



Discourses Shaping Primary School Leaders' Approaches to Transition to School in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Children's initial transition from early childhood education (ECE) to school has been well studied across the world, with diverse accounts of policy and practice in a variety of contexts. However, to date, the specific contributions of those school staff in leadership roles who shape and oversee transition-to-school processes have been under-researched. Furthermore, little research to date has considered transition to school through a discourse lens. This paper responds to these gaps, reporting findings from a post-structural discourse analysis of interviews with five primary school leaders (deputy/associate principals or across school leaders) responsible for supporting children transitioning from ECE to large New Zealand primary schools. The data analysis suggested that leaders' ways of talking about transition to school reflected four specific discourses, which we termed structural, relational, pedagogical, and achievement discourses. These discourses within the schools intersected with each other and with wider social and educational discourses (e.g., discourses of managerial leadership, "best transition practice," sociocultural, child readiness, neoliberal, data, and play). The paper looks critically at the discourses on transition that both produce and are reproduced by policies and practices in some of New Zealand's schools. In doing so, the paper offers a fresh perspective on the role of primary school leaders in constructing transition-to-school approaches within their school contexts. The paper highlights the importance of critical examination of discursive forces and invites school leaders and others to exercise agency in constructing transition-to-school approaches and discourses within their specific contexts.

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KEYWORDS:

Transition to school; school leaders; educational leadership; discourse analysis; poststructuralism; New Zealand

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Souness, K., McChesney, K., & Kamenarac, O. (2023). Discourses Shaping Primary School Leaders' Approaches to Transition to School in New Zealand. *International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions*, 2(1): 24, pp. 1–15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ijelt.59>

Starting school is a complex process as children construct new identities, roles, and relationships. The approaches that schools deploy to support children and families during this transition have been well researched (for example, see [Hartley et al., 2012](#); [Peters et al., 2015](#); [Wickett, 2017](#)). However, little research has considered the influence that leaders have on shaping their schools' transition approaches ([Boyle & Wilkinson, 2018](#); [Dockett & Perry, 2021](#); [OECD, 2017](#)). Leaders may exert influence in a wide range of ways ([Bush & Glover, 2014](#)), and their influence is shaped by the various discourses that consciously or unconsciously underpin their thinking and practice. To date, no past research has explored how discursive forces might shape the ways leaders construct and design transition to school. In response, this article draws on interviews with five New Zealand (NZ) primary school leaders responsible for transition from early childhood education (ECE) to school to investigate which discourses are evident in these school leaders' constructions of transition-to-school approaches.

BACKGROUND: TRANSITION TO SCHOOL IN THE NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT

Over 97% of NZ children attend some form of ECE prior to starting school, despite ECE participation being non-compulsory ([Ministry of Education, 2021a](#)). All ECE services adhere to the ECE curriculum framework, *Te Whāriki* ([Ministry of Education, 2017](#); [Ministry of Education, 2021b](#)), which embraces a holistic, socio-cultural, Te Tiriti o Waitangi underpinned approach¹ to early education and development, recognising the power and strengths that each child brings and emphasising respectful, reciprocal, and responsive relationships with children, families, and local communities ([Ministry of Education, 2017](#); [Rameka, 2018](#)).

This paper centres on the initial transition to primary school. In NZ, children typically start school around their fifth birthday, although legally, they are not required to start until their sixth birthday. Schools may allow children to start school on any date, or they may offer fixed cohort entry dates throughout the year. Even in the latter case, however, it is still the parents' decision on which cohort entry date their child will start school.

Numerous complexities surround children's initial transition to school in the NZ context, presenting school leaders with multiple challenges and creating possible discontinuity for transitioning children. With varied school start date options, school leaders must contend with multiple or even rolling transitions to school. Significant differences between the philosophies and pedagogical practices reflected in the ECE and school curricula ([Haggerty et al., 2020](#)) create further challenges. Diverse ECE experiences may leave children with no known peers when transitioning to school ([Peters, 2010](#)). Finally, children requiring support services may experience disruptions in accessing these during the transition to school ([Burgon & Barwick, 2013](#)).

To mitigate the above challenges and provide a smooth transition experience, national guidance for transitioning children from ECE to school emphasises careful staffing, professional learning, instructional leadership, and programme evaluation ([Education Review Office, 2015](#)). However, the neoliberal NZ educational context arguably heightens the perceived strategic importance of school leaders' roles in welcoming new families and children into the school environment since enrolling as many children as they can supports the school's financial viability in the competitive market. Wider educational and social policies also have tangible impacts on transition practices, as the priority placed on different demographic groups, learning areas, or pedagogical practices shifts (e.g., [Hohepa & McIntosh, 2017](#)).

