsewhere) is continually changing. As illustrated in Sections 5.7.4.1 and 6.1.1, policies such as National Standards have a long reach even once abolished, and historical resistance or submission to such policies impacted on leaders' approaches to transition to school through the ways an achievement discourse still shaped and was shaped by transition practices. Second, transition to school involves ever-changing cohorts of new children entering school contexts. The nature of student populations is beyond a leader's control, and participants indicated that this had required flexibility of thinking and approach. Finally, COVID-19 was a wider contextual change force that had varying impacts on transition to school approaches (see Section 5.7.4.2).

Finally, in complexity **the agents and system constrain each other** (Snowden & Boone, 2007). This concept is consistent with the post-structural notion that we simultaneously shape our contexts through our discursive constructions, and our context shape our understandings (Baxter, 2016). Through leaders' choice of language and discourse, they influence their context; and through discourses circulating within their contexts, the identities of leaders and others are also shaped. In the interview data, this was evident when considering leaders' power and agency within their school-specific contexts (Section 6.2). Leaders' perceived agency and power constrained their actions within their school-specific contexts.

According to Snowden and Boone's (2007) five criteria, then, leading transition to school is indeed complex. Its complexity is reflected in Figure 6 (presented at the beginning of this chapter). With so many moving parts, competing discourses, possible identities, and contextual factors, what can the findings of this study offer to leaders in their own complex contexts?

By being aware that leading transition to school is complex, and that the many discourses circulating add to this complexity, leaders can take the first step towards understanding how their leadership is discursively constructed. Snowden and Boone (2007) suggest that in complex situations, leaders need to probe, then sense, and then respond. Examining the discourses underlying practice involves

probing one's own underpinning beliefs, and then looking wider to understand other's beliefs too (Aaltonen, 2009).

The goal of working with complex situations is not to discover a "best" practice, but rather to develop emergent practice (Snowden & Boone, 2007). This suggests that while elements of practice from other contexts may be applicable, searching for a "model", "system" or "best practice" (such as within a structural discourse) may not be the most effective way forward for a complex task such as leading transition to school. This view is echoed by Schweisfurth and Elliott (2019) who argue that instead of best practice, gathering evidence about what works "will always be a question of which practices are appropriate for whom, for what purposes, and under what conditions" (p. 4). In this way, practices and leadership must be contextualised to be effective and appropriate. In regard to transition to school in diverse communities, the idea of "appropriate for whom" (Schweisfurth & Elliott, 2019, p. 4) calls into question who has the power to determine transition approaches within school contexts. For practice to emerge and be contextually appropriate, rich discussion, dissent and communication must be involved (Snowden & Boone, 2007), signalling an opportunity for leaders to authentically gather a range of voices and perspectives from their communities in developing transition to school approaches.

6.4 Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, I offered a diagram to illustrate the complexities of discourses, contexts and identities combining in multiple ways to form the transition to school approaches of participants in this study. The diagram showed several elements that I have discussed, critically examined, and provided reflective questions for readers to consider.

Firstly, the framework contains the four small "d" discourses, pictured in blue inside the "Discourses" circle. These discourses overlapped each other, and Section 6.1 unpacked the tensions and complexities of two pairs of discourses: pedagogical and achievement discourses, and structural and relational discourses. Secondly, the two post-structural concepts of power and agency revealed constraints and enablers for leaders. I discussed the power of leaders to embrace their agency to enact change within their contexts. Two big "D" Discourses were identified as underrepresented in the interview data: cultural responsiveness, and kaupapa Māori. I have brought together the reflective questions contained in this chapter in an infographic, found in Appendix J.

Chapter 7:Conclusion

This study was a post-structural discourse analysis exploring how five school leaders in large, urban primary schools in Auckland, New Zealand, constructed their approaches to transition to school and their own and others' identities within their contexts. The iterative, cyclical discourse analysis process revealed complex constructions of transition to school approaches and multiple possible identities for leaders, children and whānau. Participants were generous in sharing of understandings, experiences, contexts and influences as they described their approaches during semi-structured individual interviews.

This chapter begins with a summary of the key findings (Section 7.1). The significance of this research is discussed in Section 7.2, followed by the identification of implications for leaders, and for transition to school practice (Section 7.3), reflections on the study (Section 7.4), and future possibilities for research (Section 7.5). Underpinned by a post-structural conceptual framework, the final section of this chapter argues that leading transition to school is a complex process with interwoven discursive constructions and identities for those engaged in the process.

7.1 Summary of findings

This study sought to answer the main research question

How do school senior leaders discursively construct approaches to transition to school and their own and others' identities within their contexts?

Firstly, ***the study identified four small "d" discourses that participants employed when approaching transition to school within their contexts***. Leaders constructed their transition to school approaches through four micro discourses identified in the interview data. These were the structural, relational, pedagogical and achievement discourses. The combination of discourses constructing and reconstructed by leaders in their approaches were manifested through a set of transition to school processes that may have looked similar in different schools but were underpinned by multiple discourses. These discourses circulated within school contexts, sometimes in tension and sometimes in harmony, and they combined with both big "D" Discourses and contextual factors as school leaders constructed their transition to school approaches.

Secondly, the study showed how ***elements of school context (considered in terms of situated, professional, material and external contexts; (Braun et al., 2011) produced leaders' approaches to transition, and in turn were reproduced by leaders***. Maintaining effective relationships with ECE centres was a challenge for leaders, although in some contexts this was enabled somewhat by

formal engagement structures such as Kāhui Ako. An unexpected finding was that the diversity of student cohorts and school communities was less influential than anticipated.

