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**Title: Together or Apart? What Principals, Members of the Board, and New Entrant Teachers
are saying about Cohort Entry.**

**A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Education**

**At Massey University,
New Zealand**

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2023**

Abstract

I've turned five. I'm starting school!

Starting school on the day of your fifth birthday has been a long standing tradition in New Zealand. Grandparents and parents will recall their entry into primary school which followed an ad-hoc approach. It was not until 2017 that the Ministry of Education changed their policies to allow for a cohort entry enrolment option for schools. Research suggests there are positive outcomes of cohort entry for children and the school community. While many OECD countries only operate a cohort entry model when beginning school, the number of schools that follow suit is limited in New Zealand. This study aims to give voice to key stakeholders in the transition to school process to articulate their beliefs regarding cohort entry. This study pays particular attention to principals, members of the board and new entrant teachers. A survey was used to gather data from participants and analysed within a case study methodology. The findings suggest that participants acknowledge that cohort entry is an effective way for students to enter school. Participants believe that under a cohort entry approach children have a greater support system, the ability to form relationships with others more quickly, creating a sense of belonging in their classroom, as well as fostering continuity of learning from one education setting to another. While identifying a number of benefits, participants also acknowledge some challenges with a cohort entry approach, including; parents wanting children to start on their birthday, large numbers of children transitioning at once, and children with a range of needs all starting on the same day.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my two supervisors Karyn Aspden and Philippa Isom for their unwavering support, guidance and inspiration, all of which has been instrumental in shaping the outcome of this thesis. Over the course of the past three years, their dedication and mentorship has been important, providing me with the necessary tools to navigate the difficulties of my research journey. Their impact on my academic growth is immeasurable and I wish to extend my appreciation for their contribution to the successful completion of this thesis. The tears were all worth it in the end!

I also wish to thank all those who have supported me on this journey. Firstly, the school who offered me a year's leave to begin pursuing this chapter. While I never made it back after accepting a job in international waters, the encouragement I received from colleagues to pursue this challenge was greatly appreciated.

Secondly, my family, who welcomed me back home with open arms to continue my educational career. While I was unemployed, studying and saving to move to the UAE, Mum and Dad provided financial assistance when I needed it the most. I simply would not be writing this without you both.

Finally, my friends and colleagues, all who have encouraged and supported me throughout the duration of this master's journey. I know it has not been easy, but it has definitely been worth it.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Overview

Beginning school is one of the biggest transitional challenges individuals face in early childhood (Gündüz & Özarlan, 2017). Starting school is seen as a significant milestone for a child, as it is regarded as being where their formal education officially begins (Bay & Bay, 2020). In literature globally a common viewpoint is shared, that, the transition to school process can have an effect on the future success of a child's schooling (Dockett & Perry, 2006; Fabian et al., 2007; Giallo et al., 2008; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003) either positively or negatively. Although there are differences globally regarding; school entry age, preschool education, parenting styles, and socio-economic status, what remains constant is the need to ensure students are provided with the best start to formal education, for both short- and long-term holistic outcomes (Arnold et al., 2007; Dockett & Perry, 2001, 2004; Fabian, 2000; Harper, 2016).

This introduction chapter provides an overview of the research including key terms of school readiness, transition, and continuity of learning. Additionally, it considers the transition to school approach in New Zealand (NZ) and globally and within the context of a significant recent Education Review Office report released in 2022 report titled "Starting School Together: What do we Know?" To conclude the chapter a description of the researcher's personal interest and justification for the study is included.

1.2 Defining Key Terms

In this present study there are several key terms which require a mutual understanding. For the purpose of this study, the key terms are defined below:

- **Transition** is the window of time before, during and after a child has moved from one educational setting to another. Usually, from an early childhood setting to primary school (Arnold et al., 2007).

- **Readiness** is linked closely to transition and focuses on the skill and attributes children have for learning. Research suggests readiness consists of five key domains; physical development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and knowledge (Arnold et al., 2007).
- **Continuity of Learning** occurs when learning is built upon prior knowledge which is completed through age-appropriate learning experiences. This is particularly strong when early childhood educators and primary school teachers share an understanding of what and how children learn in both settings (Dockett & Perry, 2021b)
- **Ad-hoc** is the transition to school approach commonly used in NZ when children begin their formal school on any day of the school year provided they have turned five.
- **Cohort entry** is the transition process where a group of children transition to school collectively on a specific day stipulated by the Ministry of Education. This is usually on the first day of each term as well as at the mid-way point of the term.

Starting school on a child's fifth birthday has been a societal norm for a significant period of time in Aotearoa. A child turns five, and the first question asked is "when are you starting school?". This approach to starting school is known as 'ad hoc' or 'continuous entry,' where children can begin their schooling career on any day of the school year provided they have turned five. The second approach to starting school in NZ is termed 'cohort entry'. This approach ensures children begin school on a pre-determined date set by the Ministry of Education (MOE) rather than individually on or close to their fifth birthday. Cohort entry is a relatively new initiative introduced in 2017 by the MOE and has only been adopted by 7% of schools across NZ.

There is, however, a lack of research in NZ around cohort entry and the benefits this has for both children and the school community. When looking at approaches internationally for children beginning school, while not termed 'cohort entry', the approach is the same, by which children are required to start on a pre-determined date, rather than on their birthday. The aim of this research is not to distinguish which approach (ad-hoc or cohort) is deemed 'the best'

practice for transitioning children to school, rather, designed to provide insight into how schools have adopted this practice, what they value about cohort entry as well as the challenges faced. With this research and the ERO report, schools are then able to make an informed decision regarding how to transition their new entrant (NE) children to school.

1.3 A New Zealand Context

Starting school in NZ is a unique experience for children and unlike any other country in the OECD (Education Review Office, 2022). The MOE allows for NZ children to start school on any day of the school year provided they have turned five years old, in a distinctive approach termed 'ad-hoc' entry. In comparison to NZ's most common school entry option (Education Review Office, 2022), other countries have adopted a periodic entry to school approach where children begin school on specific dates either occurring once or twice a year, or alternatively termly. This approach in NZ literature is known as 'cohort entry' and is also endorsed in NZ.

The MOE first introduced cohort entry to school in NZ in 2017. Schools were able to opt into this by allowing students to begin school at four specific entry points per year. These entry points occur at the beginning of each term and children could start on the first day of term closest to their fifth birthday, meaning some NZ children entered primary school at the age of four. In 2020 the Education and Training Act was amended resulting in two significant changes to the guidelines. Firstly, children were required to have turned five before beginning school and were not allowed to begin school prior to their fifth birthday. Secondly, the number of entry points for children eligible to begin school doubled from four to eight, allowing for two entry points per term. For the purpose of this thesis, cohort entry will be defined by the guidelines stated in the Education and Training Act 2020.

1.4 A Global Approach

The age of students starting school has been the subject of debate in the education sector for a lengthy period of time. Factors including students' readiness for learning, skills, attributes, cognitive development, and maturation (Jindal-Snape, 2010) all play a role in the argument

leading to determining the ideal age at which a student should enter their formal primary school education. While there is no general consensus as to what age children should start school, many nations begin primary school education at six (OECD, 2020). The range for students starting compulsory education spans a three-year period, where the earliest child begins their formal education at four and the latest commences at seven. Neuroscientists show that a child’s learning from birth to six years is crucial as the brain has an extraordinary amount of capacity to learn, grow, and develop (OECD, 2020). When children are given the opportunity to begin their education career in this timeframe it sets the foundation for future success both at school, and their career (OECD, 2020).

Transition to school approaches globally are varied where children move into a ‘transitioning’ classroom to bridge the gap between home care or early childhood education and formal schooling. As seen in the figure below, a variety of transition programs are offered worldwide to students who are beginning their formal education (OECD, 2020).

Country	Transition Program	School Starting Age
NZ	New Entrant	5
Australia	Prep	6
United Kingdom	Kindergarten	4
South Africa	Grade R	7
Italy	Pre-Primary School	6
India	Pre-Primary Education	6
France	Pre-Elementary Education	6
United States of America	Kindergarten	5
UAE	KG1	6

Figure 1: Transition program and starting age globally.

For the majority of countries in the OECD students begin in what NZ terms a ‘cohort.’ Students begin their formal education on a specified date stipulated by the government based on their

education requirements. For example, a student wishing to begin school in Queensland, Australia must have turned five by the 30th June in the year they enrol to begin school (ACARA, 2022). Further abroad, children begin school in the September after their fourth birthday in the UK, meaning they will turn five in their first year of schooling (OECD, 2020). While these approaches differ to the enrolment process for children in NZ, they follow a cohort approach which ensures all children begin school on the same day.

1.5 Starting School Together: *What do we know?*

As cohort entry is a new approach in NZ the research around the benefits it has for children, schools, and parents is limited. Following changes to the law in 2017, ERO (Education Review Office) conducted a study titled 'Starting School Together: What do we know?' which offers a glimpse into the cohort entry to school approach and the benefits this offers for students, families, and schools. Starting school is a significant event in a child's life and can cause some uncertainty for children during this time of change. ERO found through their study that schools that operate cohort entry have altered the structure of their transition which ensures less disruption for teachers and students causing positive effects on well-being and learning (Education Review Office, 2022). The report shares the experiences of schools that have moved away from the ad-hoc regime and have implemented cohort entry. Their focus was on six key areas of impact; impacts on students, on whānau, on peers, on schools, on ECE services, and on transition. The findings generated by ERO were collected through surveys and interviews with principals, teachers, and parents, with additional data collected from the MOE to formulate this report. This ERO report does not argue for cohort entry being a better option for students entering school, rather the focus is on the experiences of schools who operate this model of school entry in NZ (Education Review Office, 2022). Additionally, the report allows for schools who may adopt cohort entry to learn from the experiences of schools who have previously implemented this process (Education Review Office, 2022). The results and findings of ERO's report are discussed in the following chapter in exploring key literature.

To date, only 7% of schools in NZ use a cohort entry approach (Education Review Office, 2022).

Perhaps reflecting that the number of schools that use a cohort approach is low, the research around cohort entry in NZ is limited. This may be a contributing factor as to why schools have not changed their practices. To combat this, this study aims to contribute to the research carried out by ERO regarding the benefits of cohort entry. The study aims to gather the voices of members of the board, principals, and NE teachers who have implemented the change from ad-hoc to cohort and can identify the benefits and challenges faced along the way. It is acknowledged that while cohort entry may be the best practice for one school, it may not be for another.

1.6 A Personal Interest

As a first-year teacher, I had the privilege of teaching a Year One/Two class at a small Catholic school in the South Island. I found myself with a class of 17 children, some of whom had been at school for over a year while others had just a few terms. Due to the large number of new enrolments and new children beginning their education, my class size grew. I then passed the children on to a new teacher and gained an additional group of children. While I was not teaching in the NE space, it was evident that these children began school on their fifth birthday, and spent a small amount of time settling into school before being moved to a second classroom. For some children, they had two transitions, the first to school, while the second was to a new teacher. As an early years/junior school teacher, I have a passion for ensuring children are provided with the best start to school. Although I have not had the opportunity to work in a NE classroom, I often think about what this would look like, how would I transition children to school, what support, care, and guidance would I provide, and how could I give children the best start to their education career and nurture their love of learning. These thoughts accompanied by a desire to make a change in education have been instrumental in shaping this study.

1.7 Aims of the Study

The aim of this study was to understand ways in which schools in NZ have implemented the cohort entry approach. This was guided by the overarching research question: In what ways are

schools enacting cohort entry and what are the key considerations that guide transition to school practices?

To better understand this aim, the following sub-questions were developed:

1. In what ways are schools enacting cohort entry and what are the key considerations that guide transition to school practices?
2. What do Principals, Members of the Board, and NE teachers see as the value of cohort entry to school?
3. What do Principal, Members of the Board, and NE teachers see as the challenges of implementing cohort entry for students starting school?

1.8 Outline of Chapters

This study is organised into five chapters. The first, this introductory chapter, outlines the scope of the study, defines key terms, and establishes the research aim and questions. Chapter two reviews literature both nationally and internationally regarding transition to school. It pays attention to key areas such as the transition, school readiness, and continuity of learning for children. Chapter three outlines the qualitative method used to guide this study, as well as the case study design approach that allowed for in-depth, descriptive data collection, before outlining the data analysis methods used. A discussion of the ethical principles considered throughout this study concludes chapter three. The findings are presented in chapter four and are narrated as individual cases represented by the principal, member of the board, and NE teacher from each school. The data is then considered at a meta-level to consider the similarities and differences across cases, through the lenses of principals, members of the board, and NE teachers. Chapter five discusses the findings together in light of key themes and in the context of key literature regarding cohort entry. Additionally, this chapter reflects on the strengths and limitations of the study as well as proposing suggestions for future research. Chapter five concludes with a summary of the findings and implications of this research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Effective education transitions have been researched worldwide, with many researchers articulating that the transition to school has a lasting effect on students' educational achievement (Dockett & Perry, 2001, 2013; Huser et al., 2016; Margetts, 2002). There are two current options for children starting school in NZ, ad-hoc, or cohort entry. While ad-hoc has been the 'status-quo' enrolment type for a significant period of time in NZ, research suggests cohort entry has significant benefits for children.

The following topics will be covered in this literature review:

1. Starting School Together: *What do we know?* – ERO 2022 Report
2. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological model of transition
3. Transition to school
4. School readiness
5. Continuity of learning
6. Transition to school practices
7. Disadvantages of cohort entry

The Massey University library database was used to gather appropriate references related to relevant literature. The keywords used represent the focus of this research and were crucial in discovering academic articles. Keywords such as; 'transition,' 'continuous entry,' 'starting school,' 'readiness,' 'school readiness,' 'continuity of learning,' 'continuity,' 'entry to school,' 'ecological transition,' and 'transition to school' were pivotal in the discovery of academic information which related directly to the aims of this study.

2.2 Starting School Together: What do we know?

ERO's 2022 report titled Starting School Together: What do we know? was aimed at gathering a view of the cohort entry to school approach from a community perspective. Throughout the

report, ERO spoke with 12 schools and six ECE providers which varied in size from under 50 students to schools of 500 students. ERO acknowledged that four of these schools were state-integrated schools and were located in both urban and rural settings throughout the North and South Island of NZ

The data gathered by ERO was in the form of both surveys and interviews which were carried out in November and December 2021. Surveys were administered using the SurveyMonkey platform and sent to principals, teachers, and parents of the school communities which had already adopted a cohort entry approach. As the number of schools which were using a cohort entry approach in 2021 was 130, ERO opted to send the survey to all principals of these schools. The data gathered consisted of responses from 94 principals (81%). Links were also requested to be shared with the NE teachers at each of these schools. The response rate from this group of individuals was low, with only 21 NE teachers from 14 schools responding. It is key to note that due to the inability to gauge how many NE teachers worked at schools which used a cohort entry approach during the duration of this study, the findings by ERO regarding NE do not depict an accurate representation of NE teachers. Finally, during the interviewing stage of data gathering, four schools were chosen to complete the Carers Survey. This was provided to family members of children in Years 0-2, of which 66 families members completed the survey. The data generated by the surveys were both qualitative and quantitative. When analysing the data ERO removed any identifying information about a particular school, teacher, child, or family member to ensure anonymity was upheld.

Selecting the participants for the interview process was completed by ERO through accessing administrative data regarding schools which use a cohort entry model and those who follow the ad-hoc approach. ERO then created a stratified sample of both primary schools and ECE providers which ranged in various sizes. This process provided ERO with 12 schools, six which used cohort entry, five that followed an ad-hoc approach, and one that used cohort entry and had reverted back to an ad-hoc approach. Interviews were then conducted with various members from each school, including principals, teachers, and a board member. To gather the

perceptions of ECE providers, ERO contacted centers which were located close to the 12 schools selected. This resulted in 12 managers from six ECE providers interviewed. The interviews were conducted in Term 4 of 2021 and were completed either over the phone or on a Zoom meeting. The information provided was transcribed and then analysed through a thematic analysis to identify key themes, ideas, and patterns. The results from this report are outlined below.

As of the beginning of 2022, ERO (2022) reported that only 7% (130) of NZ primary schools offered a cohort entry start for their NE children, resulting in 10% of NZ children experiencing this approach. Additionally, of the 7% of schools offering cohort entry, the majority are schools which are higher socio-economic areas, in bigger cities across NZ, and who have a large school roll (Education Review Office, 2022). This resulted in many children who live rurally missing out on the opportunity of cohort entry. Although the majority of schools throughout NZ do not offer cohort entry, MOE data shows that some parents do elect to start their child at school later than their fifth birthday. In 2008, 82% of five-year-old children started school in their birthday month compared to 2019 where only 70% of children started during that month (Education Review Office, 2022). This trend is due to several factors, including school readiness, social and emotional development, financial considerations, family arrangements, or parents waiting for friends to start at a similar time. Furthermore, while children can start school at five years old, it is not compulsory for children to be enrolled at school and begin until they are six (Education Review Office, 2022). This may be an additional factor in the decrease in number of children starting school on or close to their fifth birthday.

ERO (2022) found that cohort entry to school had a range of impacts on students, families, and school. Results found that students who start school in a cohort with others are likely to begin school with a group of children of whom some of them they may know. This allows for children to establish or continue to develop the friendships formed in an ECE setting or previous childcare. This has a positive benefit on students' emotional and social wellbeing (Education Review Office, 2022). Principals interviewed by ERO acknowledge this as being a strength of

cohort entry. ERO (2022) also recognise a sense of belonging as a universal marker for social and emotional well-being, which is enhanced when they begin school with peers rather than on an individual basis. Over three-quarters of principals (78%) and teachers (74%) acknowledge the well-being aspect as the most positive benefit for students entering school as a cohort.