Notably, leadership of the first/junior years of primary school lacks formal recognition as a specialised role in NZ ([May, 2011](#)). Leaders overseeing the initial transition may never have taught in new entrant or Year 0/1 classrooms or may have been out of the classroom for some time. Given the varied experiences and views of that may be held by school staff responsible for leading the initial transition, it is important to examine discourses underpinning their perspectives and practices regarding this transition.

¹ Te Tiriti o Waitangi is New Zealand's founding document, signed by the British Crown and Māori chiefs in 1840. More information can be found here: <https://www.archives.govt.nz/discover-our-stories/the-treaty-of-waitangi>.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article takes a post-structural lens (Baxter, 2016; Foucault, 1972; Weedon, 1997) in examining the discourses constructing school leaders' views of themselves and others and the leaders' approaches to transition to school. In this article, "school leaders" denotes school staff responsible for designing and overseeing approaches and processes related to children's initial transition from ECE to school.

Through a post-structural lens, leaders' views of themselves, others and the world are understood to be produced through diverse discourses and "discursive practices—economic, social and political—the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power" (Weedon, 1997, p. 21). Discourses represent "language in use" (Gee & Handford, 2012, p. 1; see also Gee, 2011; LeGreco, 2014) with the power to define "what can be said and thought [e.g., about transition to school] but also ... who can speak, when, where and with what authority" (Ball, 2010, p. 2). School leaders, consciously or not, take up specific discourses that position themselves and others in specific ways and inform how transition to school is enacted. Leaders accept some discourses, reject others, and negotiate multiple positions for themselves and others in constructing specific transition approaches for their school context.

Within a post-structuralist lens, the function of discourse is examined and defined at two levels. Micro-level or small "d" discourses refer to the localised meanings and strategies in transition that school leaders construct within their specific school contexts. In contrast, macro-level or Big "D" Discourses refer to "wider socially constituted meanings" (Burman, 2016, p. 2) and "perform relationships of power" (Burman, 2016, p. 2). School leaders may resist, submit to, and/or reproduce these discourses as they construct transition approaches in their school context.

Both micro- and macro-level discourses produce the objects and subjects of which they speak. In the context of our research, discourses define and (re)produce relationships, identities, policies, and practices for transition to school. Discourses are in constant movement, meaning that leaders' views of themselves and their approaches to transition are understood as being always precarious, contradictory, and open to challenge, change, disagreement, and conflict (Kamenarac, 2019). School leaders thus continually position and locate themselves in agreement with and/or in opposition to the discourses operating in their locally specific and wider contexts. While some leaders may simply be carried by the current of the prevailing discourses, leaders have an important opportunity to exert agency in deliberately aligning their language and practice with particular discourses to shape the ways transition to school is conceptualised and enacted within their context.

Applying a post-structural lens to identify the specific micro- and macro-level discourses evident within five leaders' comments regarding transition to school, this article provides a fresh contribution to scholarship on both school leadership and transition to school. It underscores the significance of critically examining the wider (macro-level) discourses informing transition approaches in New Zealand and the localised (micro-level) discourses school leaders draw upon in their unique contexts. The article highlights the need for school leaders to exercise agency in conceptualising transition approaches and discourses that cater to the evolving needs of children, families, and their local communities.

DISCOURSES IN TRANSITION AND LEADERSHIP LITERATURE

Multiple macro or Big "D" discourses are evident in literature on both educational transitions and educational leadership. This section offers a review of these discourses to provide a foundation for the present study.

DISCOURSES IN TRANSITION-TO-SCHOOL LITERATURE

Table 1 summarises Big "D" discourses evident in transition-to-school literature and considers possible implications of these discourses for transition-to-school approaches. Each discourse reinforces a particular view of the purpose of education, and transition.