Thirdly, leaders' ***discursive constructions of transition to school within their contexts - through both small "d" and big "D" Discourses - invited leaders, children and whānau to take up different identities when transitioning to school***. These identities offered varying levels of power and agency in the transition process. In some cases, children and whānau were constructed as capable and knowledgeable, and their capacity and knowledge were carried with them into their new school context; however, in other cases, leaders were positioned as experts and children and whānau was simply to follow the transition structures provided for them.

A fourth key finding was that ***discourses of Kaupapa Māori and cultural responsiveness were underrepresented in the findings***, which could be for many possible reasons. In superdiverse Auckland, in a country with a strong imperative – particularly in education - to honour the Treaty of Waitangi and commit to bicultural partnerships, it was concerning that these discourses were not explicitly engaged with in leaders' approaches to transition to school.

Finally, the findings showed that ***leadership of transition to school is a complex phenomenon*** (according to criteria offered by Snowden & Boone, 2007). With many interacting elements and the need to respond to ever-evolving external and school-specific contexts, there are infinite possibilities for leaders' approaches to transition to school. Examining transition to school through a lens of complexity problematises the idea of "best practice" in transition to school. The illustration of this study's findings presented in Chapter 6 (Figure 6) invites leaders to consider how discourses, contexts, identities, and practices circulate around each other in relation to transition to school (or, potentially, other aspects of leading in their school contexts) and ask, which discourses do I pull into my approach, and which do I resist?

7.2 Significance of the research

My study has responded to a gap in the literature examining the experiences of school leaders designing transition to school approaches. Much of the transition to school literature to date has been focussed on practice (see, for example (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Garpelin, 2014; Hayes, 2013; Mirkhil, 2010; Wickett, 2017; Woodhouse, 2019). This research opens a new perspective of examining transition to school, using a post-structural perspective to understand leaders' approaches.

To my knowledge, this is the first time a post-structural perspective has been applied to transition to school. Multiple authors have identified the value of this theoretical perspective to examining

leadership (Karina Davis et al., 2015; Niesche & Gowlett, 2015, 2019) and applying it to a complex phenomenon with a wide range of stakeholders, perspectives and discursive influences such as transition to school adds to this body of research. The value of using discourse analysis to examine leadership practices and discursive constructions within contexts has also been identified in literature (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Mabey, 2013; Torrance & Humes, 2015). By using a discourse analysis approach to examine leadership of transition to school, this research has opened space for a critical examination of discourses consciously or unconsciously shaping the identities of school leaders, and children.

This research also adds new perspectives of an understudied group. The leadership of the junior school, and specifically transition to school, is an important role but one under-recognised in practice or policy (May, 2011). The current research on transition to school lacks recognition of leaders' roles, which is not surprising as leaders other than principals (such as the leaders in this study) are underrepresented in literature (Gear & Sood, 2021). By giving leaders of transition to school a voice through this research, I hope that others are inspired to include their perspectives in further research.

This research provides a unique model for leaders, and others involved in transition to school, to examine the underlying beliefs and discourses that shape their transition to school approach within their context. In addition, reflective questions that have arisen from the findings are included in the discussion chapter and collated in Appendix J. Along with the findings and discussion, these questions may lead others to consider possibilities for future research. I have identified some possibilities for future research in section 7.5.

7.3 Implications arising from this research

This research was based on the conceptual understanding that realities are socially constructed, and that we construct our understandings through language and interaction with others. Given this foundation, this research cannot offer definitive recommendations that are directly applicable to other contexts. Instead, the implications I suggest in this section are my own interpretations of what this research might offer others – I recognise that in interacting with the discursive text that is this thesis, readers will have their own ideas about implications in their own lives and contexts. With that proviso, I believe this research reveals opportunities for critical thinking for leaders and others involved in the transition to school process.

Perhaps the strongest offering of this research is ***the visual framework (illustrated in Chapter 6) that could assist leaders to critically examine how discourse, context and identities circulate and***

interact within their own settings. The framework demonstrates the complex and contextual nature of leading transition to school, and it highlights the opportunity for readers to examine transition practices for underpinning beliefs. While it is tempting to focus on the physical transition practices that are observable within schools, the framework deliberately moves the transition to school approach to the background of the image. This move invites those involved in supporting children transitioning to school to resist transactional or task-centric approaches and instead to examine the discourses influencing their practices and identities in the school context. Thus, this thesis shifts examination of transition to school away from *what* and into *why*.

Two significant discourses were highlighted in the discussion chapter of this thesis as being surprisingly quiet in the interview texts. This was an unexpected finding that has many possible implications. Identifying the absence of Māori and cultural responsiveness perspectives specifically in the transition to school approaches examined in the interview data invites readers to ***critically examine how these discourses are present in their own constructions of reality***, and whether (and why) these discourses are drawn upon none of the time, all of the time, or only in certain times and spaces. Leaders are invited to consider how dominant discourses produce taken-for-granted "truths" and reproduce structural inequities. Leaders might thus re-examine their own power and agency in shaping identities and realities.

Bringing a post-structural perspective to the phenomenon of leading transition to school may, I hope, encourage readers to understand that "every time we make a decision, it is located (knowingly or not) from a premise of belief about the world and how it operates" (Niesche & Gowlett, 2019, p. 4). To make appropriate contextual decisions about transition to school, leaders must not only consider stakeholders' understandings from their own personal perspective. Instead, they must ***attempt to step into the worlds of others*** - including whānau, teachers and children - to get a better understanding of changes that could be made to their approach, or to identify processes that are not serving the needs of their community.