Settling into the routine of school is part of the transition to school process. The report found that 93% of principals and 79% of NE teachers interviewed acknowledge that students settle into classroom life better under a cohort entry approach, while 18% believe there is no difference between cohort entry or ad-hoc in terms of children's ability to settle (Education Review Office, 2022). Elements of starting school such as routines, rules, classroom culture, and procedures can be taught as a cohort rather than on an individual basis. This understanding was affirmed by a teacher who articulated "systems and routines that NE thrive on in class can be built and established clearly with each new cohort" (Education Review Office, 2022, p.12).

Other key findings for students entering school with a cohort included the continuity of learning for children where fewer disruptions occurred allowing for students to grow their curriculum knowledge and readiness (Education Review Office, 2022). Additionally, ERO (2022) found that transitions were able to be more consistent and streamlined, where the same message was delivered to all children and their whānau prior to commencing school.

Similar to cohort entry having an impact on students, the impact was felt within the receiving school. ERO's (2022) report found that over 80% of both teachers and principals interviewed believed that cohort entry had a positive entry on administration as well as teacher workload. The research suggests that principals believe staffing requirements, effective planning, classroom size management, and knowing the diverse range of students needs are positive outcomes of cohort entry to school and that planning these entry points reduces disruption to the whole school. Additionally, principals suggested that their enrolment process was more streamlined and the management of waiting lists was eased (Education Review Office, 2022).

ERO's review found that 84% of teachers believed that a cohort entry to school approach gave them more time to teach the students in their classroom environment. This was due to a range of reasons such as knowing when students are starting and how many will begin, streamlining students' transition visits, preparing and planning a range of activities and introductory lessons, and communicating information to parents as a group rather than on an individual basis (Education Review Office, 2022).

Although much of the research highlighted the positive aspects cohort entry has on schools, having a large group of NE students enter school for the first time at the same time may cause some challenges (Education Review Office, 2022). New children who may be feeling anxious or nervous miss out on teacher attention due to the high volume of students beginning, the diverse range of needs of students beginning on the first day, and not being able to effectively cater to these individuals. Additionally, concerns that the time available to build relationships with students and their whānau may be more limited due to having a greater number of students starting at the same time (Education Review Office, 2022) have been voiced in ERO's report. Principals and teachers see this as a potential hindrance to a cohort entry to school approach.

As the 2022 ERO report highlights, schools who have already opted into the cohort entry approach express many benefits it has for both the school and children. However, this approach may not fit the needs of all communities across NZ due to the cultural of families, the community, or location, therefore, the ad hoc approach is preferred (Education Review Office, 2022). The ecology in which schools are situated, as well as family preferences, will influence the entry to school approach a school uses.

2.3 Ecological Transition

Bronfenbrenner's theory, The Ecology of Human Development is often referred to in understanding studies of students' learning and the transition from early childhood education to primary school (Pianta & Cox, 1999). Bronfenbrenner's theory specifically describes how individuals develop, grow, change, and adapt within their environment and ever-widening

ecological contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). Additionally, Bronfenbrenner and Morris' model provides those researching the transition to school process with a strong outline that focuses on transitions and discontinuities (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Webb et al., 2017) which can directly be applied to the transition process (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). Yim (2018) recognises that the child transitioning to school process is situated in the centre of an ecology which is dependent on a raft of interconnected environmental systems. These interconnected systems include family, school, community, rules, media, society, and values. The theory can be likened to the Babushka Russian dolls. The closer to the individual, the greater the influence on the child. However, as Bronfenbrenner (1986); Pianta et al. (1999); Pianta and Cox (1999); Webb et al. (2017); and Yim (2018) concur, one system influences others in a dynamic and transactional way.

Relating the Babushka Russian dolls to the transition to school process is not uncommon and was used by Bronfenbrenner himself as an illustration to see the contributing factors that have an impact on children. When both biological and environmental factors combine and mutually affect one another, change or growth occurs (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The doll closest to the centre (or individual) known as the 'microsystem' has the most influence on an individual. Included in this system are all the environments in which the individual has direct relationships with, or spends a significant amount of time in, including home, an ECE centre, or school. The interactions between the individual and these contexts are central to the development of the child (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) as these connections occur regularly and last for a lengthy period of time. The transition to school process begins in this layer, as children regularly switch from their immediate home setting to an ECE setting, and when appropriate, to school.

The second doll - the 'mesosystem' - does not directly involve the individual, rather the individual is affected by this system due to the interactions that occur (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Within the transition to school process, it is likely there is communication between ECE, school, and whānau which involves critical information shared. These

conversations can have an influence on aspects of students transition due to the values, actions, and practices others identify with.

The third layer is the 'exosystem.' The individual does not directly function with aspects of their exosystem on a daily basis due to the nature of elements included in this layer. Elements of the exosystem such as parental workplace, media, government, rules and laws, health services, or community impact a child's transition into school in implicit ways as they navigate their new surroundings. Due to children living in an environment which can be easily affected by the actions of others, their ecosystem has a direct effect on their individual microsystems (Berk, 2013).

The final doll, the 'Macrosystem' and the outermost layer of the ecosystem refers to elements that may support, guide, or influence a child in their microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem, including attitudes and beliefs, cultural norms, values, and laws (Berk, 2013). The macrosystem of an individual binds all the other three systems together and shapes the transition into school experience at the widest policy and implementation levels.

Children are growing up in an ever-changing world which is interconnected by an increased use of technology. The increased use of technology now means the nature of how children grow and learn has changed. Bronfenbrenner's Ecology Theory shows how the increased complexity of the world has an impact on children's learning. When children transition from one educational setting to another the immediate learning environment and relationships between those transitioning and the environment is a focal point. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) recognises and values the importance of environments and relationships as a strong foundation for success in transitions for young children (Department for Education, 2021). However, what is often overshadowed is the unseen environmental factors that directly impact children in their mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem as children are continually surrounded by environmental factors which affect them directly or indirectly (Berk, 2013; Yim, 2018). NZ is a multicultural country, therefore, educators in the early years must consider the

effects on a child's development which are wider than their immediate learning environment.

2.4 School Readiness

The Convention on the Rights of a Child articulates that each and every child has the right to access education and the right to be respected for their developmental milestones (Fabian & Dunlop, 2003). It is evident that some students develop faster than others, can read and write at an earlier age, establish oral language skill quicker, and progress with fine and gross motor skills before others. However, readiness for school is not predetermined by the set of educational attributes students have (Noel, 2010), rather their environment and experiences play a central role in the development of readiness.

For decades, readiness has been a focal point in transition to school literature. Readiness can be defined in a variety of ways. School readiness relates to the behaviours children both need and possess that allow them to carry out learning activities (Öngören, 2021). Janus (2007, as cited in Shallwani, 2009), has similar views, and recognises that readiness is relates to the skills and knowledge that students have in five domains; physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language, cognitive development, communication skills, and general knowledge, which are needed upon entry into school (Shallwani, 2009). Additionally, both Bates (2019) and KoÇAK and Incekara (2020), highlight the social and emotional elements of readiness, emphasising students' ability to be socially and emotionally aware, interact with others, recognise their own and others feelings, and form stable relationships. Although different research studies place importance on different elements of readiness for formal education, there is a consensus that 'readiness' comprises a range of cognitive, physical, emotional, and social skills that are needed for students to successfully begin formal education. Moreover, readiness signals students' ability to begin formal education (Meisels & Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement, 1998).

Research suggests that one of the greatest misconceptions regarding school readiness is an emphasis on the child knowing letters, sounds, and numbers in order to be deemed 'ready'

(Elkind, 2008). Academic knowledge does not determine how ready a child is for school. Although literacy and numeracy knowledge can aid the ability of a child to engage with the curriculum, this does not determine how ready a child is for formal education. Readiness can be indicated by students' cognitive development, however, social, emotional, behavioural, physical, and language development also play an imperative role in the readiness of a child (Bates, 2019; KoçAk & Incekara, 2020; Lumaauridlo et al., 2021; Öngören, 2021; Shallwani, 2009). The concept of being able to measure a child's 'readiness' has led to a range of tests, both formal and informal, which seek to position a child alongside the 'normal' expectations of how they will process through the education system (Graue, 1993). However, readiness is a highly contested and debated topic, especially when set in the context of socio-cultural perspectives. Parents and educators can differ in their beliefs about the expectations and notion of school readiness in terms of a student's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical abilities prior to entering a formal education setting (Neuman, 2002; Scott-Little et al., 2006). In addition, different communities have a different understanding and construct of 'readiness' (Graue, 1992) based on the needs, values, and aspirations of their society.

Parents of NE students and teachers themselves often have divergent views on school readiness. A study carried out by Jose et al., (2002) found significantly different results in parents and NE teachers' understanding of the concept of school readiness in Australia. Their findings suggest that parents prioritise children's emotional development as the driving indicator of school readiness, acknowledging that to be ready for school their child must cope with being separated from their mother or father and dealing with the anxiety this brings (Jose et al., 2022). The results from the study show that the 39 parents interviewed were far less concerned about their child's cognitive, physical, and social development, rather they focused on the emotional experience of children settling into school smoothly. However, a study conducted in Australia by Dockett and Perry (2002) found that teachers and parents shared similar views around the transition to school process in a broad sense but had differing perspectives as to what aspects of readiness were more important. Their results found that adjustment was central to a successful transition to school. Teachers believed students needed

to adjust to a new school context, following rules, routines, and boundaries, while parents recognised adjustment needed to occur on a social level (Dockett & Perry, 2002). This social level of adjustment meant students needed to form new relationships with teachers and students, and this allowed parents to accept their child was ready for school.

Just as parents and teachers hold different views on readiness, so too do ECE and NE teachers. A study carried out by Koçak and Incekara (2020) in Turkey aimed to identify the different understandings ECE and NE teachers had in regard to school. The key themes of school readiness defined by ECE and NE teachers revolve around students' social and emotional development and cognition. ECE educators tended to emphasise students' ability to share, take turns, communicate with others, and share their thoughts and desires (Koçak & Incekara, 2020), while NE teachers required students to have self-confidence, emotional independence, adopt forms of responsibility, and have the ability to express themselves and their knowledge (Koçak & Incekara, 2020).

Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, and Cox's (2000) study echoes similar perspectives. Their findings suggest that students who have social-emotional skills are better prepared and ready for school (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). Similarly, NE teachers in Slovakia ranked social-emotional development as the most important factor in students' readiness for school (Stillerova et al., 2021), stating "children with good social-emotional skills have better relationships with teachers, higher school engagement, overall academic adjustment and higher scores on measures of reading and math skills" (Stillerova et al., 2021, p. 154).

Although the discourse around school readiness is mainly situated around children's skills, they are not the only contributing factors to ensure they are ready for school. School readiness includes the much wider contexts of children's lives; their family, the environments they are involved in, their community, and the school itself (Lumauridlo et al., 2021). Notably, researchers of school readiness have turned their attention to understanding the perspective of 'ready schools' (Dockett & Perry, 2001) where the school amends their approaches and

practices to allow for a smooth transition for students. Parent orientation days, transition activities for children, and sharing expectations with both children and parents are three ways in which schools are able to demonstrate their readiness for students and their families (Cook & Coley, 2017). Bernstein, Barnett, and Ackerman (2019) recognise that ready schools consist of three key factors. Firstly, a ready school provides the necessary support for all children. This will not look the same for every child, and teachers adapt their practices to ensure children's transition programs suit their individual needs. Secondly, ready schools provide adequate professional development for teachers to adjust to the diverse needs in their classroom. Finally, they recognise that ready schools are adaptable, with leaders who make sure staff are well supported, resourced, and capable of ensuring all students receive a smooth start (Bernstein et al., 2019).

“Learning occurs at different rates for different children” (Kagan, 1990, p. 267). Therefore, no matter what age is set for students to enter formal education, educational institutions must deal with an array of students presenting different developmental, behavioural, social, and cognitive strengths and needs (Zill et al., 1997). As the rates of development for students are increasingly varied, one six-year-old may be able to read, write, know basic mathematics, while another is still working on identifying the letters of the alphabet and numbers to 10. Kagan believes these differences are not due to the prior education students have received, or their age, but rather their maturational readiness (Kagan, 1990).

Although there are often conflicting views about what constitutes a ‘ready child’ for school, and the skills, attributes, and knowledge one needs to be ready, the underlying aspiration behind all who are involved in the process is similar. ECE and NE teachers, as well as parents, want children to enter school happy, confident, and ready to engage with new learning, have the ability to make friends, and enjoy their time at school, as all of these are linked with positive educational outcomes (Harper, 2016; Pianta, Cox, Taylor, et al., 1999; Wallis & Dockett, 2015).

2.5 Transition to School

The transition to school is a singular life event for a child, although they may move to several schools, the beginning of their schooling only happens once. Thus, the transition to school process will have a lasting effect on students and their future success in education (Dockett & Perry, 2001, 2013; Huser et al., 2016; Margetts, 2002). While many researchers have differing views on what transition is, there is an element of commonality which relates to change. There are multiple components of change in a transition, a change in role, community, environment, nature, and behaviour or development and learning (Dockett & Perry, 2021a; Fabian et al., 2007; Fabian & Dunlop, 2003). Dockett and Perry (2021) recognise change as a critical element for a transition to occur, and without change in a particular area a transition is not needed (Dockett & Perry, 2021a). In recent years the notion of co-constructing the transition process has been made. This idea suggests that relevant individuals who are important in the transition to school process work together to build understanding, and support systems to ensure a child is catered for in the transition (Jordan, 2004). A group of contributors working together who know the child is more powerful than the contribution of an individual (Jordan, 2004). Throughout a child's lifetime, a myriad of transitions occurs, each signalling a pivotal developmental stage or a period of growth (Webb et al., 2017). Starting school is just one of these early key transitional milestones for children. Whether it be positive or negative, exciting or terrifying, this momentous occasion is one many children will remember for a lifetime (Arnold et al., 2007).

Authors have reported the significant impact the transition to school has on children, many argue that the effects of the transition have life-long impacts on student's attitudes toward schooling (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Fabian et al., 2007; Peters, 2010; Webb et al., 2017). In order for a transition to occur there must be an element of change, as without change, a transition is not required (Dockett & Perry, 2021). As a student begins their first day of school there are multiple changes they go through. Many wear a school uniform, leave their parents at the classroom door, follow a new set of rules, are required to read and write, have different break times, and play on new equipment (Dockett & Perry, 2021). The physical, relational, and

environmental changes are also coupled with internal changes, feelings of anxiousness, and nervousness, students having to make new friends, and view themselves through the lens of a 'school kid.' (Dockett & Perry, 2021). Peters (2010b) describes this process as crossing the threshold, where a child leaves behind the environment, people, and security of what they knew, to a new environment. Throughout this time, it is normal for students to experience uncertainty as they begin to figure out their new normal and integrate themselves fully into the new role they will play in their educational context (Peters, 2010).

Transition occurs in three key phrases, separation, transition, and incorporation, meaning transition is not an isolated event (Dockett & Perry, 2021; Gennep, 1960). Societal changes influenced by communities, environment, relationships, identities, and agencies all situated within the school context are involved in this life-changing event for a child (Dockett & Perry, 2021a). Some children who come from ethnic minorities can find this adjustment to school difficult. The discrepancy between home and school can become overwhelming for children due to the differences in language, culture, values, and beliefs (Margetts, 2007). Therefore, the transition to school program must be responsive, flexible, and inclusive of all individual needs, where cultural diversity is respected and accepted by all involved (Clancy et al., 2001). A smooth transition to school is what all parents and teachers strive for (Dockett & Perry, 2004). As the social, emotional, and cognitive demands are accelerated for children during the period of transition, ensuring a sense of belonging and comfort in a new environment is paramount for the continuity of learning (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002).

The rite of passage or phases of transition outlined by van Gennep (1960) focusses on leaving a familiar context and moving into a foreign context through three phases. Firstly, the separation phase occurs which involves detachment from the known (Gennep, 1960). This can cause heightened stress and anxiety for a child (Dockett & Perry, 2021). Throughout this period a child reflects on their time as an ECE student, their education, and the relationship built with teachers and peers as they change their identity from an ECE child to a primary school student (Dockett & Perry, 2021). Secondly, the transition period occurs where a child is in between

stages (Gennep, 1960). For many, this is a period of limbo where students have left their previous educational setting but have not yet started their formal primary school education. Depending on where students are living globally this period can be lengthier than others as for some there is a long holiday period, while others it may be a term break or weekend. Gennep (1960) describes this passage as one of regeneration, where one's energy is renewed in a period of change which allows them to continue their journey. Finally, the last phase is known as the incorporation phase. Throughout this phase, a child is introduced to a new environment where their identity has changed as they are tasked with building relationships, navigating unfamiliar territory, and settling into new routines and rules of school. The incorporation phase does not happen overnight, instead, it is a drawn-out process and is determined by the child themselves (Gennep, 1960). For some children, they are able to incorporate themselves quicker than others. However, the ability to settle into school quickly does not distinguish a 'successful' transition to school (Laverick, 2008), rather Gennep's rites of passage highlight the change in a social position for individuals who endure each stage, where one door closes, but another will open (Gennep, 1960).

Similar to Gennep's theory, many researchers use the metaphor of crossing the bridge to describe the transition to school process (Broström, 2007; Huser et al., 2016; Neuman, 2002; Petriwskyj et al., 2005; Pianta, 2004). Although the metaphor is used universally, there are different interpretations regarding the relationship between the bridge and a student's transition to school. Some believe the bridge allows continuity to occur (Petriwskyj et al., 2005), others recognise it as an element to narrow the gap between ECE education and primary school (Broström, 2007) or simply a way of bridging learning across a variety of settings (Neuman, 2002). The notion of crossing this bridge identifies the support and guidance students receive through the transition process from a familiar context to an unfamiliar one, ensuring this process is as smooth as possible (Huser et al., 2016). Before students cross the bridge, opportunities arise that allow them to become familiar with their passage. These are in the form of school visits, parent evenings, and meet-the-teacher opportunities. Hartley et al, (2012) NZ study suggests relationships between educators, creating an environment where students

belong, building connections with students' families, ensuring the continuity of learning, and implementing a sense of community allows for students to have positive experiences on their own individual bridge (Hartley et al., 2012).