DISCOURSE	FOCUS	IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSITION TO SCHOOL	EXAMPLES OF RELATED LITERATURE
Contextualisation	Educators' openness to change to meet the school community needs.	Children's experiences of transition may differ according to contextual factors.	Dockett and Perry (2021); Hartley et al. (2012) Sanagavarapu and Perry (2005)
Continuity	Education as ongoing and iterative, building on children's life experiences and knowledges.	Transitions as ongoing, not a moment-in-time event, and must build on children's life experiences.	Boyle et al. (2018); Fletcher (2018)
Deficit	Lack of children's inherent capability, cultural appropriateness or resources are responsible for educational difficulties (Bishop, 2019).	Responsibility for a child's transition shifted to the child and family.	Colegrove and Adair (2014); Comber and Kamler (2004)
Neoliberal	The purpose of education is the production of economic subjects contributing to a country's economy.	Transition approaches fostering children's independence, self-reliance, and academic achievement (Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2022).	Haggerty et al. (2020); Otterstad and Braathe (2016)
Play	Play as a legitimate and the most appropriate pedagogy for young children.	Play as a bridge between ECE and school.	Blucher et al. (2018); Broström (2005)
Readiness	Varying levels of children's readiness for school.	The prioritisation of academic aspects in transition, viewing "not ready" children with a deficit mindset.	Evans (2015); Shah et al. (2021)
Relationships	Collaborative and effective relationships between professionals, families, and children as necessary for effective learning.	Prioritising relationships between ECE, schools, families, and children during transitions.	Boyle and Wilkinson (2018); Hohepa and McIntosh (2017); Wickett (2017)
Sociocultural	Learning as socio-culturally situated, embracing children's funds of knowledge into their new educational context.	Transitions as rites of passage, promoting holistic transition practices and children's learning from other contexts.	Peters (2014); Vogler et al. (2008)

Table 1 Big "D" Discourses in transition scholarship (Adapted from Souness, 2022).

Within the New Zealand context, significant Big "D" Discourses influencing transition to school approaches include play, readiness, and neoliberalism. Recent New Zealand research highlights play-based pedagogy in some new entrant classrooms, supporting continuity with ECE pedagogy (Blucher et al., 2018). Nonetheless, a readiness discourse remains active in New Zealand, particularly in mainstream media and empirical research from near or beyond the boundaries of the education field (e.g., Shah et al., 2021). Readiness often intersects with neoliberal discourse, particularly where educational policies prioritise a child's academic achievement for future "success" (e.g. Thrupp, 2017). In contrast, play-based discourses which promote learning through exploration, experimentation and child-centred discovery may conflict with readiness and neoliberal discourses' demands for formal instruction in reading, writing and mathematics (Blucher et al., 2018).

DISCOURSES IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP LITERATURE

Table 2 provides an overview of macro-level discourses evident in educational leadership literature, and again considers the possible implications of each discourse for transition to school.

DISCOURSE	FOCUS	IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSITION TO SCHOOL LEADERSHIP	EXAMPLES OF RELATED LITERATURE
Instructional leadership	Leaders as experts in learning, responsible for student achievement and leading pedagogical change.	Leaders in charge of modelling effective teaching practices in new entrant classrooms.	Cardno et al. (2018); Hallinger (2015)
Social justice	Leaders to critically examine and challenge structural inequities, discrimination, and colonizing practices.	Examination of transition practices and structures to prevent educational inequities.	Jayavant (2016); Milne (2016)

Table 2 Big "D" Discourses in leadership scholarship (Souness, 2022).

(Contd.)

DISCOURSE	FOCUS	IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSITION TO SCHOOL LEADERSHIP	EXAMPLES OF RELATED LITERATURE
Collaboration	Collaboration with various stakeholders as key to effective leadership.	Leaders in genuine collaboration with ECE and schools to enable effective transitions.	Kitchen et al. (2016); Notman and Henry (2011)
Contextualisation	Leadership embedded in a local-specific context, and leaders adopt approaches coherent within local practices (Sanga et al., 2020).	Local contextual factors determining transition to school approaches.	Braun et al. (2011); Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012)
Cultural responsiveness	Leaders as critical thinkers, moving beyond embracing diversity, to seeing it as an active force for change (Lopez, 2015).	Critical consideration of children’s culture and identity in informing transition approaches.	Bishop (2019); Lopez (2015)
Neoliberal	Leadership practices for securing students’ future employability.	Normative assumptions and data about children on school entry determine leaders’ transition approaches.	Gobby (2016); Moos (2017);
Complexity	Embracing the complex and multi-faceted nature of leadership, and rejecting universal “best practice”.	Promoting non-universal transition approaches and local-specific responses to transition in an authentic school context.	Kershner and McQuillan (2016); Mawdsley (2018)

Of the discourses shown in Table 2, arguably the two that exert the greatest influence in NZ at present are neoliberal and instructional leadership discourses. Neoliberal pressures on education in NZ are evident in the influence of international forces such as the OECD (Moos, 2017) and in national education policies such as Tomorrow’s Schools (which decentralised school leadership and governance) and National Standards (which required nationally consistent assessment and reporting; McMaster, 2013). Instructional leadership discourse is prevalent in shaping effective educational leadership practice in NZ, as evident in official government publications and professional standards (e.g., Education Council New Zealand, 2018). Notably, cultural responsiveness—already a very strong discourse related to teaching and learning in NZ—is emerging in leadership discourses as a counterforce to hegemonic neoliberal discourses that are seen to privilege White/Pākehā people and knowledges (e.g., Jayavant, 2016; Milne, 2016).