Ultimately, the post-structural approach taken in this thesis opens possibilities for leaders to ***re-examine, reperceive, and re-understand their practice and environments***. Examining the nexus of transition to school and leadership gives one example of how leaders can seek to understand the ways in which roles, structures and hierarchies shape their practice, and the power they hold to reimagine their contexts.

7.4 Reflections on the study

In this section, I reflect on the study considering my own reflexivity, the choice of a post-structural framework, quality criteria, and the limitations of the research.

A reflexive approach says that as a researcher, I am inescapably part of the social world within which I am researching (Cohen et al., 2018). In Chapter 1, I outlined my background in education, with particular reference to transition to school. Since I wrote that section, a whole research project has occurred and with it, my perspectives, understandings and knowledge have shifted and grown. Although much of this growth has occurred because of the reading and discussions I have had, by far the most change has been through interviewing the school leaders who generously gave their time to this study, and becoming familiar with their words through the discourse analysis process.

My approach to transition to school and research has changed as the study continued. If I were conducting the participant interviews now, I would do so with a different lens. The perspective taken by this research is that between us, my participants and I constructed a reality together in that moment and time. A different reality would be constructed if we talked today. I hope that my participants recognise themselves in this research and feel their perspectives at the time of the interviews have been honoured.

At times, maintaining integrity in the reporting of interview data was challenging. One section I found particularly challenging was writing about Māori perspectives, or lack thereof; suffering from what Hotere-Barnes (2015) called "Pākehā paralysis". It took time to come to terms with my reluctance to discuss the absence of Māori perspectives in the interview data: what right did I, as a middle aged Pākehā woman, have to comment? Further reading helped me reframe this question: what right do I have *not* to comment? To not discuss the absence of Māori perspectives on the transition to school within the interview data would be to "[cut] off creative educational capabilities for the future, and [limit] the potential in thinking through how things might be done differently" (Hotere-Barnes, 2015, p. 42).

I was also assisted in writing the discussion chapter by the illustration of findings, which make it clear that it is not that the influence of any discourse (including underrepresented discourses) on transition to school approaches is *impossible*. Rather, they were not drawn upon by leaders in this study when describing their transition approach at the moment in time of the interview in the particular social construction of the interview setting. Hence, the discussion of findings, and the contents of this thesis, is not a judgement or criticism of my participants, but an examination of the discourses influencing their practice and being reproduced within their contexts.

Had time constraints allowed, I could have gone back to my participants and sought clarification and further information which would have involved further ethical approval. Alternatively, had I been more aware at the beginning of the interview process of the possible discourses influencing transition to school, I could have gained insight into the ways that discourses shaped leaders' transition to school approaches through enunciating discourses and debating the merits with participants at the time of the interview (Cruickshank, 2012). While this method could potentially engage participants on a deeper level, it would have been co-creating a discursive construction of transition to school, rather than allowing leaders to express their own approach. Although there was flexibility in the questions asked during the interviews, discourses were not named and discussed during the interviews.

It is impossible to pretend that this is an objective piece of research, and the conceptual framework the research is based upon rejects a universal truth entirely (Williams, 2014). Instead, this thesis is a discourse itself, produced through my own interpretations of the literature and interview data, and readers will engage with it through the lens of their own discursive constructions. There is no "universally communicable meaning" to this thesis (Williams, 2014, p. 14), and arguably more questions will be raised than answered. However, I hope that readers will gain new insight into the complexities of supporting children transitioning to school and be able to apply the reflective questions to their own lives in some way.

In Section 4.3.1, I outlined this study's inclusion of three elements of quality research: rich rigour, credibility and resonance (Tracy, 2010). Elsewhere in this concluding chapter (particularly Section 7.2) I discuss the first criteria, which is a worthy topic. The second criteria identified, rich rigour, was met in this study through using "complex, flexible and multifaceted" tools that reflected the complexity of transition to school leadership. A post-structural approach and the tools of discourse, identity and context allowed me to produce a dynamic and complex illustration of findings in Chapter 6. The final feature of credibility, thick description, was sometimes challenging to meet. While it was important to contextualise language within the reporting of findings to provide information about where and when language was produced, this needed to be balanced with participants confidentiality. Through careful examination of quotes for identifying features, and anonymising data by not using pseudonyms as originally intended, I have been able to provide thick description whilst protecting participant confidentiality.

There are limitations to this research that must be acknowledged. While a post-structural perspective is a strength of the study, it can also be regarded as a limitation. Post-structuralism opens up transformative possibilities of new ways of looking at the world and examining leaders'

(and others) power within transition to school settings and agency for change. However, understanding that realities are socially constructed (including the reality constructed by me and participants in the interview setting) means that findings cannot be generalised. The intention of this thesis is not to provide examples of "best practice"; in fact, I have argued against the notion of transition structures that suit all settings. Instead, one intention is to prompt readers to examine the discourses circulating in their own contexts and ask themselves, what do my words say about what I believe about transition to school?

7.5 Future possibilities for research

Given that the existing transition to school literature has largely focussed on practice, my research opens multiple possibilities for further research in the nexus of leadership and transition to school.

Firstly, there is scope to develop ***a post-structural evaluative framework for leaders of transition to school that invites leaders to critically examine their transition approach***. While recent research has started to explore this possibility (Te One et al., 2021), the only other publicly available New Zealand-based framework available to schools is 7 years old and has its own problematic discursive constructions (Education Review Office, 2015). These constructions include a focus on structures and processes and a lack of critical examination of power relations and equity issues. A framework that asks questions that challenge readers to look at transition from multiple perspectives and encourages schools to co-construct transition approaches with their communities would be a welcome addition to the support currently available to schools.