A predominant theme in the transition to school literature is the idea of friendships as a key feature in ensuring a child's transition is successful (Fabian, 2000; Ladd, 1990; Ladd et al., 2006; Margetts, 2002, 2003; S. Peters, 2010; S. A. Peters, 2010). Most children are good at making friends at a young age and this trait is beneficial during the transition to school process. Friends are a social support for children during the difficult times they face when beginning school (Danby et al., 2012). Margetts (2002) found that when children commence school with an acquaintance, playmate, peer, or friend, they are more likely to have greater social skills, engage with appropriate school behaviour, and have notable academic success compared to that of a child who is starting school without a known other (Margetts, 2002). Furthermore, as the transition to school process results in a shift of microsystems, retaining something familiar from one microsystem (ECE) and transferring it to another (school) alleviates stress and makes this process less challenging and daunting (Ledger et al., 2000). Peters' (2004) "crossing the border" study found students who had already formed a friendship prior to commencing school allowed them to support each other through challenging content, and ensure they were following appropriate school behaviour. Friends were able to scaffold students learning for others without the need of a teacher, be a support system and a guide if needed (Peters, 2004).

Another relevant theme in transition to school literature is students' culture. Many different cultures worldwide have specific education ideologies that are recorded in legislation, education documents, and recommendations (Fabian & Dunlop, 2003). These are filtered down to leaders in education, teachers, parents, and are reflected in the education children receive. What is failing to be addressed is the culturally diverse needs of the children sitting in front of teachers. Instead, teachers deliver an approach that is best for the majority of students in their classroom, while the minority is left to change their learning needs to adapt to what is being delivered (Fabian & Dunlop, 2003). Inclusive practices must cater to the increasingly diverse

and complex needs of students, be it cultural differences, challenging learner abilities, or children with disabilities (Petriwskyj, 2013). In NZ, Māori and Pasifika students' identity, culture, and language are often excluded from school contexts (Macfarlane et al., 2007). From day one at school right until the day a child leaves the NZ education system, students should not “leave their cultural identity at the gate” (Macfarlane et al., 2007, p. 74), instead this should be welcomed, celebrated, and shared within the school community. Good practice in education revolves around culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy, variation of teaching practices, continuity of learning, and sound relationships (Petriwskyj, 2013) which allows students to foster a sense of belonging in their immediate environment. Ka Hikitia (Ministry of Education, 2020) and Tātaiako (Education Council New Zealand, 2011) provide teachers with vital knowledge to implement in their classrooms which allow for both Māori and Pasifika students to gain the skills, knowledge, and expertise to achieve educational success. Ensuring a student’s culture is valued, acknowledged, and accepted throughout the transition to school process allows students to settle into school comfortably knowing they are accepted for who they are.

Effective transition to school practices share a commitment to ensuring relationships developed with all involved are secure, respectful, and reciprocal (Dockett & Perry, 2014). In terms of a child’s transition to school, relationships can take many forms (Dockett & Perry, 2013; Ladd et al., 2006). Children’s relationships with their siblings and peers play an important role in adjusting to school life, parents' relationships with the school and staff are fundamental in supporting children’s transition to school and educational needs, and the relationships developed between teacher and student is crucial for positive educational outcomes (Mashburn & Pianta, 2006). When there is an agreement that relationships are the focal point for a child’s transition it becomes easier for all involved to prioritise these (Dockett & Perry, 2014). Relationships are not established immediately instead take work from both individuals involved. Time, effort, and energy are spent getting to know one another, identifying their strengths, weaknesses, likes and dislikes, and understanding their cultural identity (Podmore et al., 2003). Building a relationship is an ongoing process which is embedded in the society in

which we reside, therefore it is a given that having a well-rounded understanding of a child is central to establishing a good relationship (Shields, 2009). It is said, good relationships are good practice (Shields, 2009) regardless of the individual needs and differences children have. When a secure relational support system is established and maintained the likelihood of a smooth transition to school occurs (Petriwskyj, 2013).

2.6 Continuity of Learning

Learning occurs from birth to death and is an aspect that is continuous over one's lifespan. Children's learning in the early years is situated within the immediate contexts and the relationships they have with family, community, and other additional settings (Ministry of Education, 2017). Continuity of learning is paramount during the transition to school period as new knowledge is built upon the foundation of students' existing knowledge.

Te Whāriki (2017), the New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum Framework recognises that all children are born with potential, and we need to treat children as taonga (treasure), to be nurtured and cared for, allowing them to grow and flourish as capable individuals (Ministry of Education 2017). Importantly, when children attend ECE centres throughout NZ, they are taken on a learning journey supported by teachers who work together in partnership with the child and their family to allow them to be life-long learners (Ministry of Education, 2017). Te Whāriki appreciates that all children are unique and bring their own set of strengths and talents to ECE. Furthermore, Te Whāriki builds on this understanding by acknowledging that all children are confident competent learners, who, with meaningful and relevant conversations and interactions with people, places, and things will strengthen their learning (Ministry of Education, 2017). Throughout the Te Whāriki curriculum, there is no doubt that children are portrayed as active participants in their learning. Children are given autonomy to choose, plan, discover, and challenge themselves on a daily basis, stimulating their curiosity and positively contributing to their own learning.

The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) that guides learning and teaching for the compulsory education sector is a statement of what is important in education for children in NZ. The NZC's

vision is to develop “lifelong learners who are confident and creative, connected and actively involved” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.4). The values, key competencies, and principles laid out in the NZC are designed to be modelled, explored, and encouraged with the aim to prepare students to be effective participants in society (Ministry of Education, 2007). Unlike Te Whāriki, the NZC does not offer children as much scope to be autonomous with their learning as external pressures force teachers to continue to follow the guidelines established in the curriculum. However, schools are able to adapt their curriculum based on the NZC to meet the needs of the students in their learning communities (Ministry of Education, 2007). Through this approach, there are opportunities for teachers to interpret the curriculum in such a way that benefits the students in their class, allowing all ākonga to reach their full potential.

The continuity of learning from one setting to another is a key aspect of a smooth transition from ECE to school. The Ministry of Education 2002’s Curriculum Stocktake Report stated, “a smooth transition between early childhood and school is important to minimise the barriers to learning faced by children” (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 31). While many observe the two curricula to be different in numerous ways there are in fact multiple similarities between the two, and the intention is that these documents would be seen as complementary. A strong connection can be identified between the five strands in Te Whāriki and the key competencies of the NZC. These connections can be seen between the five strands (Mana Atua, Mana Whenua, Mana Tangata, Mana Reo, and Mana Aotūrorā) in Te Whāriki and the key competencies (Thinking, Using Language Symbol and Text, Managing Self, Relating to Others, and Participating and Contributing work. The strands and key competencies can be woven together to ensure a holistic curriculum is delivered to children. The 2015 ERO report titled ‘Continuity of Learning: transitions from early childhood services to school’ suggests that schools that offer effective transition to school have teachers who have an in-depth understanding of both curriculums, their similarities, and differences (Education Review Office, 2015).

Students do not come to school with an empty backpack, rather bring with them a diverse range of needs, experiences, values, and beliefs. Literature centered around the continuation of learning from one educational setting to another has become a prominent focus in transition to school literature (Dockett & Perry, 2021). Research suggests that a primary school environment differs from an ECE setting in numerous ways, including environment size, orientation, equipment, play areas, and classroom organisation (Margetts, 1997). Additionally, alteration to the curriculum and student's educational goals, where less time is spent on activities which are student led and more time on teacher directed learning (Margetts, 2002). There is a difference in staff where there is now usually only one classroom teacher who has a distinctively different role from an ECE teacher (Margetts, 2002). Finally, students beginning primary school are faced with a different social setting, thus challenging children to make new friends (Ladd, 1990; Ladd & Price, 1987). Although these adjustments are a central component to the transition for a young student, research suggests the most important factor in this process is keeping a sense of continuity to help ease these differences (Dockett & Perry, 2014). What makes a student's transition to school increasingly complex and diverse is the array of student's developmental capabilities and mix of learning experiences teachers are presented with when children move from one educational setting to another (Margetts, 2002).

Recently, continuity has become a major focus for children's learning, with particular attention paid to enabling continuity and reducing discontinuity (Dockett & Perry, 2021a). It is not expected that primary school teachers duplicate what learning occurs in ECE centres, or ECE centres offering primary school level education, rather it encourages educators to implement strategies that support students learning from one setting to another (Dockett & Perry, 2021a). There is no question that as children get older their skills develop. Their cognitive, motor, and language skills mature, they have a greater attention span, students can increasingly communicate their feelings and emotions, play cooperatively with each other, and have a greater interest in the world around them (Arnold et al., 2007). What is important is these skills are recognised in students at an early stage of their learning journey and are built upon when transitioning from ECE to primary school. Peters (2010) work on educational transitions framed

the transition from ECE to primary school as a 'learning journey' for children (Peters, 2010b). Peters acknowledges that a student's learning journey is a central component in their transition and places significant emphasis on ensuring the two distinct educational environments in the transition process work hand-in-hand to support a child's learning (Peters, 2010b). In the NZC, it states their aim is to "build on the learning experiences the child brings with them" and to "make connections with early childhood learning experiences" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.41). Sociocultural perspectives on continuity of learning acknowledge shared understandings between teachers and students, the need to collaborate, and have an understanding of both Te Whāriki and the NZC as this promotes students learning (Podmore et al., 2003). Research suggests that continuing similar learning experiences from ECE in NE classrooms can mitigate challenges and can promote students' continuity of learning (Bredenkamp & Copple, 2009). Learning activities such as messy or outdoor play, drama, dress ups, and water or sand activities are a selection of perfect learning opportunities for NE children to continue at a primary school level which promotes learning continuity from ECE (Margetts, 2002; Wilder & Lillvist, 2018).

Parents and family can also support continuity during the transition period. Maintaining family routines, boundaries, expectations, and rules enables children to keep a sense of normality (Dockett & Perry, 2021a). Additionally, parents can support children with their learning journey by being actively engaged and involved in their school life (Margetts, 2003). Opportunities such as parents entering the classroom, keeping up to date with students' progress, and developing secure relationships are visible cues for students that their learning is being supported by both their parents and teacher (Noel, 2011). Parents, like teachers, have the ability to help their child grow in confidence and competence in themselves as learners and continue building on their pre-existing knowledge (Glicksman et al., 1981).

2.7 Transition to School Programs

Transition to school programs are used globally to ease students from ECE into primary school settings. A transition to school program can be defined as "a plan or schedule of activities and practices that aim to promote positive transition to school experiences for all involved" (Dockett & Perry, 2021b, p. 4). Additionally, a transition program involves the transitioning

child, their family, and the school working together harmoniously to bridge the gap between ECE experiences and primary school education (Margetts, 1999). While each student's transition is unique due to their personal characteristics, life experiences, and family background (Margetts, 2002) there is a general consensus that establishing transition to school programs is necessary in supporting a positive effect on students' education (Laverick, 2008).

Peters (2010) report to the MOE titled 'Transition from Early Childhood Education to School' outlines seven fundamental aspects which teachers are able to tailor to individual needs. These are; ensuring children feel they belong, recognising students' culture, developing reciprocal and respectful relationships, engaging students in learning, giving students identity, having positive expectations, and building on the knowledge and skills children bring from ECE (Peters, 2010). Although these seven principles are not the recipe for success for every child, they are created to offer teachers an array of ideas which when tailored to the individual needs of a child can enable a successful transition to their new environment.

Similar to Peters, Margetts's (1999) study highlights four fundamental characteristics of a successful transition to school, including program continuity, open-ended communication, preparation of children, and parent involvement. The continuity of learning for a child is central to a successful transition for any child as building on pre-existing knowledge, similar learning activities, familiar materials, or structure to learning eases tension and anxiety. Secondly, when both ECE and primary teachers work together throughout the transition period, identifying children's strengths and weaknesses, communicating areas of interest, and how to best support them in the transition period, educators are enabled to craft a more tailored transition program. Ultimately, these two key stakeholders have the child's best interest at heart (Margetts, 1999). The importance of this connection between staff increases professional relationships among sectors but also upholds good practice of what teaching is all about – having the child at the centre (Renwick, 1987). The third characteristic of a successful transition includes preparing a child for the transition. Ongoing communication, regular visits to the school, putting on the school uniform, as well as ECE teachers allowing opportunities for

students to develop greater independence prepares children for their next step (Fowler et al., 1991). Finally, a joint effort between parents and the school creates a greater chance of a smooth transition to school but also allows for parents to continue to be involved with their child's education journey (Margetts, 1999). When parents are informed, understand how the transition program occurs, what is expected of both them and their child, and feels a sense of belonging within the school community, they are less likely to show signs of anxiousness or stress allowing them to help pave the way for their child (Glicksman et al., 1981).

Children know themselves better than anyone else, in fact, they are experts in their own lives (Dockett & Perry, 2011). When it comes to the transition to school process for children, consulting the child who is transitioning firsthand is an integral factor in this process. Children have a right to have a say in situations that have a direct impact on themselves and their livelihood (Lansdown & Bernard Van Leer, 2005). Evidence suggests that when children are given the opportunities to be active participants in situations that affect them, they are better able to communicate their concerns, and make meaning of the world around them (Lansdown & Bernard Van Leer, 2005). The Voices of Children project conducted by Kirk-Downey and Bob Perry (2006) gathered data on student's opinions about leaving preschool, starting school and what teachers could do to make this process better for them. Research gathered from the project suggests that children are capable and competent contributors of their perceptions and experiences (Kirk-Downey & Perry, 2006). More importantly, one of the key findings of the report outlines the importance of taking children's views seriously as they bear the brunt of the transition to school process (Dockett & Perry, 2011).

All educators aim to provide support to children to see them succeed both inside and outside the classroom. Their ultimate goal is to provide the best education to each student in their primary care so that children are able to achieve their desired success (Glicksman et al., 1981). In order for this to occur there must be collaboration between children, family, and school. Many authors agree that starting a child's school journey on the right foot is key for later educational success (Alexander et al., 1988; Dockett & Perry, 2002; Peters et al., 2015; Webb et

al., 2017). Ensuring transition programs that allow for open-ended communication, cater to the needs of individual children, involve the family, offer rich activities throughout the duration of the process, and allow students to feel a sense of belonging in their new environment will enhance students' love of learning.

2.8 Challenges of Cohort Entry

Early childhood education services are affected by cohort entry in a variety of ways. Although many ECE centres acknowledge the positive research regarding cohort entry for students as well as the administrative benefits for schools and their staff, however, there are associated potential challenges for ECE centres. Cohort entry impacts the flow of children out of one education provider and into another. Many ECE teachers are concerned that cohort entry affects their rolls and intake of new students (Education Review Office, 2022). ECE centres who feed to cohort entry schools are often faced with larger groups of students leaving at the same time due to a cohort entry point date (Education Review Office, 2022). Due to ratios and numbers allowed in centres, this creates complications at the other end where children are placed on waitlists to enter an ECE provider or move from one stage to the next within the same service (Education Review Office, 2022). For smaller, rural centres in NZ, this can be difficult for families and education providers as it creates a backlog or shortage of places available for students to attend (Education Review Office, 2022). Additionally, this can cause a financial burden due to losing a group of older students at a similar time, but not having enough numbers pre-enrolled to fill the gaps (Education Review Office, 2022). Moreover, children in ECE centres who have turned five and are 'school ready' need to be challenged with their learning and education. This means that ECE teachers have to continually adapt their programs to stimulate children's interest, continue their involvement with learning, and develop their skills for an additional period of time (Education Review Office, 2022).

Similarly, cohort entry has an impact on students' entry date into primary school. For some children, it is a one- or two-day delay, while for others it can be up to six weeks. Parents may see this time as missing out on opportunities for learning (Education Review Office, 2022). Research conducted across Australia found that children who start school older than the

required age have better social and academic behaviours compared to that of their younger peers (Hanly et al., 2019) due to the extra time spent in ECE centres, however, there is little information regarding the long-term impact of these early advantages (Hanly et al., 2019).

The literature reviewed above stresses the importance of three key areas in the transition to school process. Firstly, school readiness, secondly the transition itself, and lastly the continuation of learning from one educational setting to another. It is evident that a community-focused model of transition is needed, where teacher, parent, and student work together to ensure the right of passage or crossing of the bridge is seamless (Broström, 2007; Genep, 1960; Huser et al., 2016; Neuman, 2002; Petriwskyj et al., 2005; Pianta, 2004). When the community approach is used Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Transition comes into play (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). A child, in their microsystem, is influenced by a raft of other interconnected systems subconsciously. When teachers work in conjunction with parents, and students and acknowledge the diverse environments children come from, the range of lived experience children have obtained, and the effects of the meso and exosystem which they are indirectly a part of, a tailored transition can be offered.

This study aims to contribute to the gap in literature around cohort entry to school in NZ by exploring the beliefs of a cohort entry approach. Cohort entry is a relatively new approach in NZ; the only research centered around this discourse was completed by ERO in 2022. This study aims to contribute to the existing research by focussing on the perspectives of principals, board members, and NE teachers of five schools throughout NZ who use the cohort entry approach.

This research is guided by the following three research questions:

1. *In what ways are schools enacting cohort entry and what are the key considerations that guide transition to school practices?*
2. *What do principals, members of the board and NE teachers see as the value of cohort entry to school?*
3. *What do principals, members of the board and NE teachers see as the challenges of implementing cohort entry for students starting school?"*

The following chapter outlines the research process, participants consulted, data collection and analysis, as well as the strengths and limitations of the design process. The chapter is concluded with a summary of the ethical considerations upheld throughout the duration of the study.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This study aimed to explore the beliefs, perspectives, and experiences of principals, members of the board, and NE teachers enacting a cohort entry to school process. Furthermore, this study invited principals, members of the board, and NE teachers to express the value and challenges that cohort entry presents in their school. A qualitative research approach was deemed the most appropriate research method to successfully fulfil this aim as the beliefs, perspectives, and experiences of participants are considered valuable data.