DISCOURSES ACROSS BOTH TRANSITION AND LEADERSHIP SCHOLARSHIP

Examining Big “D” Discourses evident in transition (Table 1) and leadership (Table 2) scholarship, notable overlap emerges. Both domains are subject to neoliberal discourses reinforcing early academic performance as a marketable choice, potentially privileging transition approaches aimed at securing students’ academic success and future employability. Additionally, a discourse of relationships is evident in both fields, highlighting genuine collaboration among and between stakeholders as key to effective practice. Finally, both fields recognise the importance of being responsive to school-specific contexts and local community needs.

Notably, the few existing studies specifically considering the role of leadership in relation to transition to school tend to focus on transition activities and/or leaders’ practices without explicit investigation of the discourses influencing the leaders’ approaches to transition. This article responds by examining localised and wider discourses underpinning participating leaders’ transition-to-school approaches.

METHODOLOGY

Employing post-structural discourse analysis, this qualitative study critically examined how each of five leaders responsible for children’s transition from ECE to school articulated and discursively constructed transition approaches. The study allowed the identification and problematisation of the discourses underpinning leaders’ constructions of identities

and transition approaches. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the authors' university.

All eligible schools were contacted regarding participation in the study. Eligibility criteria were (a) urban Auckland location, (b) >400 students enrolled, (c) >80 children transitioning from ECE to school each year, and (d) culturally diverse student populations (<50% Pākehā/New Zealand European). All eligible Auckland schools were contacted, and of the 12 that expressed interest, a purposive sample of five schools was selected, representing a range of socioeconomic communities.

Each school's principal identified the person who held overall responsibility for transition to school, and these people were invited (and all consented) to participate in the study. Four participants were deputy principals while the fifth held a part-time leadership role across a community of schools alongside a teaching role at their base school. All participants were female. Participants' leadership experience ranged from just a year or two up to nearly two decades overseeing transition to school.

Data collection involved individual semi-structured interviews lasting 60–90 minutes. Key questions were emailed to the participants prior to the interview to honour participants' time, encourage reflection, and foster trust (Zhao et al., 2022). All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and validated by participants before analysis.

Poststructuralist discourse analysis (Gee, 2011) was applied to identify micro or small “d” discourses in the interview data. As an iterative, cyclical process, the discourse analysis combined (a) keyword searching (including, for example, “ready/iness,” “belonging,” “standard,” “context,” “process”), (b) identifying themes, and (c) applying the following three discourse analysis tools (Gee, 2011):

- *The identities building tool*: “What socially recognisable identities is the speaker trying to enact or get others to recognise?” (p. 110)
- *The context is reflective tool*: “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?” (p. 85)
- *The Big “D” Discourse tool*: “What Discourse is this language part of, that is, what identity is the speaker or writer seeking to enact or be recognised as?” (p. 181)

This study does not purport to establish “universal truths” about transition to school, given the limited number of participants and the subjective nature of discourse analysis (Lee, 1992). Rather, the findings present some possible ways of thinking about transition-to-school leadership. To ensure credibility of the description and interpretation of participants' accounts, data analysis and presentation, and conclusions, we used strategies identified by Tracy (2010). Specifically, we sought to ensure the study had a robust theoretical foundation and that the written account of the research involved “self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s)” (p. 840). We ensured ample use of participant quotes to provide thick description and facilitate “showing rather than telling” (Tracey, p. 840) and were attentive to data crystallization (a practice similar to triangulation but located within a post-structuralist paradigm) as a way of “open[ing] up a more complex, in-depth, but still thoroughly partial, understanding” (p. 844) of how the participants discursively constructed their transition approaches.

FINDINGS

DISCOURSES IDENTIFIED

The discourse analysis of interview data led to the identification of four small “d” discourses—structural, relational, pedagogical, and achievement—that appeared to construct the participating leaders' transition-to-school approaches and identities. These discourses (with examples from data) are summarised in Table 3 and explored in turn below. Then, in the subsequent discussion section, we explore how these small “d” discourses intersected with each other and with wider social and educational discourses (e.g., managerial leadership, “best transition practice,” sociocultural, child readiness, neoliberal, data, and play).