Secondly, the findings of this study have highlighted ***a gap in research specifically looking at culturally responsive and kaupapa Māori approaches to transition to school***. This echoes earlier calls for more research into Māori children's experiences transitioning to school (Hohepa & Paki, 2017; Peters, 2014). Examining kaupapa Māori and culturally responsive transitions from a leadership or teaching perspective would add a valuable dimension to the transition to school literature.

Thirdly, ***employing post-structural frameworks that invite leaders to examine tasks or systems from other's perspectives*** offers rich possibilities for leaders. Frameworks such as the Cynefin framework (Snowden & Boone, 2007) or multi-ontological thinking (Aaltonen, 2009) ask leaders to consider dilemmas, tasks or other phenomenon within their context from a range of perspectives. While leadership models and frameworks are readily available (for example, Kiwi Leadership for Principals; Ministry of Education, 2008a), there is space for future research into how leaders engage

with sense-making structures that are open ended and require leaders to examine their underpinning beliefs.

Finally, while this study has examined leadership of transition to school, it is a small study with theoretical underpinnings that limit generalisability. ***Further research into leadership of transition to school*** has been identified as necessary (as noted by Boyle, Petriwskyj, et al., 2018; Dockett & Perry, 2021; Noel, 2011), and the more perspectives and constructions of approaches that can be gathered, the richer the capacity for leaders understandings of the complexities of transition to school will be.

7.6 Concluding thoughts

A post-structural approach creates space for educational leaders to critically explore discourses operating in their school-specific and wider contexts that shape their leadership and transition approaches. More importantly, such an approach may support the leaders to view the discourses in circulation as not only as "a hindrance, a stumbling block", but rather as "a point of resistance" (Foucault, 1998, p. 101) and a starting point for changing and reinvigorating leadership practices within their specific contexts and co-constructing an alternative transition to school approaches.

It has been a privilege to carry out this study of transition to school with five school leaders who welcomed me into their schools and allowed me to examine the words they spoke. As a result of undertaking the personal, professional, and scholarly journey reflected in this thesis, I have found perspective forever altered by viewing the world through a post-structural lens. In daily interactions, I find myself problematising previously taken-for-granted concepts and reflecting on my own identity positioning. I hope that this thesis will inspire similar critical examinations for other who engage with it in the future.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Email to principals

Kia ora,

My name is Katherine Robinson and I am a student in the Master's in Educational Leadership programme at the University of Waikato. My Master's thesis research is about the transition from early childhood to school, and specifically how school leaders approach the development of programmes to support these learners.

Why am I emailing you?

I am seeking 4-6 schools to participate in this study. Attached is a flyer for the person in charge of transition to school at your school (this could be yourself, a DP/AP, a syndicate leader, etc.), and a full information sheet and consent form. Both you and your transition leader would need to consent to the transition leader's participation in this study, because they will be representing the school and describing practice and decision making that happens at your school.

What does participation involve?

A 60-90 minute audio recorded interview with your transition leader during Term 2, 2021. Pseudonyms are used for the transition leader and for the school; the transition leader will be asked to review their transcript before it is used in the study.

Why is this research important?

Much of the current transition to school research is written from the early childhood perspective or focuses on elements of the process on which a classroom teacher, whānau and the child can impact. Some research talks about the role of the school, but there is little research on how school leaders who are in charge of transition to school experience and can impact on the process. I recognise that school leaders in large, urban primary schools with diverse student bodies juggle expectations from many stakeholders in their roles, and I am interested in how they manage the process of transitioning new students to school in their specific contexts.

What benefits are there to your school?

Taking part in research like this prompts participants to think deeply about their practice. When the thesis is complete you and your school's transition leader will receive a copy. I

would be more than happy to come in and discuss the findings with you, your staff, or others who may be interested. I am committed to communicating the findings in a user-friendly way.

What should you do now?

Please **CONSIDER** whether you would be happy for your school to be a part of this study.

If so, please **FORWARD** this email and attachments to your transition leader, letting them know that you would be happy for them to take part if they wish (but their participation would still be entirely voluntary).

This research is supervised by Dr Katrina McChesney and Dr Olivera Kamenarac (University of Waikato). This research has been approved by the University of Waikato Division of Education Ethics Committee on 5 May 2021. Approval number: FEDU028/21

Ngā mihi nui

Katherine Robinson

Researcher:	**Research Supervisor:**	**Research Supervisor:**
Katherine Robinson, Masters student School of Education, University of Waikato Email: ks423@students.waikato.ac.nz	Katrina McChesney University of Waikato Tauranga Email: k.mcchesney@waikato.ac.nz	Olivera Kamenarac University of Waikato Hamilton Email: olivera.kamenarac@waikato.ac.nz

Appendix B: Flyer for school leaders

Appendix C: Information sheet for principals and participants

UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
DIVISION OF EDUCATION

INFORMATION FOR TRANSITION TO SCHOOL LEADERS

SCHOOL LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSITION TO SCHOOL: WHAT INFORMS THEIR DECISIONS?
MASTERS OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP THESIS RESEARCH
KATHERINE ROBINSON

Dear school leader in charge of transition to school,

Thank you for considering participation in my research. The information below may help you decide whether to become involved. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions. **If you read this information and decide you would like to be involved, please email me at ks423@students.waikato.ac.nz**

The title of the research is School leaders' perspectives on transition to school: what informs their decisions?