3.2 Qualitative Research

Denzin and Lincoln define qualitative researchers as individuals who “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.3). Due to the nature of the study, it was decided that a qualitative approach would provide relevant answers to the research questions outlined, as it gives the researcher the opportunity to gain an insight into the participants’ individual experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Moreover, through the open-ended exploratory approach that qualitative research offers, the participants involved in the study were able to present the researcher with their individual perspective and views (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). Qualitative research allows the researcher to determine how individual meanings are formed both through and in their culture, where variables are discovered rather than tested (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This arises through the fluid, dynamic, and ever-evolving nature (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) of qualitative research compared to the rigid, fixed structure quantitative research presents. Qualitative researchers seek to interpret and contextualise meaning from the beliefs and practices of individuals (Baskarada, 2014). Through qualitative research rich, descriptive data was gathered through the eyes of principals, board members, and NE teachers who were operating a cohort entry to school program at the time of the study.

3.3 Interpretivist Approach

The interpretivist approach of qualitative research acted as a guide which gathered the perspectives of principals, board members, and NE teachers who operate cohort entry in schools across NZ. Through this style of research, participants were able to express their own lived experiences and beliefs through a questionnaire where open-ended questions allowed participants to express freely their beliefs and viewpoints. An interpretivist approach was used to communicate ideas from individuals involved in the research study relating to the context in which they practice their actions on a daily basis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Multiple perspectives based on an individual's views and knowledge are valued through an interpretivist approach where each perspective is unique to the individual and the social domain where they are situated (Mills et al., 2006). The interpretations of these findings were then analysed by the researcher in conjunction with relevant research based on cohort entry practices.

3.4 Case Study Design

A case study approach was selected for the study as both Yin (2014) and Merriam and Merriam (1998) recognise how successful this approach is when exploratory studies are conducted. Moreover, this methodology is known for the insight researchers gather which are specific to the issues being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, 2018). In this research design the case study approach is influential as the generation of specific themes arising from case studies contributes to the understanding of the issue at hand. Importantly, multiple case studies allow for differences and similarities to be explored between cases, as well as strengthening the credibility of conclusions drawn (Merriam & Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). This study draws upon the methodology of a multiple case study approach where the information generated has arisen from a range of sources which allows for a cross-case analysis to occur upon the completion of gathering data.

Creswell (2002) defines a case study as an in-depth study or exploration of a system which is bounded such as an activity, process, event, or individual (Creswell, 2002). The aim of the researcher/s is to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation in a holistic way, where a community works together to provide information for the researcher to analyse (Merriam &

Merriam, 1998). Merriam and Merriam (1998) allude to boundaries such as time, location, people, or physical attributes that create a boundary around what is being studied (Merriam, 1998). This study suits a case study method due to the bounded system which can be used. The bounded system in this case study approach is deemed to be the individual school units, comprising the collaboration with principals, board members, and NE teachers who operate a cohort entry to school model. The specific boundaries of the multiple cases involved in this research are the schools who use a cohort entry approach and the principals, board members, and NE teachers who manage the school, enrol and teach these students.

A multiple case study approach is instrumental in this design as it provides an insight into an issue (Stake, 2005) through the lens of those whose work aligns with cohort entry to school. Additionally, the inclusion of multiple cases in a study strengthens the conclusions drawn from the data, allowing for exploration between cases to occur (Merriam & Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014)

3.5 Strengths and Limitations of Case Studies

The case study approach of generating data has both strengths and limitations for research. First, a case study approach generates multiple perspectives, situated in a real-life context (Yin, 2014). Rather than the whole context being studied, elements which are central to the particular study are able to be investigated based on the selection of cases (Yin, 2014). Patton (1987) suggests that a strength of case study is having the ability to probe an area of particular interest in depth, due to the selection of cases which will be able to provide rich information (Patton, 1987). This study uses multiple NE teachers, principals, and school board members that have adopted the cohort entry to school approach to provide contextually rich data.

Although a case study approach to research has strengths, there are also limitations. A case study research design cannot be replicated due to the situational information provided by the selected applicants. Researchers may be able to infer that the results will be similar based on the same set of criteria, however, this is not certain (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Secondly, bias is a limitation in a case study approach. The researcher is able to form a bias on the data collection

method, or how the data is interpreted (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Due to the number of cases involved in a case study and the labour and time-intensive process of data collection and analysis of data in a case study, the ability to generalize results is also limited (Punch & Oancea, 2014).

3.6 Sampling

The success of purposeful sampling lies within selecting information-rich cases to study in depth (Suri, 2011), thus the importance of selecting cases which will significantly benefit the research. Patton (2002) suggests that studying cases that provide significant information allows for the researcher to develop an insightful, in-depth, and meaningful understanding of their phenomenon. Additionally, the selection of cases also needs to focus on individuals who are able to express their beliefs and opinions in an articulate but reflective manner (Palinkas et al., 2015). Criterion sampling bases data collection on cases that meet a predetermined set of criteria (Palinkas et al., 2015), whereby inclusion or exclusion from the study is explicitly determined by the researcher based on their needs. In this study the inclusion of participants related directly to the entry to school policy the school follows. Principals, board members, and NE teachers who work in a school which offers a cohort entry were chosen to participate in this study. This was due to their ability to specifically critique and reflect on the implications cohort entry to school has on their students and school community.

3.7 Participants

The participants of this research came from five schools across NZ who implemented a cohort entry enrolment approach in their schools. These schools were found through an invitation posted to the NZ Primary Teachers Facebook page where principals indicated their school follows the Ministry of Education guidelines regarding cohort entry and were willing to participate in the research. Principals were then contacted via a direct message to obtain their school email address so information regarding the study could be shared before making a decision to participate in the study. The five schools selected were from across the country and were a mix of state and state-integrated schools, primary and full-primary. They also varied in the length of time cohort entry has been used. To formalise the process an email (Appendix A)

was sent to principals outlining the research. If principals agreed to participate, they were asked to provide the email addresses of a board member (due to a recent change in terminology the term member of the board will replace what was formerly known as the Board of Trustee member) and NE teacher who were also willing to participate in the study to ensure the relevant information was passed on to gain their approval (Appendix B). Once the five schools were confirmed all participants received an email with an information sheet (Appendix C & D) attached detailing the research outline and requirements for participation. Participants were given an opportunity to seek clarification or ask questions regarding the research before committing. Participation in the research was voluntary and participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality. The sample size in this research was capped at 15 participants which is an appropriate sample size for a first-time researcher (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). The sample size is also large enough to allow for data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). A total of 14 out of the possible 15 participants completed the questionnaire, with one board member not responding within the required timeframe.

3.8 Data Collection

Data was collected through a questionnaire administered through an online platform called Qualtrics. The questionnaire had both open and closed-ended questions for participants to answer. The results from the questionnaire provided descriptive data that captured the participants' experiences with cohort entry (Flick, 2015). The questions were constructed after a review of the key literature related to the transition to school process for children, both in NZ, and internationally. Furthermore, the questions were written to gather descriptive responses that allowed participants to express their beliefs about the cohort entry process as well as identify challenges they have faced.

The questionnaire was written and administered by me (the researcher). It was piloted with teachers who have worked with NE children both in NZ and in the United Arab Emirates where I currently reside. Feedback was given which led to questions being refined. The questionnaire was 29 questions long, with a mix of open questions and closed questions. Some questions allowed participants to select multiple answers. The first 11 questions gathered data about the demographic of the schools, including the school size, length of time cohort entry had been implemented, whether staff were on board with the policy, and adherence to the Ministry of Education policy. The next section included questions regarding the transition to school process for children, the implementation process of cohort entry, the benefits cohort entry had for children and the school, as well as the challenges experienced. The final section was focused on individuals' beliefs about cohort entry and how they viewed this process. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix E.

3.9 Data Analysis

Qualitative data in education focusses on describing individuals' understanding of a specific phenomenon (Clarke & Braun, 2017). As qualitative data is incredibly complex and diverse, a descriptive analysis was used to describe, show, and summarise the data collected. Due to the nature of the research, an exploratory approach was adopted whereby the analysis of the data collected was content-driven and focused on describing case-level data (Guest et al., 2012). Exploratory approaches to analysing allow the researcher firstly to read and reread the data in order to derive ideas that link to commonalities (Guest et al., 2012; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The ideas generated ensure the researcher has understood the data provided on a deeper level (Liamputtong, 2009).

Through a descriptive analysis approach of analysing qualitative data, the researcher's role is to identify and interpret key features of the data and how this relates to the research question/s (Clarke & Braun, 2017). It provides a description of the beliefs, views, and understandings of participants and seeks to identify potential areas of future study. Firstly, individual responses were grouped according to their schools. This ensured the researcher knew how each school

implemented a transition process and was able to gain the principal, member of the board, and NE teachers' perspectives of cohort entry. By doing this the researcher also got a "feel for the data" (Punch & Oancea, 2014, p. 229). Secondly, individual responses were categorised into their position or role at school. The principals, members of the board, and NE teachers were grouped collectively to gain an understanding of the cohort entry approach from each key stakeholder. Doing this ensures the researcher understands the data in-depth. Overall, the data analysis process is conducted to highlight common ideas, and differences in the data which allows for a deeper understanding of board members, principals, and NE teacher's beliefs regarding the cohort entry to school process.

3.10 Ethics

The ethical considerations were upheld in accordance with the principles and guidelines of the Massey University Code of Ethics (2015). The nature of this study was deemed to be low risk; therefore, ethical approval was given following the low-risk guidelines and protocols (see Appendix F). This research was approved by Professor Craig Johnson under application number 4000027049. The researcher acknowledged that ethical principles were needed for this research to ensure the potential risk of any harm was mitigated (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Key issues identified in this study are; informed consent, confidentiality, justice, beneficence, special relationships and access to participants.

- **Informed Consent**

This research upheld the ethical consideration of informed consent due to providing participants with all relevant, necessary and up-to-date information regarding the research process. The email included an information sheet regarding the study and participants were informed that completion of any question on the survey implied consent.

- **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality was upheld throughout this research to ensure the avoidance of harm caused to any participant as they were able to express their individual feelings regarding cohort entry to school. However, it was not possible to ensure absolute confidentiality, rather, a duty of care

was imposed to ensure the anonymity of participants. Pseudonyms for all individuals and schools were used throughout this study.

- **Justice and Beneficence**

This study was designed to provide insight into the cohort entry to school process. Specifically, this research was targeted at principals, members of the board, and NE teachers who operate a cohort entry to school approach. However, this research serves the wider education community as many schools who do not use a cohort entry to school approach can better understand the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. Furthermore, this research sits alongside recently released information regarding cohort entry to school published by ERO.

- **Special Relationships**

Throughout this study principals, members of the board, and NE staff from the same school participated in the same survey. As the board is the employer of the principal and staff member, and the staff member works under the principal, a power imbalance could occur. This is due to the nature of the hierarchical system which occurs in schools. In order to mitigate repercussions, confidentiality was upheld where individuals' responses were kept confidential with a duty of care exhibited to ensure identity was protected in the reporting of data.

- **Access to Participants**

This study aimed to represent a diverse mix of participants from schools with a mix of demographics across NZ. This allowed for educators who come from diverse backgrounds to share their insights and beliefs into the cohort entry to school approach. Due to cohort entry being a relatively new approach in NZ meant the access to diverse participants was limited.

3.11 Summary

The chapter has outlined the theoretical perspectives regarding the study, research design, data gathering, and analysis process, and the ethical considerations used throughout the research. A multiple case-study approach was used throughout the study to ensure the cohort entry approach was looked at in detail from a variety of perspectives and stakeholders. The data

generated from the surveys allowed for descriptive analysis to occur, ensuring the practices of cohort entry in schools were described in rich detail, as well as describing the strengths and challenges of a cohort entry enrolment type from the perspective of key stakeholders in these schools.

The following chapter reveals the findings generated through the completion of surveys by principals, members of the board, and NE teachers. The chapter begins by outlining the platform used to complete the survey, those that responded to the survey within the month time frame, and the codes given to particular schools and individuals for identification purposes. The chapter is then broken into cases; firstly narrated case by case, and then at a meta-level to consider the similarities and differences across cases, through the lenses of principals, members of the board, and NE teachers.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

The findings generated from this study lead to an overwhelmingly positive approach to cohort entry. Principals, members of the board, and NE teachers consulted are activists for schools across NZ to implement a cohort entry to school model for NE children transitioning to school. As a collective group, they indicate numerous benefits that cohort entry offers students who enrol in their schools. However, participants do not disregard the challenges this enrolment type has. Participants recognise that the cohort entry process is not straightforward, and there are challenges that arise. The findings are described below in detail. Firstly, at a school level and then at a meta-level, describing the beliefs of cohort entry through the lens of principals, members of the board, and NE teachers.

A qualitative research design approach in the form of a questionnaire was used to explore how principals, board members, and NE teachers use cohort entry in their schools. This research explores the key considerations that guide transitions to schools using a cohort entry approach. Cases, which are based on the five different schools who participated in the research are presented along with data which answers the following research questions:

- 1. In what ways are schools enacting cohort entry and what are the key considerations that guide transition to school practices?*
- 2. What do NE teachers, principals, and board of trustee members see as the value of cohort entry to school?*
- 3. What do NE teachers, principals, and board of trustee members see as the challenges of implementing cohort entry for students starting school?*

4.2 Questionnaire Outline

The questionnaire was administered to participants through an online platform (Qualtrics). This was distributed to five principals, NE teachers and members of the school board from schools across NZ. Of the 15 questionnaires sent there were 14 responses. A member of the board was

the only non-respondent. The questionnaire was structured to gain as much information as possible about the features of the cohort entry process, how cohort entry supports schools, the benefits for both children and schools, and to identify the strengths and limitations of this approach as noted by these key stakeholders.

4.3 Questionnaire Findings

Data was collected through individual questionnaires. These were administered to key stakeholders who indicated their school uses a cohort entry to school approach for children beginning primary school. A description of each school and their cohort entry journey, beliefs, and practices are recorded below. Each school's story is unique and tailored to their school community. The five schools from across the country are a mix of state and state-integrated schools, primary and full-primary, and vary in the length of time cohort entry has been used. To identify each school as a separate case they have been allocated numbers 1-5. Additionally, principals have been allocated the code 'P', NE teachers 'N', and members of the board 'B'. For example; '3P' is the principal from School 3. Due to a recent change in terminology, the term member of the board will replace what was formerly known as the Board of Trustee member.

4.5 School One

School 1 (S1) is a small, state-integrated school in the South Island of NZ. As per the demographic questions asked in the survey, S1 has a roll between 100-250 ākonga and they have implemented a cohort entry enrolment scheme for the past 2-3 years. This school has two intakes per term, one at the beginning of a term, and the second during the mid-point of a term, following the guidelines stipulated by the Ministry of Education (MOE). When asked about the latest ERO report regarding cohort entry to school published in May 2022, only the principal and NE teacher acknowledged they had read this.

Participants were asked to describe a typical transition process for NE children starting school. The principal and NE teacher responded that 'all staff' at S1 support the transition to school policy implemented by the school, while the member of the board believes 'most staff' support it. The transition to school process for S1 is outlined below. Students "complete visits to get

used to the school environment” (B1) before they begin “school in either week 1 or week 6” (B1) of the school term. The first two weeks adopt shorter attendance hours, “week one is from 9-12.30pm” and “week two from 9-2pm or 9-3pm” (1P). Normal hours commence after these two weeks. The NE teacher stated, “this graduation of starting hours ensures all children have processing time upon entry” and “has proven to be remarkably effective (N1).” During this transition to school time, S1 has asked parents to prioritise their child by planning their work schedules around drop-off and pick-up time to ensure their child feels settled at school.

Implementing a cohort entry to school approach for S1 was brought about through a variety of reasons. Firstly, this school was “in a position of no permanent principal in 2021, [their] acting principal, who was ‘loaned’ from another school introduced the idea to [the] school (B1).” The cohort entry approach was then placed into a trial phase before the staff saw the benefits cohort entry had on students. Both the NE teacher and principal identify the benefits this approach has for children who have the ability to start with a group, where children are cared for on a pastoral level. When questioned about the practices that guide their cohort entry to school approach only the principal and NE teacher answered. The principal mentions the “community supporting this approach” (P1) where time is spent with families discussing their child’s entry into S1. This involves conversations to identify if the child has any additional learning requirements, so their entry is supported. Furthermore, this principal outlined that they “allow for movement” (P1) around the cohort entry date to accommodate children. While the NE also recognises the community approach, they acknowledge the work between the “management system and teacher who work very closely together to ease this transition” (N1). Additionally, the NE teacher describes forward planning at least a year in advance for students coming into S1, in particular those with additional needs.

Participants were asked to select from a list the benefits they perceived that both students and the school gained from a cohort entry. From the seven outcomes available for selection, all three participants had observed or experienced three of the benefits. These include; children establishing a support network, students developing a sense of belonging, and children not

feeling isolated as multiple students are transitioning on the same day. Both the NE teacher and member of the board agreed that children are able to continue their learning journey with fewer interruptions as well as outlining that they believe students are more 'ready' due to additional time spent in ECE (Early Childhood Education). The principal, on the other hand, has not observed or experienced these outcomes, rather they believe that the cohort entry to school process allows children to establish links between ECE and primary school due to the continuity of learning. In terms of the benefits the school receives, there were 11 options to choose from. All three participants agreed that the following five outcomes benefit their school; students beginning on the same day, teachers continuing learning without interruptions, establishing friendships, teachers spending time with children, and the family being supported.

Facilitating a smooth transition to school for a child is an important aspect of the cohort entry to school process. Participants were questioned regarding the outcomes of facilitating a smooth transition to school for a child, and all three members of S1 agreed on many areas. These were; ensuring children have the ability to develop friendships easily, children feeling safe, cared for, and nurtured in their learning environment, students being cared for socially and emotionally, developing a love of learning, and students having a support system in place.