	WHAT IS THE DISCOURSE ABOUT?	IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSITION TO SCHOOL	HOW DO LEADERS CONSTRUCT THEIR IDENTITIES?	LINKS TO BIG “D” DISCOURSES
Structural discourse	Transition processes and systems.	Transition practices could become performative, with leaders removed from pedagogy and enacting managerial leadership.	Schooling structures outside and within a school construct leaders’ identities.	Managerial leadership, institutional hierarchies, “best practice.”
Relational discourse	Forefronting relationships in transition.	Transition processes are driven by relationships, flexible, and power-sharing with families	Creators of relationships and a collective school/ community identity.	Sociocultural, contextualisation.
Pedagogical discourse	Transition approaches grounded in pedagogical sense-making.	Transition to school approach may change over time according to up-to-date pedagogy	Leaders of pedagogy and agents of change.	Instructional leadership, contextualisation, play, rejection of readiness discourse.
Achievement discourse	Achievement and academic foci informing transition practices.	Assessment may forefront in transition, reinforcing children’s academic performance and achievement-related identities.	“Experts” in schooling, accountable for achievement.	Child readiness, neoliberalism, “best practice”, evidence.

Table 3 Overview of small “d” discourses in the interview data (adapted from Souness, 2022).

STRUCTURAL DISCOURSE

Participants discussed the significance of “transition activities” and “organisation” in relation to transition. They frequently referred to “structures,” “paperwork and talking,” “processes,” and “systems” driving and organising transition activities in their schools. This discursive pattern of describing transition to school as a structure, process, model, or system was termed a “structural” discourse.

Within this discourse, leaders’ roles and identities seemed defined through the leadership structure of the school. Some leaders described themselves as decision-makers responsible for resourcing, funding, and deciding on timelines and structures underpinning/defining the school’s transition-to-school approach. While sometimes influenced by pedagogy, leaders also viewed their role as managerial: “making sure that our teachers are well supported; with an effective pedagogy, resources, funding and the time to give our new learners a good start to school.” The leaders who adopted a structural discourse in constructing their transition approaches did not identify themselves as being “experts” in pedagogy; rather, they perceived that the classroom teacher was “the expert teacher” who “[built] the relationships [that] are really important.”

Transition embedded predominantly in the structural discourse seemed formal and often organised in a standardised way by the school. For instance, in some cases, the initial parent mornings were described as having a dual purpose: meeting new children and educating parents. They were designed and “delivered on two levels” namely “on the level of the child” and “with learning for the parents” ensuring that families “get the information they need” and ask questions of the school.

Within the structural discourse, children and families were subject to the school procedures, leading to an effective transition to school. As one participant explained:

If the children have [transitioned] really well, which generally tends to happen, because it is a good, strong process ... they’re happy and the parents [have] got a chance to ask questions.

Employing predetermined and systematic approaches to transition—as opposed to the more flexible, tailored approaches some participants perceived as only being possible in smaller schools—constrained parents’ contributions to shaping the wider design of transition. Parents’ input was limited to predetermined “opportunities” to ask questions as well as instances when a child’s transition was viewed as “problematic”, such as when a child had identified special needs or displayed signs of distress. A consultative transition approach for all children or families was not the default choice within the structural discourse. Leaders and schools seemed to make decisions based on their own experience and assumed expertise. Initial relationships

with families focussed on information exchange between the school and parents, rather than allowing parents and children to actively contribute to and inform the “transition model” by offering unique insights that the school might not have previously considered.

RELATIONAL DISCOURSE

A relational discourse was also identified within the interview data. This discourse reinforced leaders’ positions in building/strengthening responsive relationships with all stakeholders in the transition to school starting from initial individual meetings with families. Leaders described this work as significant:

because [transition] isn’t just about the child, it’s about that relationship that we are building with that whānau [family]. This is the first experience of us...We ride that wave or not, forever. It’s hard to undo an impression...it’s about relationships.

These early meetings enabled conversations that involved careful listening by leaders in environments designed to make families and children feel comfortable in the school environment. For some, this was a walk around the school; for others, it was an office environment adapted to include toys and a couch to make children and families feel welcome. Leaders enacting a relational discourse also made themselves available to parents and welcomed their feedback:

I text them [i.e., parents] about their upcoming visits, and then they’ve got my number, and they know they can text me back if there are any issues. So straight away they [have] my contact from before they’ve started.

While these efforts helped leaders get to know children and families prior to transition, approaches grounded in a relational discourse brought some challenges for leaders. For instance, responding to multiple parents via text involved a significant time “investment” and “commitment.” There was also vulnerability associated with leaders’ sharing their own transition experiences and emotions (“I talk about who I am, my family, my children, how I felt [bringing my child to school]”).

Relationships between children were prioritised within a relational discourse. Some schools employed tuakana-teina relationships, a concept from Te Ao Māori in which older children have the responsibility for sharing knowledge and skills with younger children (Macfarlane et al., 2007). Starting school in a group alongside peers from ECE was also enabled where possible, “because it’s another connection that the child and the parents have, that they know someone else coming into school.”