The research aim is to discover the discourses underpinning the practice of school leaders implementing programmes for children transitioning from early childhood to primary school, in large Auckland primary schools.

The overarching research questions are
How is the role of school leaders developing and implementing transition to school programmes discursively constructed within diverse, urban communities?
Specifically,

- What discourses underpin ways school leaders perceive factors that constrain and/or enable transition to school programmes?
- What discourses shape school leaders' understandings about current research and recommendations about transition to school?
- What discourses underpin school leaders' decision making about transition to school programmes?

Participants (school leaders in charge of transition to school) will be involved in the project by engaging in an audio recorded, semi-structured face to face interview of 60-90 minutes. Interviews will be scheduled at a time and place that you are available. If Auckland is in level 2 or above, it will take place via zoom.
The interview will be about your experiences of leadership, particularly leading transition to school programmes. The questions will vary according to how the conversation flows, but some key questions will be:

- What guides you when making decisions about transition to school in your context?
- What principles or priorities underpin your school's approach to transition to school?
- How does the context of your school - the community, leadership structure and staff, for example - influence the way you lead transition to school programmes?

Before the interview, you will be sent a more complete list of questions.

Should more respondents than needed show interest in participating, participants will be purposefully selected to include a range of transition to school practices. All respondents who show interest will be sent the completed thesis.

Important information

- Participation in this research is voluntary
- Your time commitment is estimated at up to 90 minutes for an interview, and up to 60 minutes to review the transcript of your interview
- If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study, no questions asked, until two weeks after you receive your interview transcript. After that date, your data will be included in the study. You can withdraw by contacting me, Katrina McChesney or Olivera Kamenarac (my supervisors) on the numbers below.
- Your principal may withdraw your and your school's participation at any time up until the day before your interview.
- Information from this study will be used for my Masters thesis and may be used in further articles, presentations, or discussions. Every effort will be made to make information provided in the interview anonymous, but total anonymity cannot be guaranteed.
- The names of research participants and their schools will not be mentioned in research reports and publications. Participants will be asked to choose pseudonyms to replace their real names.
- COVID-19 contact tracing is the exception to anonymity. If requested by public health authorities, participants' contact details may be provided.
- Your transcript will be sent to you for approval or amendment after the interview and will need to be returned within two weeks. Any transcripts not returned by this time will be treated as approved.

Use of information
You will maintain ownership over all of your data,but following approval of the transcript of your interview you agree for the data to be used in the thesis and any publications by me relating to the topic. Access to your data is limited to me and my supervisors, Katrina McChesney and Olivera Kamenarac. Your principal or employer will not be given access to the interview transcript or any other data. They will still be able to access any publications or reports produced using the research findings.

In the thesis, data will be used in the form of blended scenarios or case studies, and quotes or paraphrases from interviews attributed to pseudonyms. Information from this research may be used by me in journal articles, presentations or publications. Once complete, the thesis will be sent to you via email or paper, according to your preference. I would be very happy to come and present and discuss the findings with you, your staff or your leadership team once the research is completed.

If you have any questions, please contact me using the details below.

Contact details

Researcher:	**Research Supervisor:** Dr Katrina McChesney	**Research Supervisor:** Dr Olivera Kamenarac

Katherine Robinson, Masters student School of Education, University of Waikato Email: ks423@students.waikato.ac.nz	University of Waikato Tauranga Email: k.mcchesney@waikato.ac.nz	University of Waikato Hamilton Email: olivera.kamenarac@waikato.ac.nz

Ngā mihi nui,

Katherine Robinson

Appendix D: Consent form for principals

UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

CONSENT FORM FOR PRINCIPALS

SCHOOL LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSITION TO SCHOOL: WHAT INFORMS THEIR DECISIONS?
MASTERS OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP THESIS RESEARCH
KATHERINE ROBINSON

Please tick to indicate your agreement.

- o I understand the purpose of this research project, have had the opportunity to read the information sheet provided and have had any questions answered.

- o My transition leader's participation in this research is completely voluntary.

- o I understand that I can ask further questions about the research at any time during the transition leader's participation by emailing the researcher, but that any information provided to the researcher by the transition leader remains confidential.

- o I understand that I may withdraw my school's participation, and that of the transition leader, from the research up until the day before the transition leader's interview.

- o I understand that the transition leader's interview transcript will only be available to me, the researcher and the research supervisors. I will not have access to the transcript.

- o I recognise that while every effort will be made by the researcher to retain my anonymity, this cannot be fully guaranteed.

- o I understand that while every effort will be made to keep the name and contact details of the transition leader confidential, they will be provided to public health if required by COVID19 contact tracing.

- o I understand that the transition leader may choose a pseudonym for them and the school. Their real name and that of the school will only be used with both my agreement and theirs.

- I will receive a copy of the final thesis and will have the opportunity to have the findings presented or discussed in person with the researcher.

- I wish for a pseudonym to be used for my school and understand this will be chosen by the transition leader.

Accordingly, I agree for the transition leader and my school to participate in this research.

Signed:

Name *(please print clearly)*:

Date:

Researcher:	**Research Supervisor:**	**Research Supervisor:**
Katherine Robinson, Masters student School of Education, University of Waikato Email: ks423@students.waikato.ac.nz	Katrina McChesney University of Waikato Tauranga Email: k.mcchesney@waikato.ac.nz	Olivera Kamenarac University of Waikato Hamilton Email: olivera.kamenarac@waikato.ac.nz

Appendix E: Consent form for participants

UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

CONSENT FORM FOR TRANSITION TO SCHOOL LEADERS

SCHOOL LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSITION TO SCHOOL: WHAT INFORMS THEIR DECISIONS?