Role in School	Staffing	Effective Planning	Classroom Size Management	Knowing Diverse Needs	Enrolment	Managing Waitlists	Resourcing
Member of the board	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful
NE	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful
Principal	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful

Figure 1: How does cohort entry support your school in the following areas?

Figure 1 shows how cohort entry supports school in a range of areas. It was agreed by all three participants that a cohort entry approach beginning formal education is very helpful for areas such as; staffing, effective planning, classroom size management and enrolment. While participants do not agree fully on the remaining three areas there is a consensus between all members that a cohort entry approach is helpful to ensure these areas are managed. This is highlighted by all participants selecting 'helpful' or 'very helpful.'

The participants in this school identified very few negative responses to the cohort entry model. After distributing a survey to their local community to gain feedback on the intended start for NE children, two concerns arose. The first being, parents having "to wait another week for [their] child to start" (P1) and the second being a nostalgic reason, where some parents wanted their "child to start on their birthday...because [they] started school on [their] birthday (N1)." The principal stressed that apart from those two "grumbles" (P1) the approach was viewed in an extremely positive light by their community.

All three participants agreed that they would not revert to an ad-hoc approach, rather they were highly likely to recommend this approach to other schools. The principal of S1 shared their view on cohort entry by stating "we love it!" (P1), while the member of the board agrees, adding "it is an excellent start for children to school and I would recommend it to any school" (B1).

4.6 School Two

School 2 (S2) is a small, rural school in the South Island of NZ. As per the demographic questions asked in the survey, S2 sits in the roll band of 100-250 ākonga and identified that this is their first year of implementing a cohort entry approach. The principal acknowledged that S2 follows the MOE guidelines for schools that have adopted cohort entry with one intake occurring at the beginning of each term and a second at the midpoint (week 6). When asked about the latest ERO report regarding cohort entry to school published in May 2022, only the principal had read this.

For this school, the upcoming cohort is invited into school for “four visits prior to their first day” (P2). These visits vary in duration. “The first two are from 9-11.30am, the third one is from 9-1.30pm and the last one is from 9-3pm” (N2). In addition to children visiting the school, a staff member from S2 was also in contact with the NE child’s preschool. This school arranges for either contact with the child’s early childhood educator or conducts a visit to the child’s preschool. After these visits are completed, the child begins school at school on the scheduled day of the cohort intake.

When asked why this school decided to implement a cohort entry approach to school, answers varied between the principal, the member of the board, and the NE teacher. The principal suggested that with the new initiative of Structured Literacy being used in the junior school it makes it hard for teachers to continue with teaching and learning due to children starting at “random times” (P2). The member of the board believes that S2 have implemented a cohort entry approach to have “groups start at a common time and therefore allow a group to progress at a common time rather than individuals at spasmodic times” (B2). The NE teacher identified the following as reasons why their school implements cohort entry to school. These include specific school visits, Structured Literacy, big buddies, routines, assessment, less disruption, smoother transition, parents establishing relationships, Mihi Whākatau, sharing information with parents, and ECE centres being prepared. Additionally, in supporting the NE teachers' reasons for adopting this type of entry into school, the principal added that the practices that guide their cohort entry to school approach are based on sound research and having clear communication lines with parents and ECE providers.

The cohort entry to school process was seen by S2 participants to have benefits for both children and the school. There was a shared agreement that cohort entry allows children to establish a social network, develop a sense of belonging, and to feel less isolated in the transition process. Both the principal and NE teacher reported that cohort entry to school allows children to continue their learning from ECE to primary due to establishing connections to both. Additionally, both the NE teacher and member of the board agreed that children who

start in a cohort are more ‘ready’ for school due to having extra time in ECE. For the benefits to the school, these were identified across participants as including; students all beginning on a set day, teachers having the ability to continue learning with fewer disruptions, new students having the ability to develop friendships more easily, and teachers having the ability to spend time with new children. The NE teacher and member of the board further identified additional outcomes as being; the family feeling supported and clear guidelines for when children will be entering their formal schooling chapter.

Participants were asked to identify aspects that they believe allow students to have a transition to school that is seamless. For this school, participants agreed on factors which included continuity of learning, the ability to develop friendships, children feeling safe, cared for, and nurtured as well as students being cared for both socially and emotionally. In addition to these aspects, the principal and NE teacher highlighted that a smooth transition to school also supports children to develop a love of education and learning.

Role in School	Staffing	Effective Planning	Classroom Size Management	Knowing Diverse Needs	Enrolment	Managing Waitlists	Resourcing
Member of the board	Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Helpful	Helpful	Helpful
NE	Not Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Not Helpful	Somewhat Helpful
Principal	Somewhat Helpful	Helpful	Helpful	Helpful	Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	

Figure 2: How does cohort entry support your school in the following areas?

Figure 2 shows that cohort entry is seen to support the school in a range of areas. This is highlighted by participants selecting ‘helpful’ or ‘very helpful’ in the following areas; effective planning, classroom size management, knowing diverse needs and enrolment. The outliers

come in the form of the NE teacher selecting that cohort entry does not help with staffing or managing waitlists. Additionally, the principal also highlights that a cohort entry approach is only somewhat helpful in terms of managing staff and waitlists.

The participants of this school did not highlight any areas of concern or issues raised by parents through the implementation of cohort entry into their school and believed that their school community “liked the approach”. The principal stated they have only heard “positive comments” about cohort entry.

Additionally, in line with their school community who have a positive approach to cohort entry, the individuals surveyed indicated they would not revert to an ad-hoc enrolment process. The NE teacher is particularly fond of cohort entry, stating that “I would even like to see us go to one intake a term or even 2 intakes a year but those are big steps” (N2). They follow this up with the statement “I believe the whole NZ education system would benefit from doing this” (N2).

4.7 School Three (NB: The member of the board did not respond for this case).

School 3 (S3) is a small, state-integrated school in the North Island of NZ. As per the demographic questions asked in the survey, S1 sits in the roll band of between 100-250 enrolled ākonga, with one NE classroom. They have implemented a cohort entry enrolment scheme for the past 2-3 years. This school follows the guidelines set out by the MOE for schools that use a cohort entry to school approach, with one intake occurring at the beginning of each term and a second at the midpoint (week 6). Respondents indicated that all staff support and agree with the cohort entry to school policy. When asked about the latest ERO report regarding cohort entry to school published in May 2022, no participants identified they had read this.

Due to being a state-integrated school, the enrolment approach begins with an interview process to ensure they meet the enrolment policy. This is required due to being a school with special character. Once accepted, the transition to school process begins with children being

invited into school for a visit the week prior to entry. For children starting at the beginning of a new term, they are invited in week 10 of the previous term, while those starting at the halfway point are invited in week five. The NE teacher also mentioned that the school seeks to accommodate students who have additional learning needs and/or parents who feel their child needs additional time to transition. Specifically, “children with additional needs get an individual transition plan that includes starting with shorter days or less days a week as required” (N3).

When surveyed about the reasons as to why their school chose to move forward with cohort entry, the principal believed a continuous approach was “burdensome on the junior school teacher to be forever teaching the same thing to different students throughout the year as they joined at irregular intervals upon turning 5” (P3). The principal followed this statement up by reiterating the importance of the cohort the teacher has in front of them in terms of their academic learning, rather than being distracted by students joining in sporadically. Furthermore, this principal explains that using a cohort approach reduces the anxiety levels of children beginning school on their fifth birthday. This is due to “students [having] a social/peer group straight away thereby lessening any social or academic anxiety” (P3). The NE teacher reported that as the school was growing in numbers, they could see that a cohort start would be more beneficial to reduce the disruption of children starting on different days in the week. The NE teacher mentioned the dynamics in the classroom changing as well as effectively “starting again in some areas” (N3) due to additional students joining.

When asked to outline the benefits they have observed or experienced for both children and school through the implementation of a cohort entry to school program both the principal and NE teacher identified a range of positive outcomes for children including; establishing a social network, developing a sense of belonging, feeling less isolated, continuing learning with fewer interruptions, and being able to develop a relationship with their teacher. The principal suggested that the cohort entry approach sees children who are more ‘ready’ for school as they have spent additional time in an ECE centre as well as identifying the fact that children are able

to develop a link between ECE and primary due to the continuity of learning. They also noted benefits to administration workload and staffing requirements.

The participants at this school had similar views on what they viewed as important outcomes in terms of facilitating smooth transitions to school. These included; the continuity of learning from ECE to primary, the ability for children to develop friendships, children feeling safe, cared for, and nurtured in their learning environment, students being cared for socially and emotionally, future educational success, love of education and learning, and students having a support system are integral components of an effective transition for children. Furthermore, providing positive expectations, developing reciprocal relationships, understanding student culture, giving students identity, and engaging them in learning are additional aspects which the principal and NE teacher agree enable a smooth transition to school. The principal explained that a cohort entry to school approach allows for families to “feel more like part of a group and are more likely to engage and participate in school life knowing they have the support of others in a similar situation” (P3).

Role in School	Staffing	Effective Planning	Classroom Size Management	Knowing Diverse Needs	Enrolment	Managing Waitlists	Resourcing
NE	Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful
Principal	Helpful	Helpful	Helpful		Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful

Figure 3: How does cohort entry support your school in the following areas?

Figure 3 shows how cohort entry is seen by participants to support the school in a range of areas. Both agree that cohort entry supports their school in; staffing, effective planning, classroom size management, managing waitlists and resourcing. The major difference between respondents is how cohort entry helps with enrolment. The principal acknowledged that cohort

entry is very helpful towards this process, while the NE teacher only acknowledged this as somewhat helpful.

While cohort entry is seen to have a positive impact at this school, they identify some challenges. The NE teacher highlights three challenges they have noticed. The first being that there is a diverse range of needs all beginning school at once. Secondly, having less time to develop relationships with children. The third reason given is parent related, where parents want their child to start on their fifth birthday (N3). As parents also are key stakeholders in the transition to school process, communication with parents regarding this enrolment type is paramount. This school was asked about their school communities' perception of cohort entry, to which the principal stated, "it has been accepted from the very beginning as the best means of transitioning our students from ECE to primary" (P3).

At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked to state their stance on cohort entry. The NE teacher had a different response to the principal in regard to their stance. The principal has an "exceptionally positive" (P3) outlook towards cohort entry, where the NE teacher understands the benefits, however, feels saddened by the fact "that children do not start on their birthdays and have to wait" (N3). With this being said, they stated that they "truly believe it is beneficial to the class" (N3) and not detrimental as new children begin school. As cohort entry is now a policy at this school, they do not see themselves reverting to an ad-hoc approach and are highly likely to recommend cohort entry to other schools.

4.8 School Four

School 4 (S4) is a small, rural school based in the North Island of NZ. As per the demographic questions asked in the survey, S4 sits in the roll band of 100-250 enrolled ākonga and identified they have implemented a cohort entry enrolment scheme for the past 2-3 years. This school has one NE classroom and follows the cohort entry guidelines set out by the MOE by ensuring they have two intakes per term for prospective NE children. Furthermore, all three respondents indicated that cohort entry is supported by all staff at this school. When asked about the latest

ERO report regarding cohort entry to school published in May 2022, only the principal acknowledged they had read this.

Respondents were asked to describe the typical transition process for children starting at this school. Both the principal and NE teacher described the importance of having visits prior to children starting school. At this school “our NE teacher visits children at their ECE and talks to them, parents and workers of ECE” (P4). In addition to this, “ECE centres bring six-eight children for a visit to school including child/children starting school” (N4). This ensures children starting have a “morning visit and an afternoon visit to school” (N4) before beginning their learning journey at school. To further support children who are transitioning, the principal talked about small class sizes, which helps children who are undergoing this transition. In order for the NE teacher to have a better understanding of the children entering the classroom, parents are asked to fill out a “Your Child Through Your Eyes” form to share with the child’s teacher. Parents are also provided with a starter pack that contains all the relevant information, they are given a QR code to log into SeeSaw where they can view pictures of their child and their learning, messages are sent home at the end of the first week, as well as hosting a whakatau at the beginning of each term to welcome children and their whānau (N4).

When asked to comment on the reasons why this school chose to implement cohort entry all three respondents commented on the support system children have when they begin their formal education. The principal stated, “children get to start with others, so have friends right from the start” (P4), while the NE teacher also mentioned this. The member of the board agreed with the principal and NE teacher by understanding that starting “with a group of peers as opposed to alone” (B4) is a much easier transition process. Both the principal and NE teacher talked about the ease for teachers in being able to plan for the whole group of children starting at one particular time, rather than planning for individual children starting asynchronously. This ultimately creates “less disruption to the class” (B4). The NE teacher mentioned that previously they at times had children beginning three out of five days a week. With a cohort approach

eliminating this disruption and planning for NE visits and children beginning school became a much simpler process (N4).

When questioned about the benefits children receive from a cohort transition only the principal and NE teacher provided a response. Both the principal and NE teacher agreed on the following benefits children receive; a social support network, developing a sense of belonging, not feeling isolated due to having numerous children beginning on the same day, and being able to develop a relationship with their teacher. The principal also believes that children are able to establish links between ECE and primary due to the continuity of learning. Participants were asked to select what benefits their school gained from a cohort entry school process, with agreement across the following seven outcomes; students all beginning school on the same day, being able to continue learning without disruptions, students establishing friendships easily, students not feeling alone in the transition process, family feeling supported, clear guidelines are outlined for when children will begin school, and ensuring there are less interruptions which allow for children to feel settled at school. Both the principal and NE teacher agreed that teachers are able to spend extra time with children. Additionally, both the principal and member of the board acknowledged the administration benefits cohort entry allows for the school, while the NE teacher did not comment on this area.

Schools need to ensure they facilitate a smooth transition for a child as part of the cohort entry to school process. All three participants agreed that children need to feel safe, cared for, and nurtured in their learning environment, have their emotional and social needs addressed, have a support system, and develop a love of learning. Both the principal and NE teacher believed that children having the ability to develop friends easily is necessary for a smooth transition, while the member of the board did not acknowledge this.

Role in School	Staffing	Effective Planning	Classroom Size Management	Knowing Diverse Needs	Enrolment	Managing Waitlists	Resourcing
Member of the board	Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful
NE	Not Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Helpful	Helpful	Helpful	Helpful
Principal	Somewhat Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Somewhat Helpful

Figure 4: How does cohort entry support your school in the following areas?

Figure 4 shows how cohort entry is seen to support the school in a range of areas. It was agreed by all respondents that cohort entry supports effective planning, classroom size management, enrolment, and managing waitlists. The significant difference between members from this school is in relation to staffing and resourcing. The member of the board believes cohort entry helps this process, the principal believes it is somewhat helpful, while the NE teacher states it is not helpful. Similarly, the three participants recorded different answers for how cohort entry supports resourcing in their school.

Participants were asked to comment on the challenges they have faced as a school in implementing cohort entry. Both the principal and member of the board mentioned the same challenge related to parents who wanted their child to begin school on their fifth birthday.

The final question of the survey asked participants to outline their stance on cohort entry to school. This principal believes all schools should implement this approach. They reinforce this further by stating “one of the arguments is that schools are worried parents/children will go to other schools if they move to cohort entry, so if everyone did it, problem solved” (P4).

Additionally, the member of the board and NE teacher support this approach too, where the NE teacher believes that it is “one of the best initiatives implemented in the last 20+ years teaching NE children” (N4).

4.9 School Five

School 5 (S5) is a medium size school located in a city in the North Island of NZ. As per the demographic questions asked in the survey, S1 sits in the roll band of 200-500 enrolled ākonga and has identified they have implemented a cohort entry enrolment scheme for the past 5 years. This school has two NE classrooms for children beginning their formal schooling career and follows the MOE guidelines for schools operating a cohort entry approach, ensuring that it has two intakes per term, one at the beginning and one during the midway point of each term. Furthermore, participants report that cohort entry is supported by staff at this school who agree with the policy implemented. When asked about the latest ERO report regarding cohort entry to school published in May 2022, only the NE teacher acknowledged they had read this.

Participants from this school were asked to describe the typical transition to school process. Initially, when parents are interested in enrolling their child at school, enrolment forms are supplied to whānau. Once accepted, children are invited to attend two school visits. The NE teacher explains that this was altered from three visits to two visits “due to a range of additional things happening which made three visits impractical” (N5). During these visits, children have a tour of the school where they visit their classroom, toilets, playground, and areas which they are required to know about. Additionally, during their second visit, children stay for the morning tea break. The NE teacher explained how they “encourage parents to leave during this break so that their child is more comfortable when they begin school” (N5). To further support children transitioning to school the NE teacher and principal make visits to the local ECE centres to develop relationships with children transitioning.

When questioned about the reasons why this school chose to implement a cohort entry approach to school, all three respondents outlined the same reasons. Firstly, the school highlights the importance of students having a support system when starting school. The

principal mentioned that it is a time “for students to develop relationships with peers” (P5), while the member of the board outlined that students starting with others means they are all “in the same boat on the first day” (B5). Secondly, cohort entry allows for less disruption throughout the academic year. This school acknowledges this by implementing a cohort entry approach; they do not need to ‘reset’ the classroom multiple times a term due to new children arriving sporadically. Additionally, the NE teacher believes that it is easier to transition a group of children at the same time, rather than children individually. This ensures that the “classroom culture and environment is not disrupted” (N5). Thirdly, this school believes that cohort entry has administrative benefits, where office admin staff are able to manage enrolment and entry data.

Participants were asked to identify the benefits they perceive cohort entry has on both the school and the child. The three participants agreed on just one benefit; children not feeling isolated due to a number of children transitioning on the same day. However, both the principal and NE teacher also agreed that children are able to develop a relationship with their teacher more easily during a cohort entry approach. All three participants suggested additional benefits such as establishing a social support network, developing a sense of belonging, and continuity of learning. Participants from this school agreed on a greater number of benefits for the school itself. All three participants explained that this process ensures; students all begin on the same day, students feel that they are not alone in the process, families feel their child is supported, guidelines and routines are established easily, and fewer interruptions occur to allow children to feel settled at school. While all were in agreement with the five statements above the member of the board identified additional areas such as staffing requirements and administration workload. They believe these are managed easily due to a simplified process.