Importantly, leaders drawing upon a relational discourse used less definitive language to describe transition processes. Their transition approaches and the ways they defined transition changed “depending on the needs of the child,” with leaders and schools having “the flexibility to do what we [both school and families] need.” This contrasts with the more rigid structural discourse described above.

Taken together, participants constructing their transition approach through a relational discourse took a socially contextualised approach to leadership and rejected individualistic leadership theories (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). By prioritising relationships within transition-to-school approaches, leaders were able to alter school systems and any pre-established processes according to the needs of children and families.

PEDAGOGICAL DISCOURSE

At times, leaders drew upon information about effective pedagogy to inform transition-to-school practice within their contexts. This pattern in the interview data was interpreted as leaders “constructing transition approaches through pedagogical sense-making”—a pedagogical discourse (Souness, 2022, p. 59). This discourse had links with a big “D” Discourse of instructional leadership, with the leaders who enacted the pedagogical discourse valuing strong educational theory underlying their transition approaches.

When taking up a pedagogical discourse, leaders positioned themselves as collaborators, agents of change, and enablers of professional development. Leaders invested time and professional development resourcing to facilitate change processes and to enable teaching

staff to carefully co-construct approaches to transition and new entrant classroom practice. In one school, for instance, this meant a shared decision to open several classes at the beginning of the year, each with low student numbers, to better facilitate a play-based learning approach. In other schools, leaders resourced professional learning groups “during school time” to enable pedagogical development. Although “expensive,” leaders still decided to “invest in that, because [...] it gives you really quality conversations [and] teachers feel this is really important.” Both teachers and leaders came to view learning about transition to school as an open-ended process that involved critical questioning of teaching practice.

Leaders who seemed to reflect a pedagogical discourse reported that change within their school’s transition-to-school approaches occurred over time and involved trial and error, eventually leading to “a process to build up to what we wanted.” Some participants signalled the unfolding nature of pedagogical change through language like “journey,” “process,” and “inquiry.” Participants extended their instructional expertise through considering ideas from other contexts (including ECE, other schools, and professional learning). However, while this provided participants and their teaching teams with alternative perspectives, contextualisation was important within a pedagogical discourse, as leaders described adapting externally sourced approaches for their school-specific contexts:

“we found our own way in between it all now; we’ve taken bits from everything”

“when [teachers] see a great idea in another context or another environment...they are able to call [the teaching team]...and talk about how that might look if they were to use that idea”

Drawing upon a pedagogical discourse thus necessitated developing emergent and contextualised practice, adapting ideas from other contexts (including ECE, other schools, and from professional learning) and ensuring they suited the school-specific context.

ACHIEVEMENT DISCOURSE

The final discourse identified within the interview data involved a pattern of language describing transition in relation to children’s “achievement,” “data,” “success,” and “learning.” This pattern, termed the achievement discourse, seemed to associate a successful transition to school with children being happy and settled in order to learn and achieve. Participants referred to the “soft data driving the hard data” (that is, socio-emotional competencies and learning dispositions facilitating academic gains), implying that within the achievement discourse, the ultimate goal of schooling is enabling academic achievement.

By taking up the achievement discourse, leaders constructed themselves as producers of achievement and as creators of the conditions that would enable children to achieve at school. Success and achievement within the school environment were defined by the school, clearly influenced by wider policies such as National Standards (McMaster, 2013; Thrupp, 2017). Tracking and reporting on achievement was a significant part of the leadership role:

There’s a lot of discussion on names/numbers/needs [of children] across the year levels, about where these children are, are they “at” [expectations/standards]? Are they “below”? ... merging into how we’re going to get them to where we want them or we’d like them to be

The above statement appears to allude to learning as being linear and quantifiable, and to children moving along a predetermined course towards the goal. Further, the phrase “where we want them...to be” indicates that the school, or school leaders, are “the experts” in schooling and knowledgeable about children’s needs and “the [correct] pathway” to achievement.

Within the achievement discourse, children were positioned on a continuum of readiness and/or achievement right from the beginning of their schooling: “Most of the children are really ready for school, [although] there are some, you know, we’ve got the outliers, we’ve got the bell curve.” Children’s sense of belonging and overall well-being in the school environment was important insofar as leaders recognised that children who did not feel safe or happy were unlikely to achieve academically: “We want the children in the class happy, settled, [to] have a chance of learning.”

When influenced by an achievement discourse, leaders viewed the transition from ECE to primary school as the start of a journey for children, and an effective transition was defined as one that enabled academic achievement to begin as soon as possible. Belonging and relationships were important insofar as they created the conditions for academic success.