MASTERS OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP THESIS RESEARCH
KATHERINE ROBINSON

Please tick to indicate your agreement.

- o I understand the purpose of this research project, have had the opportunity to read the information sheet provided and have had any questions answered.

- o My participation in this research is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in one audio recorded individual interview of not more than 90 minutes duration.

- o I understand that I can ask further questions about the research at any time during my participation and that I can withdraw my participation at any time, up to two weeks after the interview transcript is received by me.

- o I understand that my principal may withdraw my, and my school's, participation from this research up until the day before the interview.

- o I understand that during the interview, I do not have to answer any questions unless I am happy to talk about the topic. I can stop the interview at any time, and I can ask to have the recording device turned off at any time.

- o As a participant in this research, I will have an opportunity to check, amend and approve my interview transcript and may withdraw my interview data at any time up until two weeks after I have received the interview transcript.

- o I understand that my interview transcript will only be available to me, the researcher and the research supervisors. My employer will not have access to my transcript.

- o I will retain ownership of my interview, but I give consent for the researcher to use the interview for the purposes of the research outlined in the information sheet.

- I recognise that while every effort will be made by the researcher to retain my anonymity, this cannot be fully guaranteed.

- I understand that while every effort will be made to keep my name and contact details confidential, they will be provided to public health if required by COVID19 contact tracing.

- I understand that I may choose a pseudonym for me and my school. My real name and that of my school will only be used with both my and my principal's agreement.

- I will receive a copy of the final thesis and will have the opportunity to have the findings presented or discussed in person with the researcher.

Accordingly, I agree to participate in this research.

Signed:

Name *(please print clearly)*: _____

- I wish to be referred to in the research by the pseudonym _____

- I wish for my school to be referred to in the research by the pseudonym

  _____

Date: _____

Researcher:	**Research Supervisor:**	**Research Supervisor:**
Katherine Robinson, Masters student School of Education, University of Waikato Email: ks423@students.waikato.ac.nz	Katrina McChesney University of Waikato Tauranga Email: k.mcchesney@waikato.ac.nz	Olivera Kamenarac University of Waikato Hamilton Email: olivera.kamenarac@waikato.ac.nz

Appendix F: Interview schedule

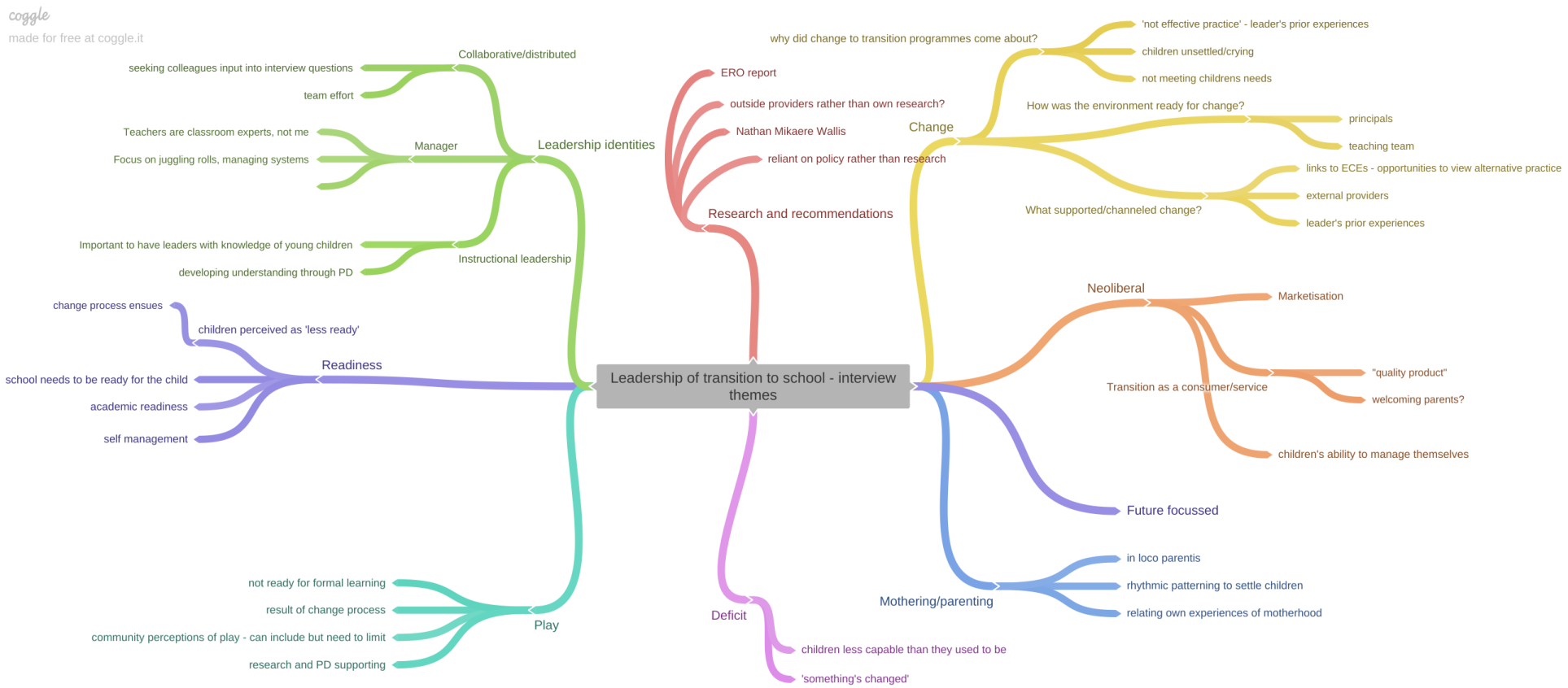
Study and participant information	What do you understand this study to be about? Confirm the interview will be one hour, check recording is okay Outline measures for anonymity and confidentiality Do you have any questions? Are you happy to proceed? Happy for me to start recording?
School context	What is your leadership role, and what responsibilities do you have with regards to the transition to school from early childhood education? How do you approach transitioning new entrant children into the school? If I described a child who had successfully transitioned from early childhood education to your school, what would I say about them?
Knowledge about transition to school *Research question: What discourses shape school leaders' understandings about current research and recommendations about transition to school?*	What guides you when making decisions about transition to school in your context? Prompt for: prior experience in leading t2s programmes, teaching experience, research, NZC, Te Whāriki, colleagues, ERO, recommendations, PD, TESOL Supplementary questions if necessary: What experience do you have with developing transition to school programmes? How do you think your experiences have shaped your views about transition to school? Is there any policy or documentation that you have used in transition to school decision making?