The question ‘what do you view as important outcomes in facilitating a smooth transition to school for a child?’ was posed to respondents where they were invited to select from a range of answers or contribute their own. All three agreed upon four outcomes which enable a smooth transition. These included children feeling safe, cared for, and nurtured in their learning

environment, students being looked after socially and emotionally, developing a love of education and learning, and having a support system. Additionally, both the NE teacher and member of the board agreed that a smooth transition ensures there is continuity of learning from ECE to primary, while the principal and NE teacher believe that children should be able to develop friendships easily as part of a smooth transition to school.

Role in School	Staffing	Effective Planning	Classroom Size Management	Knowing Diverse Needs	Enrolment	Managing Waitlists	Resourcing
Member of the board	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful
NE	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful
Principal	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful

Figure 5: How does cohort entry support your school in the following areas?

Figure 5 shows how cohort entry is seen to support the school in a range of areas. These include staffing, effective planning, classroom size management, and enrolment. In addition, participants report that cohort entry is effective in managing the diverse needs of students, being able to manage waitlists, and sourcing resources. Participants from S5 believe that cohort entry is either helpful or very helpful at managing the seven areas listed above.

Participants were asked to identify any challenges they have faced in their experiences with cohort entry. Both the principal and NE teacher suggested that the high volume of children starting at each entry point and the diverse range of needs children are coming into school with as a challenge. Furthermore, the NE teacher emphasised parents wanting their children to start school on their fifth birthday as a challenge to cohort entry.

Participants were asked to state their stance on cohort entry. The principal supports cohort entry due to the “benefits they have seen for students, school and whānau” and after seeing it in action recognised the advantages children receive from this enrolment scheme.

Furthermore, the member of the board understands that cohort entry is the best option for their school at the moment as it is developing and growing. However, they also understand that the cohort entry approach may not be suitable for all schools. Both the principal and NE teacher are ‘highly likely’ to recommend this enrolment process to other schools, while the member of the board is ‘likely’ to.

4.10 Cross Case Lens

It is evident that the five participating schools share a number of similarities regarding their beliefs about cohort entry to school. While a singular case view offers insight into the unique context of each setting, the research also sought to understand the data through the lens of the three participating stakeholder groups; principals, teachers, and board members. The following section now reports cross case data from the perspective of the three unique stakeholder groups.

4.11 Principals

The principals consulted for this research were from a range of schools across both the North and South Island of NZ who lead either state or state-integrated schools. Principals were seen to be an important stakeholder lens due to their leadership and management roles, their community involvement, and their insight into policy and practice.

A key difference which arose from the data is the length of time a cohort entry approach has been implemented in their school. The principal of S2 is the latest to adopt the approach and began at the start of the year (2022), while P5 has been using cohort entry for the past five years. The other three principals have been using cohort entry for the past two to four years. While the duration differs, all principals follow the MOE guidelines by ensuring there are two intakes per term, one at the beginning of each term and one during the halfway point.

The data suggests that all principals agree that cohort entry gives children the best start to their primary school learning journey. This is evident by all principals commenting on the ease for children who begin their schooling journey with one another. Comments such as “children get to start with others, so have friends right from the start” (P4), “we believe it helps children pastorally” (P1), and “cohort entry allows students to have a social/peer group straight away” (P3) were made by principals. Additionally, there is cohesion between principals regarding the transition to school process, where all five principals have a transition program for children transitioning from ECE to their school. A notable difference, however, is what this program looks like for each school.

Notably, all principals concur that a cohort entry to school approach lends itself to ensuring students and the school benefit in a range of ways. Principals were asked to identify the benefits children gain from beginning school as a cohort. Results show that all five principals agree that cohort entry ensures the well-being of a child, due to children being able to establish a social network, develop a sense of belonging in the classroom, and not feel isolated due to the number of children transitioning on the same day.

Principals also described similar ways in which the school benefits by using cohort entry, these mainly come in the form of administrative benefits. Through a cohort entry enrolment process the majority of principals recognise that there are clear guidelines for when children enter which in turn allows the administration workload to be managed more easily. Also, when children start in a cohort principals mention the ease of giving one set of guidelines and routines to the children and families who are beginning at their school.

Principal of School	Staffing	Effective Planning	Classroom Size Management	Knowing Diverse Needs	Enrolment	Managing Waitlists	Resourcing
P1	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful
P2	Somewhat Helpful	Helpful	Helpful	Helpful	Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	
P3	Helpful	Helpful	Helpful		Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful
P4	Somewhat Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Somewhat Helpful
P5	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful

Figure 6: How does cohort entry support your school in the following areas?

Figure 6 shows there are similar perspectives across the five principals regarding the way cohort entry supports their school in a range of key areas. Although there is not one area where all principals have the same answer, the majority of principals either find the key areas ‘helpful’ or ‘very helpful’. The principal of schools S2 and S4 provide a different lens towards staffing and resourcing, where they both agree that cohort entry is only ‘somewhat helpful’ in organising staffing, and P4 indicates it is again only ‘somewhat helpful’ in terms of resourcing.

While there are a significant number of benefits associated with a cohort entry approach, only three principals acknowledged some minor challenges that they have experienced in their schools. Both P1 and P4 understand that parents may find this approach difficult due to wanting their child to begin on the day of their fifth birthday. In addition to this, P5 understands that having a high number of children beginning school on the same day can pose challenges for their school.

From the data gathered by principals, it is clear that all five understand the benefits of a cohort entry approach. Principals were “exceptionally positive” (P3) regarding the approach and “truly believe every school should initiate cohort entry as it ensures success for the learner” (P4). These comments were supported by all five principals having a mutual agreement that they would be ‘highly likely’ to recommend this enrolment approach to other schools across NZ.

4.12 Board Members

The second group of participants consulted were the members of the board. While there were five schools who were contacted, only four out of five board members submitted their responses in the timeframe provided. The board members were consulted in this research due to their role and responsibility in the governance of schools as well as determining the strategic direction and how the school will operate.

A key similarity between board members was the fact that none of them had read the latest ERO report which provides insights from schools regarding the cohort entry process. While this report does provide details regarding how to implement cohort entry, and the strengths and weaknesses of the enrolment scheme, it also gives clear advice on how to make sure cohort entry is effective for schools, so would be important to the governance space.

There is cohesion between all four board members regarding the reasoning behind implementing cohort entry in their school. Like the principals, they take into consideration the well-being of the child during this transitioning phase where a member of the board states children are all “in the same boat” (B5), and it is “easier [for children to] transition with a group of peers as opposed to alone at a random time and date within the term” (B5).

What is interesting to note regarding the board members' understanding of cohort entry is the practices that guide cohort entry in their school. Only two participants were able to provide details regarding how their school operates this approach. In addition to this, when asked to provide details of the transition to school process, not all members responded. Those who did

respond provided fairly limited responses which referred to the number of visits children had before starting school as well as having contact with the ECE provider where children were transitioning from.

Member of the Board	Staffing	Effective Planning	Classroom Size Management	Knowing Diverse Needs	Enrolment	Managing Waitlists	Resourcing
B1	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful
B2	Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Helpful	Helpful	Helpful
B3							
B4	Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful
B5	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful

Figure 7: How does cohort entry support your school in the following areas?

Figure seven shows that all four members of the board appreciate how cohort entry supports their school in a range of areas other than the children. This can be shown by all members providing the same answer for three of the seven areas mentioned in figure seven. However, while their answers may vary, it is made apparent through the answers provided by these participants that they all agree cohort entry is either ‘very helpful’ or ‘helpful.’ The member of the board from S3 has not provided any answers due to not completing the survey.

There are some differences in the data collected from the board members regarding the challenges faced through the use of a cohort entry enrolment scheme. Out of the four members surveyed, three highlight challenges while the fourth did not recognise any challenges with this type of enrolment. Both B2 and B1 identify parents' expectations as a potential challenge, due to them wanting their child to start school on or close to their fifth birthday.

The data suggests that the board members consulted in this research advocate for a cohort entry approach for children beginning at their school. Although their knowledge of the processes appears limited and the consultation with the latest information regarding cohort entry is negligible, they are able to articulate benefits to both children and school. All four board members are “pro cohort entry” (B5), think it is “excellent for the start to school for children” (B1), “support it” (B4), and have “high advocacy” (B2) for cohort entry.

4.13 NE Teachers

The third and final group consulted in this research were NE teachers. These teachers were included in this research due to working closely with the children and whānau transitioning to school under a cohort entry to school approach. While these teachers work at different schools across NZ, both state and state-integrated of varying sizes there are key similarities between their views around cohort entry.

The data collected shows that the NE teachers consulted have been operating cohort entry in their schools for varying amounts of time. The NE teacher from S2 is in their first year of this enrolment scheme, while the NE teacher from S5 has been using this approach for the longest, with over five years of experience. The other three NE teachers have been using this approach for the past two or three years. In addition to the difference mentioned above, only two of the five NE teachers have consulted ERO’s latest report looking at other schools’ views on cohort entry.

While all schools have a different transition to school program that is tailored to the needs of their community, the NE teachers mentioned similar practices between their programs. A strong connection between ECE and primary school is mentioned by NE teachers, where both NE teachers and principals visit local ECE centres. To continue this relationship all five NE teachers mentioned the school visits children attend before commencing primary school. These vary in length for different schools, S2’s visits get longer in duration until the child completes a full school day. Once the cohort has started, S1 offers shorter days for the children, the first

week children attend school from 9am-12pm, and then this is extended to 3pm on the second week. Finally, regular communication between school and whānau is identified by all five NE teachers via a range of platforms such as SeeSaw used by S1, S4, and S5, messages home, newsletters, and formal introductory assemblies.

In a similar manner to the principals and board members, the NE teachers see the well-being of a child as a vital component during the transition period. This is evident by all five NE teachers agreeing on a range of areas that make sure a child’s well-being is taken care of. These included; children being able to establish a support network easily, develop a sense of belonging in their classroom, form a relationship with their teacher, and feel supported due to other children transitioning on the same day.

NE teacher of School	Staffing	Effective Planning	Classroom Size Management	Knowing Diverse Needs	Enrolment	Managing Waitlists	Resourcing
N1	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful
N2	Not Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Not Helpful	Somewhat Helpful
N3	Helpful	Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful
N4	Not Helpful	Very Helpful	Helpful	Helpful	Helpful	Helpful	Helpful
N5	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful	Very Helpful

Figure 8: How does cohort entry support your school in the following areas?

Figure 8 shows that most of the NE teachers have similar beliefs in regard to cohort entry supporting additional areas in their school. However, it is evident to note that there is not one

area where all teachers record the same answers. The NE teachers from S2 and S4 take a different approach to the remaining NE teachers regarding cohort entry supporting staffing where they believe cohort entry is 'not helpful.' Following on from this, the NE teacher from S2 records a different response from the remaining four teachers, again identifying that cohort entry is 'not helpful' at managing waitlists and only 'somewhat helpful' with resourcing. The other four NE teachers agree that cohort entry is either 'helpful' or 'very helpful' in these respective areas.

As a group, the NE teachers value cohort entry. All five NE teachers agree that they are 'highly likely' to suggest cohort entry to other schools. This is evident through the significant number of benefits identified. The NE teacher from S4 went as far to say it is "one of the best initiatives implemented in the last 20+ years teaching NE children" (N4) and "I would like to see us go to one intake a term or even 2 intakes a year" (N2). In contrast to this the NE teacher from S3 states they feel "slightly saddened that children do not start on their birthdays and have to wait" (N3). However, they go on to further mention that they "truly believe it is beneficial to the class they are going into and not detrimental to themselves in the bigger scheme of things" (N3).

It is evident that all three key stakeholders who contribute to the decisions regarding cohort entry are positive about the impact this approach has on both students and the school. While participants acknowledge that there are challenges involved in this process, overall, the findings affirm it is an excellent way for children to begin their formal schooling journey in NZ.

4.14 Summary of Findings

The findings from the research present similar responses in regard to a cohort entry to school approach, resulting in five key messages. These are as follows;

1. **Cohort entry is an effective approach for entry into school.** The majority of respondents agree that cohort entry is an effective approach for entry into school. This

is shown by 79% (11 participants) stating they strongly agree with the statement while 7 (1 participant) agree and 14% (2 participants) selected 'strongly disagree'.

2. **A cohort entry to school approach is valued by all participants.** All participants agree that there are benefits to children and school that are noteworthy. Although not all participants highlight the same benefits, it is recognised that through this approach a large number of areas are strengthened for children.
3. **A transition to school program is necessary for children beginning formal schooling.** When facilitating the transition to school process or implementing a transition to school program key stakeholders must ensure attention to detail. Participants recognise the importance of a transition to school program and how this ensures the transition process is seamless.
4. **Challenges are present but are limited in a cohort entry to school transition.** While challenges have been identified by participants these are limited to challenges highlighted in research such as; high numbers beginning, diverse learning needs and parents wanting children to begin formal schooling on the day of their 5th birthday.
5. **Engagement with the latest information regarding Cohort Entry to School released by ERO in May 2022 is low.** The report titled "Starting School Together: What do we know?" investigates the strengths, weaknesses and limitations of a cohort entry to school approach. Out of the 14 respondents nine participants (64%) have not read the report, while five (34%) participants have. Out of the five participants, three were principals while the other two were NE teachers. It is noted that no members of the boards have consulted this report.

The following five key messages are discussed in greater detail in answering the research questions as discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This report has investigated the key practices that guide a transition to school approach in schools across NZ as described by key stakeholders. Additionally, it has identified what principals, NE teachers, and members of the board value about cohort entry, as well as highlighting the challenges faced upon implementing a cohort entry enrolment scheme in their schools. This chapter will answer the three research questions posed in Chapter One; 1. In what ways are schools enacting cohort entry and what are the key considerations that guide transition to school practices? 2. What do principals, members of the board, and NE teachers see as the value of cohort entry to school? and 3. What do principals, members of the board, and NE teachers see as the challenges of implementing cohort entry for students starting school? To conclude the chapter, potential strengths and limitations of the study will be discussed in addition to potential areas for future research.

5.2 In what ways are schools enacting cohort entry and what are the key considerations that guide transition to school practices?

Research suggests that a transition to school program is an 'expected' pathway by which children enter formal primary school education (Dockett & Perry, 2021). This pathway is socially constructed by key stakeholders in a school such as the school board's presiding member, principal, and NE teacher. There is consensus within the research literature that transition programs are necessary for setting children up for success (Laverick, 2008) and are an important part of children moving from one educational context to another. All children in NZ transition to school either individually under an ad-hoc approach, or as a group, in a cohort entry approach. Though both transitions into school have similar pathways with children receiving visits and parents being provided details regarding school, research suggests that children transitioning in a cohort experience benefits in relation to social and emotional well-being (Fabian & Dunlop, 2003).

All five schools that participated in this research have an 'expected' pathway for children to enter school. This is in the form of a transition to school program, completed as a cohort. This ensures the cohort are provided with the same dates and times for school visits and meet the teacher opportunities. Although, as described in the findings, the transition program looks different for each school, they share a common purpose of familiarising families and children with their new educational environment (Dockett & Perry, 2004).

One school with a specific requirement begins with an interview process before an enrolment form is completed by the parents, while other schools accept students without an enrolment interview. Once accepted, children will then have a series of scheduled visits, completed with the cohort of children who will begin at the next appropriate intake. As per Ministry of Education guidance, this is either at the beginning of each school term or at the midway point, which is usually around the six-week mark. The number of visits varies between schools, with most schools opting for two to three visits before commencing. As children then begin their primary school education as a cohort some schools offer additional transition measures, such as starting with a shorter school day for children. Individualisation within the cohort model appears to be a key principle. During the transition process schools are open and willing to accommodate as needed, for example through extra visits, longer transition periods, or shorter school days. Additionally, a number of schools in the present study mention the flexibility in their enrolment, ensuring the needs of the child are upheld to ensure their transition is successful for them.

While each school has a unique transition process it is evident that thought has been put into each process to ensure the success of each child transitioning into their school.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory is central to the transition experience of children leaving ECE and beginning formal primary school. The child who is transitioning from an early childhood setting into school is placed at the centre of this widening ecology. Additionally, a range of interconnected systems such as the school, ECE provider, and whānau work together to ensure

the transition is successful (Yim, 2018). This is a fundamental aspect of any transition, be it individually or as a group.

All five schools in the present study ensure children have opportunities to attend their new school on multiple occasions before starting. While this is also similar to that of children transitioning individually, under a cohort entry approach there are opportunities for children to develop relationships with other children who are also beginning school in the new cohort, giving children the chance to form friendships and connections prior to school commencing (Fabian & Dunlop, 2003; Ladd, 1990; Margetts, 2002). The participants of this research reiterate the importance of children developing friendships for a successful transition into school. Peter's (2004) study titled 'Crossing the Border' recognises that children who are undergoing the same circumstance (such as the transition process) on the same day can work together to support one another through unfamiliar and/or challenging situations (Peters, 2004). In addition, Ledger et al. (2000) identifies the benefits a strong support network can have on children, recognising that stress and anxiety can be alleviated by the relationships and friendships secured on or prior to the day of transition. These benefits, while positive for children, must also be considered in recognising those children who struggle in larger group situations and find a process such as cohort entry overwhelming.

To further support the cohort enrolment process, participants from this research make mention of the importance of open communication with parents, whereby all parents are provided with the same information at information evenings, via online communication platforms or welcome assemblies. This can be described as the 'incorporation' phase of the transition (Genep, 1960), recognising that children and their whānau are navigating unfamiliar territory, establishing their roles and identity, and building relationships in their new environment. This aspect of transition does not happen overnight, but rather takes time and intentional support. Within a cohort system, it is not only children who are provided a support network, as parents too can find their support network with other parents who may have similar feelings, questions, and worries. Additionally, many of the schools that participated in this survey also foster communication

with the ECE centres children come from. This open communication in a child's mesosystem and sharing of important information also allows for children to have a smooth transition to school (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), through having stronger interconnection and individualized knowledge for targeted support.