DISCUSSION

DISCOURSES IN INTERPLAY

The previous section outlined four small “d” discourses—structural, relational, pedagogical, and achievement—that were identified within interview data from five leaders responsible for transition to school at large NZ primary schools. Each discourse yielded revealing insights into leaders’ approaches to transition, the forces shaping those approaches, and the influence of leaders’ approaches in their school-specific contexts.

While these four discourses prevailed in the findings, to assume that participants drew solely upon any one of the four discourses in their transition approach would be overly simplistic. Instead, our post-structural discourse analysis of interviews with leaders also considered a range of Big “D” discourses that underpin the country’s wider educational policies and practices, and we looked at how the leaders’ transition-to-school approaches had been constructed through an interplay of the four small “d” discourses and the various Big “D” discourses. Participants took up and shifted between multiple, confronting, and/or complementary discourses in their decision- and sense-making around leadership and transition, alluding to the discursive complexity of both educational leadership (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016) and transition (Boyle et al., 2018).

This section weaves together insights from our data with lessons from wider literature to offer a critical look at how discourses interacted in these school contexts to produce school leaders’ transition approaches. We argue for transition and leadership to be understood as complex discursive constructions including multiple alignments and misalignments that need to be carefully considered, challenged, and often problematised within a school-specific context.

SYNERGIES AND TENSIONS AMONG TRANSITION-TO-SCHOOL DISCOURSES

In our findings, synergies and alignments emerged among some of the four small “d” discourses. First, the pedagogical and relational discourses shared language patterns suggesting a common understanding that transition-to-school approaches should remain flexible and open to change. Reflecting constructions of contingent and contextual leadership (Bush & Glover, 2014), both discourses positioned leaders, children, families, and teachers as agentic, knowledgeable, and capable of contributing to transition approaches.

Second, the structural and achievement discourses exhibited similarities in positioning some leaders as “experts” in schooling with the authority to determine the extent of children’s, families, and teachers’ involvement in negotiating the transition process. Furthermore, as “experts,” leaders within both structural and achievement discourses were responsible for managerial decisions that tended to focus on quantifiable factors (e.g. managing achievement or enrolment data) and practicalities (e.g. accommodating parents and children at group meetings). The ways the structural and achievement discourses led leaders to construct their roles in creating transition approaches arguably echoed big “D” discourses of accountability and managerial leadership (Gobby, 2016; Moos, 2017). This does not mean that leaders enacting these discourses did not also take up instructional or relational discourses, but it underscores that the structural and achievement discourses sometimes overpowered and constrained the pedagogical and relational responsiveness of leaders’ transition-to-school approaches.

Tensions and misalignments also surfaced among the small “d” discourses. Firstly, some leaders perceived the pedagogical and achievement discourses as opposing or existing on a continuum extending from “formal learning” (achievement discourse) at one end to play-based, “inspired” learning (pedagogical discourse) at the other. These discourses were a clear source of tension in leaders’ contexts. Echoing findings in current literature on play-based learning in the junior classroom (Blucher et al., 2018), leaders indicated a binary distinction between play-based learning and achievement-oriented pedagogy. When both these discourses were interacting, the development of new pedagogy required careful management. Schools and

leaders sometimes actively identified their context as non-play-based, with statements such as “we are a traditional school.” The categorization of transition-to-school approaches as either “traditional” or “play-based” was historically rooted in NZ education context as much as in each school context, influenced at times by national educational policy.

Tensions also arose between the structural and relational discourses. Leaders enacting the structural discourse cited multiple factors that prevented them from establishing reciprocal relationships within the local community, such as the logistical challenge of enrolling 120 children from up to 60 contributing ECE services annually. These contextual factors led to transition approaches being designed to meet the needs of “most” children and families, with others expected to conform. In contrast, leaders who aligned themselves and their transition approaches predominantly with relational discourses viewed contextual factors as challenges requiring careful consideration and flexible structures focused on relationships.

While structural and relational discourses often conflicted, producing confronting positions and transition to school approaches, leaders worked to balance these tensions in multiple ways. For instance, some leaders delegated the responsibility for building relationships to teachers while they managed the structural and organisational aspects of transition. Other made efforts to cultivate “a relational leadership style,” eventually prompting changes in school structures.

INSIGHTS THROUGH CONSIDERING LEADERSHIP OF TRANSITION TO SCHOOL THROUGH A DISCURSIVE LENS

This study highlights the discourses that shape transition and leadership in a school. It showed that leaders who worked collaboratively to examine transition and leadership practices and undertook professional development were able to expose themselves and their teaching teams to alternative discourses, such as those present in ECE. In school contexts where a change to the transition-to-school approach was enacted, a commonality was that leaders were willing to disrupt long-standing practices and/or to make space for others to do so. Importantly, by taking up pedagogical and relational discourses within change processes, leaders positioned themselves as part of the collective (i.e., children, families, teachers) rather than as “experts” in designing transition. They seemed to actively seek to interrogate and re-think taken-for-granted practices, consider alternative viewpoints, and develop a collaborative, contextualised approach to transition, despite the temptation to take “reductionist and de-contextualised prescriptions of ‘what works’” (Niesche & Gowlett, 2019, p. 1).