Transition to school *Research question: What discourses underpin school leaders' decision making about transition to school programmes?*	What principles or priorities underpin your school's approach to transition to school? Prompt for: curriculum choice, assessment, stakeholders, *Supplementary questions if necessary:* What aspects of transition to school here do you think are most successful? Do you think transition to school can be a problem for some students? If so, why? What do you think the main issues involved in transition to school: eg, what are the main differences between ECE and school? What challenges do you face in enabling children to successfully transition to school in your context? Who do you see as key stakeholders in transition to school? How do you see these relationships enabling or constraining transition to school? Can you give an example of how you balance the expectations of these different stakeholders?
Leadership in context *Research question: What discourses underpin ways school leaders perceive factors that constrain and/or enable transition to school programmes?*	How does the context of your school - the community, leadership structure and staff, for example - influence the way you lead transition to school programmes? *Supplementary questions* Can you tell me about a leadership dilemma that has happened related to transition to school in your context, either internally or externally? What happened? Has the dilemma been resolved? How would you describe your leadership style? What made you choose to become a school leader? How has leading at this school changed your practice? How and where do you find leadership support?

Closing	I appreciate the time you have taken for this interview. Is there anything else we haven't covered, or that you would like me to know? Share timeline for transcript, and re-establish consent. Check whether they would prefer to receive the transcript for checking via email, or on paper. Remind of timeline for withdrawal. Leave participant with a note outlining timeline and contact details.