The transition to primary school is a singular event for a child and will only happen once in their lifetime. It is noted that these transitions can have a lasting effect on the child (Dockett & Perry, 2001) whether done individually or as a cohort. Participants from this research suggest that children who have transitioned to school in a cohort have reduced anxiety levels compared to those children who have transitioned individually. This is due to children having the ability to establish a support network with their peers and teachers. To add to this, Fabian and Dunlop (2003) recognise that a transition to school program should also not solely focus on the social and emotional development of a child, but, incorporate their cognitive development too.

While transition programs tend to focus on the child's experience of transitioning from one setting to another, it is also just as important to incorporate the whānau in this process (Margetts, 1999), and to understand their experiences too. While the transition process may be successful for one child and their whānau, it may look completely different from another. This could be due to a range of reasons such as personal characteristics, family background, and life experiences (Margetts, 1999). To mitigate such influences, schools must ensure their transition to school program is flexible to meet the needs of the children. Findings from this research suggest that the child and their family's needs can be effectively supported and catered for within a cohort entry approach. For example, several of the schools that participated in this research mention opportunities for parents to meet other parents prior to school commencing through school visits. Furthermore, the whānau is welcomed into the school through such measures as a parent morning tea put on by the Parent Council, or a whole school whakatau conducted to formally transition and welcome children and whānau into school.

In summary, it is clear that schools are committed to transition models that support the well-being and sense of belonging, of both the child and family. There is a focus on understanding the child within the wider ecological context and supporting a positive sense of interconnectedness. It is evident that the establishment of positive relationships and familiarisation sit at the heart of a cohort model, as well as a commitment to respond to the individual needs of students as needed within the wider organisational context.

5.3 What do principals, members of the board and NE teachers see as the value of cohort entry to school?”

The findings affirm that despite their different roles within the school, each of the participant groups valued a cohort entry to school enrolment scheme. The principals, members of the board, and NE teachers expressed a shared understanding of the benefits this approach has for children, their whānau, and the school. While starting school is acknowledged as a significant occasion for children, research suggests it can also have a lasting effect on their outlook toward education and educational trajectory (Giallo et al., 2008; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Within a cohort entry model participants acknowledge a range of factors that ensure this approach puts the child at the centre, where their emotional and social needs are catered for, ensuring their learning journey is acknowledged and built upon, as well as providing an environment that supports children as they move into their next phase of education.

A cohort entry approach suggests that schools are ‘ready’ for children who are beginning their formal educational journey due to having clear guidelines for the transition process. While traditional perspectives of transition typically prioritise school readiness in relation to the child, more contemporary perspectives reorient to affirm that it is just as much about the school itself being ready (Dockett et al., 1999). Participants acknowledge a significant benefit of the cohort entry approach is having clear guidelines of when children will begin school, therefore, allowing their school to be ready. It is important to critique what this view of readiness entails as educators have divergent views and beliefs on this topic. Participants in this research acknowledge that cohort entry provides administrative benefits for their schools allowing those

in administrative roles to manage enrolments and waitlists. In evaluating the effectiveness of cohort entry, it must be argued whether administrative ease is of itself a valid rationale or are there wider considerations.

Research conducted in the field of 'ready schools' is limited; however, Dockett & Perry (2001) acknowledge that a school that is deemed 'ready' amends their approaches and practices to allow for a smooth transition for its students. While this can be completed in numerous ways such as having meet-the-teacher opportunities, school tours, transition days for children, and a sharing of expectations and guidelines, these offer organisational benefits for the school. Holding such events for parents and students (usually at the same time) allows for key information to be distributed simultaneously, where all parents receive the same information. This results in fewer meetings for those involved in the transition to school process, notably the NE teacher and Principal. While some may argue completing these events are a sign of a 'ready school' it can also be argued that this shows schools are simply administratively and organisationally ready, rather than ready for the individual students who will be beginning their educational journey. Bernstein et al. (2019) acknowledge ready schools consist of three key factors; personalised support for children, adequate professional development, and systems that allow for adaptability and flexibility. When schools understand the needs of the students coming through their doors, intentionally provide the support the children require, and are willing to adapt and amend their programs to meet the needs of these children, then they can be deemed a ready school. A number of schools in this research acknowledge that they have flexible transitions for those children who may need extra support or time during their transition. This highlights they understand the need to be flexible and adapt their procedures to meet the client of their school.

While this study did not have a focus on culturally responsive practice in relation to cohort entry, it is a key component of the transition practice. In NZ, both the NZC and Te Whāriki are committed to developing competent and confident learners who are positive in their own identity and secure in their sense of belonging (Ministry of Education, 2007; Ministry of

Education, 2017). Furthermore, putting into action te tiriti o Waitangi as stipulated in the Education and Training Act (Education and Training Act, 2020) ensures equitable outcomes are reached for Māori, and importantly all immigrants to NZ, who are welcomed through the context of partnership (Te Tiriti o Waitangi, 1840) Whānau Tangata, a Māori concept based on the importance of family and community is central to the transition to school process as it is a collective process between students, parents, and teachers to ensure transitions meet the needs of individuals. While some schools in this study welcome families with a mihi whākatau, not all families may feel included, welcomed, and valued by this process. Furthermore, Māori and Pasifika families may hold different values and beliefs regarding education, therefore having different viewpoints on the cohort entry to school approach. This area is a significant area for future research in NZ.

In addition to schools being ready, teachers are able to be ready for children transitioning under a cohort entry scheme. All participants value children beginning their formal schooling on the same day and recognise this as a significant benefit of cohort entry. When children begin school together teachers are able to more effectively plan for the influx of new children. Additionally, teachers have sufficient time to ensure they are able to cater to the increasingly diverse range of needs that are present in NZ classrooms today (Petriwskyj, 2013). This is different to an ad hoc approach as NE teachers could have children starting multiple times a week throughout the year. Although participants of this study recognise parents like an ad-hoc approach due to children starting soon after their fifth birthday, teachers believe it disrupts the flow of learning and halts the continuity of learning.

Participants in this study value the continuity of learning for children from one educational setting to another. The NZ Curriculum comments on both school and teacher's commitment to ensuring children's learning is enhanced. It states in the NZC that schools should aim to "build on the learning experiences [a] child brings with them" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.41). Not all children attend ECE services, however, wherever they come from they will bring with them a myriad of prior content knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, Dockett and Perry's

(2004) research regarding children transitioning from early childhood to primary school focuses on the continuity of learning from one setting to another (Dockett & Perry, 2004). Participants appreciate that starting school is a learning journey (Peters, 2010) and should encourage students to exhibit the knowledge, skills, and capabilities which they bring with them from their early childhood education (Peters, 2010).

Participants recognise that enrolling children under a cohort entry scheme allows the transition to school process to become a community approach. This sees strong communication with parents and the school regarding the transition, where all stakeholders in the transition process feel involved, heard, and valued. This is in line with research that recognises the transition to school is much more than a child moving from one educational context to another, rather, the parents of the child also undergo the transition (Glicksman et al., 1981), and therefore collaboration and partnership should be central to the process.

While the findings affirm that principals, members of the board, and NE teachers value a cohort entry approach, parents may not necessarily prefer or value cohort entry in the same way. It might be anticipated that the administrative and organizational elements may not be as valued by parents, who will be more focused on the experience for their child and family. Societal expectations around school entry may be a key factor. Parents and grandparents have grown up in a society where children begin school on their fifth birthday, and there can be a lot of expectations attached to the birthday itself. As a cohort entry approach to beginning school is a shift from a deep-rooted societal norm, parents may have a significant concern about children missing out on formal learning time (Ministry of Education, 2022), or about navigating the expectation that fifth birthday equals starting school. Whilst both educators and parents have valid reasons as to which approach they prefer, there will not be a one-size-fits-all model for children transitioning from early childhood education to primary school.

5.4 What do principals, members of the board and NE teachers see as the challenges of implementing cohort entry for students starting school?”

For the most part, cohort entry is portrayed in literature in a positive light, with researchers identifying multiple benefits directly related to this enrolment approach (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Fabian & Dunlop, 2003; Margetts, 2007). Yet, while there is data that suggests this approach is effective for children, it is important to note that there are challenges that schools may face. The 2022 Education Review Office report titled “Starting School: What do we know?” (Education Review Office, 2022) makes mention of some challenges schools across NZ have encountered while implementing cohort entry (Education Review Office, 2022) which are also highlighted in this research. These include; parents wanting children to start school as soon as possible, transitioning a large number of children on the same day creating a potential for numerous learning needs to begin at once, the flow of children in and out of ECE services being interrupted, and losing children to other schools due to offering an ad-hoc approach (Education Review Office, 2022).

Parents have a valid reason in their argument regarding children beginning school on or close to their fifth birthday. Research suggests that there is no doubt that starting school on your fifth birthday creates a more individualised and personal event for the child (Neuman, 2002). It is impossible to generalise this about the whole of NZ. This is due to schools that are located in more populated areas may have several children begin on the same day, therefore taking away that individualised and personalised element. In addition to this, there is an element of continuous transition, where in some schools as numbers grow, older children may be required to move into a new classroom which sees children undergo two transitions in their first year of formal schooling (Peters, 2010). On the other hand, in smaller, rural schools across NZ with children starting less frequently and a lower number of NE children, this may not happen as teachers have more time to provide the necessary support for children transitioning.

As education systems are embedded in society (Ramaley, 2013) this can cause implications for those outside of education who have divergent viewpoints relating to the running of schools. Specifically, the expectations a school holds can be different to the expectations held by

members of the school community. This is due to members having preconceived ideas of education based on their own personal lived experiences (Hanly et al., 2019). While this research did not take on board the views of the wider school community in relation to children transitioning to school under a cohort setting, it is made apparent through the responses collected that community members may have alternative views to the principals, board members, and NE teachers surveyed.

Cohort entry is a relatively new process to education in NZ. The MOE amended the Education and Training Act in 2017 which allowed schools to enforce eight entry points a year for children to begin their schooling (Education Review Office, 2022). As this concept is only in its sixth year of operation in NZ, parents who started their schooling in NZ would have begun their schooling career at the age of five under an ad-hoc approach. The biggest challenge faced by the principals, board members, and NE teachers consulted related directly to parents wanting their child to begin school on or close to their fifth birthday. This aligns with ERO's 2022 report, which also found parental views as a challenge during the implementation phase of cohort entry (Education Review Office, 2022). The ERO report further highlights that parents viewed cohort entry in a negative light due to their child missing out on valuable learning opportunities as they were required to wait for the next cohort to begin (Education Review Office, 2022). Parental views should not be disregarded due to having undergone the transition process themselves. Parents will have their own independent views towards what the best approach is for their child transitioning from one education setting to another.

While parents may regard cohort entry as a disadvantage, the literature suggests that a delay in primary school education may be beneficial for some children (Hanly et al., 2019). Although Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) and the NZC (Ministry of Education, 2007) differ in terms of content, there are commonalities between the two. These similarities enable teachers to design educational programs which extend children in their learning and tailor learning experiences to their individual needs (Boyle & Grieshaber, 2017). Furthermore, both curriculums have a vision whereby they aspire for children to be "competent and confident

learners” (Ministry of Education, 2017) as well as “confident, connected and actively involved lifelong learners” (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Finally, a delay into primary school suggests that children who begin after their designated entry point have better cognitive and behavioural abilities compared to that of their peers (Hanly et al., 2019). Whilst this research did not focus on children with a delayed start into school due to cohort entry, the results emphasise that children who have a longer period of time in early childhood centres have noteworthy benefits. However, a delay into primary school may not be beneficial for all children due to the developmental pathways differing from child to child.

While the voices of parents and children are not heard in this research the views of principals, board members, and NE teachers do offer valuable insights. However, further research would provide a clearer picture of how this process is viewed by all key stakeholders who have a significant role in the transition of children from an early childhood education setting to primary school.

5.5 The Assumed Benefits

This research was designed to gauge the perceptions of principals, members of the board, and NE teachers about cohort entry to school. It is evident that these key stakeholders value cohort entry, acknowledge the benefits, and believe it is an effective way for children to transition into school. However, it does leave a stone unturned. How do participants come to these conclusions? What is the evidence that supports that this approach is more effective? How do these participants actually determine the effectiveness of a transition to school?

Among participants, there appears to be a number of shared assumptions made regarding cohort entry. Firstly, participants believe that cohort entry allows children to develop social skills, build friendships, and form relationships with one another. When analysing the data, most schools in this research offer two opportunities for children beginning in the cohort to visit their new educational environment. The schools do not stipulate the average number of

children visiting at these times, but they do acknowledge that children develop friendships through these opportunities. This shared understanding of friendship building under a cohort entry is seen as a benefit by those involved in the process, but, on the other hand, this may not be the reality. Children playing with one another, working together in the classroom, or sitting next to each other during lunchtime does not always constitute a friendship. Margetts (2007) research found that children entering school with a playmate, acquaintance, or peer will have better social skills compared to that of a child starting without. This can occur for children who have developed a friendship with a child prior to transitioning to school under a cohort approach, however, the research does not offer any insight into the ability of friendship-making prior to beginning school. Additionally, children at the age of five are learning the art of friendship-making skills, therefore, it becomes increasingly hard to measure the social skills children have obtained as well as the friendships and relationships they have formed with their peers during cohort entry.

Secondly, a number of participants shared a belief that children who start under a cohort entry enrolment approach are more 'ready' for school due to spending some additional time in an ECE provider or an additional early childhood service. What is key to note is that all schools in this study follow the MOE guidelines for cohort entry in NZ; that is, an intake on the first day of each school term and one intake during the halfway point of a term. When following these guidelines there is only a five-week gap between children starting in the first intake and children beginning in the second. While cohort entry can delay children starting at school, this is not always the case for children due to potentially having their birthday a few days prior to the new cohort starting. Therefore, some children who begin school under a cohort entry approach do not get the 'extra time' in ECE centres to become more 'ready' for starting school. Rather, these children begin school close to their fifth birthday, following an ad-hoc like approach. While readiness is a key theme in transition to school literature, the ability to measure one's readiness is increasingly complex. The physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language, cognitive development, communication skills, and general knowledge, which are deemed key attributes of readiness, (Bates, 2019; KoçAK & Incekara,

2020; Lumaauridlo et al., 2021; Öngören, 2021; Shallwani, 2009) for one child who is 'ready' for school can be different from another child who is also considered 'ready.'

Finally, children who transition to school under a cohort entry scheme are no different from the children who transition to school under an ad-hoc entry scheme. All children are unique individuals, which come with a predetermined set of beliefs, values, strengths, and weaknesses that stem from their upbringing. Children are receptive to what occurs in their surroundings; therefore, individuals grow, change, and adapt differently depending on their environment (Webb et al., 2017). As the world becomes incredibly diverse, the microsystems which have the largest effect on children, differ from child to child. The environment in which one child begins school may be conducive to their development while being unconducive for another (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). When likening this to the cohort entry to school process, the benefits one child may gain such as the ability to adapt and change to suit the new surroundings of their learning environment may not occur for another child in the same cohort.

Data gathered is in line with ERO's findings regarding the administrative and managerial benefits schools gain from a cohort entry to school approach. Those who work to enrol students under a cohort entry approach can plan for appropriate transition to school events, prepare welcome to school packs, schedule meet the teacher events, and hold school visits at a common time. Participants in this study value the administrative benefits cohort entry has to offer and can arrange for events described above to happen throughout their individualised transition to school program. Moreover, the aim of the study sought to gather the beliefs of principals, members of the board, and NE teachers' perceptions of cohort entry, the benefits and challenges they faced. The data collected from these participants is in favour of cohort entry due to the numerous positive outcomes described throughout the study. However, it is important to consider the assumptions that may underpin such beliefs and be willing to critique what this may mean in actuality for children and families.

5.6 Strengths

This research offers valuable insight into understanding the process by which children begin formal education in NZ. It has shown that schools that have already adopted the cohort entry enrolment scheme have the support of the staff and wider school community. Furthermore, the participating schools understand that while there are several strengths to cohort entry, they are also well aware of the challenges that can be faced while moving from an ad hoc to a cohort approach.

Another strength of this research was the administrative ease of using a survey approach to gather data. Due to a geographical difference between the researcher and participants, the online survey platform Qualtrics made reaching participants simple by sending a link for participants to access. In addition, Qualtrics software enables a broad range of data to be collected through a multitude of question types (open, closed, multichoice, text-entry, or matrix table) in a timely and cost-effective manner. A further strength was the number of respondents who replied within the timeframe was significantly high, with 14 out of the possible 15 respondents completing the survey.

An additional strength of this research was the ability to capture the perspectives of principals, members of the board, and NE teachers' perspectives in relation to a cohort entry approach. Through a case study approach, data was analysed in two different ways. Firstly, each of the five schools became its own unique case by combining the principal, member of the board, and NE teacher responses. This ensured an understanding of how each school implemented cohort entry and what was significant in their process. Secondly, the principals, members of the board, and NE teachers were categorised by their roles and created further cases. Doing this allowed for the similarities and differences between participants in similar roles to be analysed. Overall, the use of case studies led to five key messages which allowed for the research questions to be answered successfully.

Furthermore, qualitative research focuses on revealing participants' beliefs, thoughts, and opinions regarding a phenomenon. In this study, the qualitative aspect ensured principals, members of the board, and NE teachers from five schools across NZ had their perspectives and understanding of cohort entry described in detail. The ability to compare the differences and similarities between these five schools and present a descriptive story regarding cohort entry was a strength of the study. Additionally, securing five schools from around NZ both state and state-integrated, who have been operating cohort entry for varied lengths of time was a strength of this research.

5.7 Limitations

Due to the small nature of this study, only five schools across NZ were chosen to participate in this research which is a limitation. A larger number of cases would have added to the findings regarding cohort entry and may have encapsulated a more diverse range of schools across NZ. While there was no need to contact additional schools due to the constraints of a master's thesis, additional schools that use the cohort entry approach would have provided richer data for analysis.