The study also showed that genuine reciprocal relationships with other stakeholders supported leaders in making sense of the complexity of transition to school by allowing them to step into the roles of others involved in the process. Aaltonen (2009) refers to viewing complex problems from other stakeholders’ perspectives as “multi-ontology sense-making.” The idea of developing *emergent* practice (rather than a singular ‘best’ practice) in complex processes such as transition to school is supported by literature conceptualising leadership as a complex process (e.g., Kershner and McQuillan, 2016; Mawdsley, 2018).

The findings of this study suggest that a critical examination of discourses that underpin transition to school practices and understanding how they influence leadership could open up the “genuine possibility” of alternative ways of leading the initial transition (Niesche & Gowlett, 2015, p. 383). Considering leadership through a post-structural lens gives leaders agency to deliberately and collectively design approaches to transition that suit their school-specific contexts and the needs of their children, families, and communities.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that leading transition is a complex and contextually situated task. The participants’ leadership of transition to school was shaped by a multitude of both small “d” and Big “D” discourses which often complemented and confronted one another. The leaders in this study were positioned in multiple ways within their particular contexts through the discourses with which they consciously or unconsciously aligned their thinking, language, and practice. These varying positionings influenced the perspectives and experiences of all involved in transition to school. For example, while participants described many common transition activities and practices at their respective school sites, the implementation and reasoning behind these

practices differed according to the discourses circulating within individual school contexts, and as such impacted differently on the transition to school experiences of those involved.

It is hoped that through this research, school staff designing transition-to-school approaches may be enabled to critically reflect on their own contexts and consider the discursive forces at work through their own talk and the talk of others. Leaders and others involved in transition to school have opportunities to exercise their individual and collective agency by resisting discourses that reduce the roles of children and families in contributing to transition approaches and opening themselves to alternative discourses. While discursive forces within an education system may be taken for granted, resistance is both possible and desirable (Arnold & McMahon, 2019; McMaster, 2013). A set of reflective prompts has been developed based on this study to support school leaders in critically examining the discursive forces shaping their transition-to-school thinking and practice (see Appendix J of Souness, 2022).

In presenting these findings, the small scale of the study is acknowledged. Combined with the post-structural discourse analysis theoretical framework, the sample size means that generalisation is not appropriate. Instead of being a stable or concrete understanding of transition, leaders' contributions are understood to be a snapshot of their discursive constructions at a particular moment in time. However, this research offers valuable insight into the discursive influences at play, and as such adds an additional perspective to the wide and complex body of transition-to-school literature.

Considering the leadership of transition to school as a discursive practice also brings a new perspective to the intersection of existing research on school leadership and transition to school. This study demonstrates that discourses have a powerful influence on leaders and shows the potential for change that may arise when leaders choose to exercise their agency by actively examining, challenging, and/or resisting the dominant discourses driving their transition-to-school approaches.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Data has not been made available for this study. Participants were not asked to make their interview transcripts available, and they participated on the understanding that their anonymity would be preserved as much as practicable in the reporting of findings in the original study and any subsequent publications.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to the participants in this study for their generous sharing of time and knowledge, and would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers for their constructive feedback.

REVIEWERS

Dr Lindsay Michelle Schofield and Anonymous Reviewer.

EDITORIAL AND PEER REVIEW INFORMATION

Editor(s): Dr Rachel Takriti

FUNDING INFORMATION

Souness was supported by a Teach NZ Study Award and the University of Waikato John Allan Scholarship. Neither of these funding sources had any bearing on the nature or outcomes of the research.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

The research reported in this paper was undertaken by Souness for her Master of Educational Leadership thesis, under the joint supervision and guidance of McChesney and Kamenarac. All authors collaborated in conceptualising and outlining the journal article. Souness prepared the first draft and led the submission process. McChesney and Kamenarac contributed substantively to revising the manuscript both before and after peer review, and supported Souness through the submission and peer review processes.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Souness, K., McChesney, K., & Kamenarac, O. (2023). Discourses Shaping Primary School Leaders' Approaches to Transition to School in New Zealand. *International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions*, 2(1): 24, pp. 1–15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ijelt.59>

Submitted: 30 January 2023

Accepted: 23 June 2023

Published: 14 November 2023

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International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.