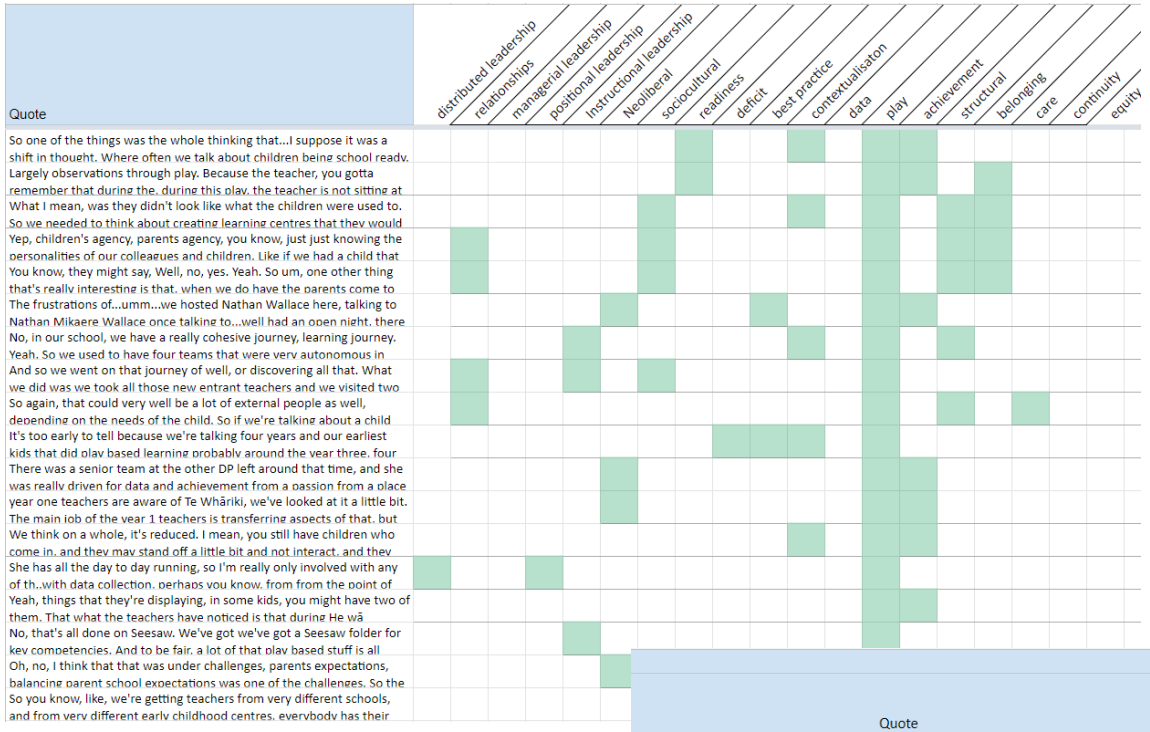
Appendix G: Mindmap of data themes

*Mindmap of data themes from **early** data analysis process*



Appendix H: Sample of analysis

Example 1: Spreadsheet identifying discourses



Quote	distributed leadership	relationships	managerial leadership	positional leadership	instructional leadership	Neoliberal	sociocultural	readiness	deficit	best practice	contextualisaton	data	play	achievement	structural	belonging	care	continuity	equity
So one of the things was the whole thinking that...I suppose it was a shift in thought. Where often we talk about children being school ready.								■			■		■	■					
Largely observations through play. Because the teacher, you gotta remember that during the, during this play, the teacher is not sitting at								■					■	■		■			
What I mean, was they didn't look like what the children were used to. So we needed to think about creating learning centres that they would						■					■		■		■	■			
Yep, children's agency, parents agency, you know, just just knowing the personalities of our colleagues and children. Like if we had a child that		■				■							■		■	■			
You know, they might say, Well, no, yes. Yeah. So um, one other thing that's really interesting is that, when we do have the parents come to		■				■							■		■	■			
The frustrations of...umm...we hosted Nathan Wallace here, talking to Nathan Mikaere Wallace once talking to...well had an open night, there					■				■				■	■					
No, in our school, we have a really cohesive journey, learning journey. Yeah. So we used to have four teams that were very autonomous in				■							■		■		■				
And so we went on that journey of well, or discovering all that. What we did was we took all those new entrant teachers and we visited two		■		■		■							■						
So again, that could very well be a lot of external people as well, depending on the needs of the child. So if we're talking about a child		■											■		■		■		
It's too early to tell because we're talking four years and our earliest kids that did play based learning probably around the year three, four									■	■	■		■						
There was a senior team at the other DP left around that time, and she was really driven for data and achievement from a passion from a place					■								■	■					
year one teachers are aware of Te Whāriki, we've looked at it a little bit. The main job of the year 1 teachers is transferring aspects of that, but					■								■	■					
We think on a whole, it's reduced. I mean, you still have children who come in, and they may stand off a little bit and not interact, and they											■		■	■					
She has all the day to day running, so I'm really only involved with any of th..with data collection, perhaps you know, from from the point of	■			■									■						
Yeah, things that they're displaying, in some kids, you might have two of them. That what the teachers have noticed is that during He wā													■	■					
No, that's all done on Seesaw. We've got we've got a Seesaw folder for key competencies. And to be fair, a lot of that play based stuff is all				■									■						
Oh, no, I think that that was under challenges, parents expectations, balancing parent school expectations was one of the challenges. So the					■														
So you know, like, we're getting teachers from very different schools, and from very different early childhood centres, everybody has their																			

Example 2: Spreadsheet asking discourse analysis questions

		Big 'D' discourse tool	Context is reflective tool	Identities
Quote	Identity	What Discourse is this language part of, that is, what kind of person (what identity) is this speaker or writer seeking to enact or be recognized as	How is what the speaker is saying and how he or she is saying it helping to reproduce contexts like this one (e.g., class sessions in a university), that is, helping them to continue to exist through time and space?	What socially recognisable identities or identities is the speaker trying to enact or get others to recognise?
But at the end of the day, the Board of Trustees still want to know where our children are sitting within the school.	Leader	Heirarchical discourse Neoliberal discourse	The school context is hierarchical and ultimate accountability sits with the board.	Leader positioned within a hierarchy with upward responsibilities.
we've got a very specific way of running the morning. .... And then we have staff, about four of us, we talk to every parent. And we talk to them about, you know, just sort of very basic stuff about have they gone to preschool before, which preschool, home language, house, needs, academic needs, anything like that, and you know. So just getting more information from the parents, because it's information that you don't get off an enrolment form.	Whānau		School decides on the process - when and where visits/meetings take place, and what form they take	Leader/school is knowledgeable about learning. Parents are the providers of information to the school Parents are told what 'they neec to remember'.
And we...yeah, and the team leader at the time talked about our babies can't do that. They need special treatment, you know, and stuff like that. Well, I'm a mother, and I've seen how capable they are. And I'm an experienced new entrant teacher. And I believe they should glue their own things in. I believe they can use a hot glue gun. And all these things in yeah and so, so, but it was so powerful because going and seeing with our own eyes and then coming back and sharing what was seen was just so, such a rich material.	Children	Deficit Capability Continuity	Changing classroom environments to enable continuity, strengthen children's identities as capable	Resisting deficit discourses is ongoing Resisting infantilising children and viewing them as less capable

Appendix I: Ethics approval

Te Wānanga Toi Tangata
Division of Education
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton,
New Zealand, 3240

Division of Education Research
Ethics Committee (DEREC)
fedu.ethics@waikato.ac.nz
www.waikato.ac.nz

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

5/5/2021

Dear Katherine Robinson

Division of Education Research Ethics Committee Application Approved
FEDU028/21

I am pleased to advise you that your ethics application for the project entitled "School leaders' perspectives on transition to school: what informs their decisions?" was approved by Te Wānanga Toi Tangata Division of Education Research Ethics Committee on May 5th, 2021.

Please be aware that the Te Wānanga Toi Tangata Division of Education Research Ethics Committee must be advised (by memo) of any changes to the details recorded in your ethics application. Please send any such advice to fedu.ethics@waikato.ac.nz. You will receive a memo of approval once the change(s) has been considered.

Kind regards

Co-chairs
Te Wānanga Toi Tangata Division of Education Research Ethics Committee (DEREC)

Appendix J: Reflective questions for school leaders