A limitation of this research was around the validity of the data. This is due to having survey questions with answers such as "somewhat agree" or "somewhat disagree." For the researcher and the respondents, the value assigned to each anchor point could be interpreted differently. To support the validity of the data generated through the questionnaires the process of member checking would have ensured the credibility of this study was enhanced. Doing this would have guaranteed there were no misinterpretations and that the data collected and analysed was an accurate representation of the participants' beliefs (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). To further support this study and to triangulate the data, an additional mode of data collection such as interviews could be used. While both the use of a survey and an interview approach would have strengthened the findings and confirmed data, again, this was not within the scope of a master's level thesis.

5.8 Future Research

The present study focused on principals, members of the Board, and NE teachers' beliefs around the cohort entry enrolment process. This research, in conjunction with aspects of ERO's recent report, highlights the important benefits that cohort entry has for children as well as schools. This research looks at how cohort entry is administered, what is valued by schools that already operate this approach, and the challenges faced. The scope of this research did not allow for parental perspectives of cohort entry or the transition process. Parents play a significant role in the transition to school of their child as they too undergo a transition. For many parents, the societal norm of starting school on the day of your fifth birthday has been a long-standing tradition. While educators see the benefit of children beginning with others, parents may have differing views. Gaining parental perspectives is an area for further research. Additionally, gaining the voices of children is an additional area of research. For children, the transition to school is a significant milestone in their educational career. They will only have their first day of school once. While they will be unable to compare the difference between an ad-hoc approach to cohort entry, children will be able to articulate their feelings towards their transition to school under a cohort approach. Gathering both parent's and children's attitudes, feelings, and beliefs toward cohort entry will allow for a better understanding of cohort entry.

There is no doubt that ensuring cultural practices are upheld when transitioning children to school helps to foster a sense of belonging and identity in their new educational environment. However, there are gaps in the literature about how cohort entry supports the differing cultural beliefs and practices of children present in classrooms throughout NZ which leads to another area of future research.

5.9 Conclusion

Together or apart? While those who contributed to this study believe children starting together is beneficial for social, emotional, and behavioural reasons, a key group of stakeholders in the transition to school process were not consulted. The question for parents still stands – together or apart? Parents have a significant role in the transition to school process for their children, therefore need to have their voices heard. This study was not aimed at identifying whether

cohort entry was better than ad hoc, rather, the aim was to gather the perspectives of key stakeholders. These perspectives and beliefs may influence other schools that are looking to change their enrolment process for children transitioning from early childhood to school.

Research highlights the importance of the transition to school for children. Given the importance of these transitions, the participating schools recognise that children beginning in a cohort eases these transitions. A significant aspect is the ability for children to develop friendships and relationships quickly while not feeling isolated. In addition, findings suggest that cohort entry is recognised for administrative benefits. Schools are aware of when children are starting so are able to plan accordingly with only two entry points per term. While those who have chosen to use a cohort entry enrolment scheme acknowledge the benefits which staff and students gain from the approach, challenges were faced along the way. For decades, parents and grandparents have started school on or close to their fifth birthday, therefore changing the narrative of starting school in NZ will not happen overnight. Providing school leaders with the knowledge and research around cohort entry, allowing time for discussion with school communities, and ensuring parents and children are aware of the benefits and challenges of cohort entry may ensure the transition from an ad-hoc to a cohort approach is smooth. However, it must be acknowledged that each school is unique. The needs of their school, students, and community must be put first, therefore, cohort entry may work for one school and not work for another.

As this research journey comes to an end, I am already looking forward to what lies ahead. When I circle back to where this all began, a small, catholic primary school in the South Island of New Zealand gave me the chance to begin my Masters. The school board supported my decision to take a year's leave from the classroom to further my education and grow myself as a professional. While on leave, I spent many days at this school relieving, talking to the principal, and staff about my topic of choice, providing them with information I had found and what my perspective on the matter was. In the middle of writing this research journey, I decided to leave the shores of NZ to continue to grow myself personally and professionally. This

meant the conversations with colleagues in NZ stopped. However, now working internationally, new conversations sparked. Interestingly enough, not many staff knew that NZ operated an ad-hoc model for children starting school. Again, these conversations were significant in the shaping of this thesis, as I was able to understand how children in other countries began their formal schooling journey. The countless conversations with colleagues and friends in education have challenged my thinking but also allowed me to share my new understanding and knowledge with others. While there is still so much research to be done in the realm of cohort entry, I believe this journey has been significant in solidifying my personal beliefs regarding children starting school. The learning, new knowledge, and understanding I have gained from this process will ensure I am able to contribute to education in NZ. While I am still pursuing my educational career internationally, I hope to come back to NZ and share what I have learned on this journey with others, in the hope of seeing more and more schools move toward a cohort entry approach. A colleague recently shared a statement that resonated with me, “when you know better, you do better.” I now understand the benefits of transitioning children to school under a cohort entry, so when I get the opportunity to do so, I will do better.

It is with much excitement that I can say three years after it all began, the school that allowed me to pursue this chapter has opted to begin a cohort model for their NE children starting in 2024.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Email to Principals

Firstly, I would like to thank you for your willingness to participate in my thesis. Without your support I would not be able to complete my study, so thank you.

Your school falls into a unique category in Aotearoa, with only 7% of schools throughout New Zealand operating a cohort approach.

I come from a teaching background that has no experience at a school with cohort entry, however, I have a great interest in this process as I believe there are a multitude of benefits this approach offers.

As the school principal, my letter asks for you to be in contact with a BOT member and your NE teacher to participate in this study. Once contacted, could you please CC them on this chain so I can forward them an additional letter providing them with the necessary information.

Your commitment requires 20-25 minutes of your time to a short questionnaire based on cohort entry to school. All information is anonymous, and no identifying factors will be included in my thesis.

If you have any questions or concerns, please let me know. I will try to make this process as simple as possible. Due to living out of New Zealand, my response timing may be delayed due to work commitments and time differences.

Please reply to this email confirming your willingness to participate and confirming the names and emails of the two additional members from your kura/school who are also willing to support this study.

I appreciate your time and look forward to being in contact with you shortly.

Kind regards,

Kate

Appendix B: Email to Members of the Board and New Entrant Teachers

Thank you for participating in my thesis. Please find attached my formal letter with additional Information.

Your school falls into a unique category in Aotearoa, with only 7% of schools throughout New Zealand operating a cohort approach.

I come from a teaching background that has no experience at a school with cohort entry, however, I have a great interest in this process as I believe there are a multitude of benefits this approach offers.

Your commitment requires 20-25 minutes of your time to complete a short questionnaire based on cohort entry to school. All information is anonymous, and no identifying factors will be included in my thesis.

If you have any questions or concerns, please let me know. I will try to make this process as simple as possible. Due to living out of New Zealand, my response timing may be delayed due to work commitments and time differences.

Please reply to this email confirming your willingness to participate.

Kind regards,

Kate

Appendix C: Principal Letter



Kia Ora,

My name is Kate Bamford, and I am currently completing my Masters of Education through Massey University. I am working closely alongside my supervisors Dr. Karyn Aspden and Philippa Isom throughout this process.

My research study aims to examine the strengths and weaknesses of a cohort entry to school approach, looking at the effects cohort entry has on kura, students, and whānau, as well as the implementation process.

In Aotearoa, only 7% of kura across the country operate a cohort entry to school approach. As your school is unique and falls into this category, I am asking if a New Entrant staff member, a BOT representative, and you, as the school principal will be willing to participate in this study, which will provide invaluable information for my research.

The data collection method will be through a questionnaire where individuals can express their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs around the cohort entry to school approach. This questionnaire will take approximately 25 minutes. The data collected from this questionnaire will be used for my written report. As the school principal, I ask that you consult the members of your school who fall into these two categories to seek their approval.

As per the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching, and Evaluations Involving Human Participants, all information collected will be anonymous and no identifying information will be collected, including pseudonyms for participants and school names. A duty of care is imposed to ensure confidentiality occurs, where participants are free to express their feelings regarding cohort entry to school. Finally, this research will help serve the wider education community to give insight into the rationale and experiences of cohort entry.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, the completion of the questionnaire provides consent for the information you have provided to be used throughout the written report.

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher, please contact Professor Craig Johnson, Director (Research Ethics), email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

If you have any questions about the study at any stage, you may contact me directly at the following contact details.

Researcher: Kate Bamford
[REDACTED]

Alternatively, you may contact my supervisors at the following contact details.

Research Supervisors

Karyn Aspden – k.m.aspden@massey.ac.nz

Philippa Isom – p.isom@massey.ac.nz

Thank you for your support.

Kate Bamford

Appendix D: Member of the Board and New Entrant Teacher Letter



Kia Ora,

My name is Kate Bamford, and I am currently completing my Masters of Education through Massey University. I am working closely alongside my supervisors Dr. Karyn Aspden and Philippa Isom throughout this process.

My research study aims to examine the strengths and weaknesses of a cohort entry to school approach, looking at the effects cohort entry has on kura, students, and whānau, as well as the implementation process.

In Aotearoa, only 7% of kura across the country operate a cohort entry to school approach. As your school is unique and falls into this category, I am asking if a New Entrant staff member, a BOT representative, and you, as the school principal will be willing to participate in this study, which will provide invaluable information for my research.

The data collection method will be through a questionnaire where individuals can express their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs around the cohort entry to school approach. This questionnaire will take approximately 25 minutes. The data collected from this questionnaire will be used for my written report. As the school principal, I ask that you consult the members of your school who fall into these two categories to seek their approval.

As per the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching, and Evaluations Involving Human Participants, all information collected will be anonymous and no identifying information will be collected, including pseudonyms for participants and school names. A duty of care is imposed to ensure confidentiality occurs, where participants are free to express their feelings regarding cohort entry to school. Finally, this research will help serve the wider education community to give insight into the rationale and experiences of cohort entry.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, the completion of the questionnaire provides consent for the information you have provided to be used throughout the written report.

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If you have any questions about the study at any stage, you may contact me directly at the following contact details.

Researcher: Kate Bamford
[REDACTED]

Alternatively, you may contact my supervisors at the following contact details.

Research Supervisors

Karyn Aspden – k.m.aspden@massey.ac.nz

Philippa Isom – p.isom@massey.ac.nz

Thank you for your support.

Kate Bamford

Institute of Education
Private Bag 11222, Palmerston North 4442, New Zealand
06 3589099 | massey.ac.nz

Cohort Entry to School - Principals, BOT members, NE Teachers

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q1 Please describe your role in your kura/school

- Principal (1)
- New Entrant Teacher (2)
- Board of Trustees Member (3)

Q2 What type of school are you?

- State-integrated School (1)
- State School (2)
- Private School (3)

Q3 Where is your kura/school located?

- Rural North Island (1)

Rural South Island (2)

City North Island (3)

City South Island (4)

Q4 What is the size of your kura/school?

Small (100-250 children) (1)

Medium (250-500 children) (2)

Large (500+ children) (3)

Q5 How many New Entrant classes do you have at your kura/school?

1 (1)

2 (2)

3 (3)

4+ (4)

Q6 How long has your kura/school been running a cohort entry to school approach?

0-1 Year (1)

2-3 Years (2)

4-5 Years (3)

6 Years + (4) _____

Q7 Does your kura/school follow the cohort entry dates stipulated by the Ministry of Education?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Unsure (3)

Q8 How many intakes does your kura/school have a term?

1 (1)

2 (2)

Other (3) _____

Q9 Does cohort entry have an effect on your kura/school funding?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Unsure (3)

Q10 How do you perceive cohort entry to be supported by **staff** in your kura/school?

All staff agree and support the policy (1)

Most staff support the policy (2)

A few staff support the policy (3)

No staff support the policy (4)

Q11 Have you read ERO's 2022 report titled "Starting School Together: What do we know?"

No (1)

Yes (2)

Q12 Please describe a child's typical transition to school process at your kura/school.

Q13 Can you tell me some of the reasons why your kura/school chose to implement a cohort entry to school approach?

Q14 What are the practices that guide cohort entry to school in your kura/school?

Q15 Please indicate your agreement/disagreement with the following statement: cohort entry is an effective approach for entry to kura/school.

Strongly disagree (1)

Disagree (2)

Neither agree nor disagree (3)

Agree (4)

Strongly agree (5)

Q16 How does cohort entry support your kura/school in the following areas?

	Not helpful (1)	Somewhat helpful (2)	Helpful (3)	Very helpful (4)
Staffing (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Effective planning (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Classroom size management (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Knowing the diverse needs of students (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Enrolment (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Resourcing (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Managing waiting lists (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break

Q17 In your observations/experience what do you see as the benefits **children** gain from cohort entry to school?

- Children can establish a social support network quickly (1)
- Children are able to develop a sense of belonging in the classroom easily (2)
- Children do not feel isolated due to a number of children transitioning on the same day (3)
- Children can continue their learning journey with few interruptions (4)
- Children can develop a relationship with their teacher easily (5)
- Children can establish links between ECE and primary school due to a continuity of learning (6)
- Children are more 'ready' due to having some additional time in ECE (7)
- Other (8) _____

Q18 In your observations/experience what do you see as the benefits your **kura/school** gains from cohort entry to school?

- Students all begin school on the same day (1)
- Teachers are able to continue with learning without interruptions (2)
- New students are able to establish friendships easily (3)
- Students feel they are not alone in the transitioning process (4)
- Teachers are able to spend time with new children (5)
- Family feel their child is supported by starting with other children (6)
- There are clear guidelines of when new children will be entering school (7)
- Administration work load is managed by having all children begin together (8)
- Staffing requirements are managed easily (9)
- Setting guidelines and routines is established easily (10)
- Less interruptions allow for children to feel settled at school (11)
- Other (12) _____

Page Break

Q19 In your observation/experience have you faced any of the following challenges in regards to cohort entry to school?

- Diverse range of needs all beginning at once (1)
- Difficulty building positive relationships with students (2)
- Difficulty building positive relationships with whānau (3)
- Children missing out on 'teacher time' (4)
- Parents wanting their child to start on their birthday (5)
- Parents moving children to a school nearby which uses an Ad Hoc approach (6)
- High volume of children starting each entry point (7)
- Other (8) _____

Q20 In your observation/experience, have you faced any of the potential disadvantages listed below?

- Less time developing sound relationships with children (1)
- Having a large number of children begin on the same day (2)
- Relationships with ECE centres becoming damaged due to large number of children leaving at once (3)
- Relationships with ECE centres becoming damaged as students have to remain at ECE due to starting dates (4)

- Students missing out on 'learning opportunities' due to staying in ECE centres (5)
- Disengagement with whānau due to negative approaches to education (6)
- The flow of children out of ECE and into school disrupted (7)
- Less time developing sound relationships with parents (8)
- Other (9) _____

Page Break

Q21 How did your school community view the cohort entry to school approach?

- Disliked the approach (1)
- Did not mind the approach (2)
- Like the approach (3)
- Other (4) _____

Q22 Have parents in your community raised any concerns about the cohort entry approach?

Page Break

Q23 What do you view as important outcomes in facilitating a smooth transition to school for a child?

- The continuity of learning from ECE to primary (1)
- The ability for children to develop friendships easily (2)
- Children feeling safe, cared for and nurtured in their learning environment (3)
- Students being cared for socially and emotionally (4)
- Future educational success (5)
- Love of education and learning (6)
- Students having a support system (7)
- Other (8) _____

Q24 In your observation/experience what do you believe are the important factors in a successful transition to school?

- Having positive expectations (1)
- Ensuring students have a sense of belonging (2)
- Developing respectful and reciprocal relationships (3)
- Recognising students culture (4)
- Engaging students in learning (5)
- Building on students existing knowledge and understanding (6)
- Giving students identity in learning (7)
- Other (8) _____

Page Break

Q25 How does cohort entry support you to build relationships with whānau?

Q26 Does your school work collaboratively with ECE providers to prepare for student intake under the cohort entry system?

Yes - if so please describe (1)

No (2)

Page Break

Q27 Will your school return to an ad hoc entry to school approach? Please describe your reasoning.

Yes (1) _____

No (2) _____

Maybe (3) _____

Q28 How likely are you to recommend the cohort entry approach to schools across New Zealand?

Highly unlikely (1)

Unlikely (2)

Unsure (3)

Likely (4)

Highly likely (5)

Q29 How would you describe your stance on cohort entry to school?

End of Block: Default Question Block

Appendix F: Ethics Approval

Kia ora,

[Link to the application](#)

HoU Review Group

Ethics Notification Number: 4000027049

Project Title: Together or Apart? What New Zealand teachers are saying about Cohort Entry to school.

Thank you for your notification which you have assessed as low risk.

Your project has been recorded in our database for inclusion in the Annual Report of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

Please notify me if situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your initial ethical analysis that it is safe to proceed without approval by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees.

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

A reminder to include the following statement on all public documents:

"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor Craig Johnson, Director (Research Ethics), email humanethics@massey.ac.nz."

Please note that if a sponsoring organisation, funding authority or a journal in which you wish to publish require evidence of committee approval (with an approval number), you will have to complete the application form again answering yes to the publication question to provide more information to go before one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. You should also note that such an approval can only be provided prior to the commencement of the research.

You are reminded that staff researchers and supervisors are fully responsible for ensuring that the information in the low risk notification has met the requirements and guidelines for submission of a low risk notification.

If you wish to print an official copy of this letter:

1. Please login to the RIMS system (<https://rme.massey.ac.nz>).
2. In the Ethics menu, select Ethics Applications.

3. Using the Advanced option, select Ethics Applications (Area), Application ID (Search On), enter the ethics notification number in the Value area and select Find on the toolbar.
4. With the application the Results Tab, tick the empty box on the far left of the application and select Reports from the toolbar.
5. Select the "Human Ethics - Low Risk Notification Letter" link, this will open the report viewer.
6. Select the application code from the Report Parameters dropdown and submit. You can then select an export option from the top toolbar (Print, Save).

Yours sincerely

Professor Craig Johnson

Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and

Director (Research Ethics)