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# **PRIMARY-SECONDARY TRANSITIONS:**

## **What Helps Adolescents with Learning Support Needs, Family Members, and Teachers?**

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## ABSTRACT

Transition from primary to secondary school marks a significant milestone in a young person's life. Research indicates some students, particularly those for whom primary school presented considerable learning challenges, can struggle to settle into their new school. Gaps in understanding exist about what helps those students, their families and their teachers have positive transition experiences.

This case study explored what personal and contextual factors assisted students with learning support needs transition from primary to secondary school and what helped their parents and caregivers, and teachers at transition time. Taking a strength focus and utilising a pragmatic approach, the research drew upon personal experiences of transition to investigate the question: What helped? The main objectives were to inform transition pedagogy and policy, and professional development within schools; to generate serious contemplation about primary-secondary transition which seems to have been almost forgotten within current educational policy; and to contribute to the domain of knowledge about qualities that enable students with learning support needs and their school communities to flourish.

The sequential design utilised two main data collection methods. Questionnaire data, including scaled and short answer responses, were collected from students with identified learning support needs, their family members, primary teachers, and secondary teachers from one urban New Zealand schooling district, before and after transition. Following transition, a subsample of students who had reported making a positive transition, along with subsamples from each participant grouping and a small group of expert educators then shared their views and knowledge about the transition, by way of individual interviews. Open-ended questionnaire data and interview data were coded and analysed using thematic analysis.

Systemically, four key features interacted to help transition. These features, applicable across all stakeholder groupings were: deliberate responsibility for the transition process; purposeful and timely engagement; strategic transition knowledge and practice; and targeted support for transition. Systemic processes were effective when schools took the lead in fostering family-

student-school relationships and new skills for transition, which enhanced participants' feelings of efficacy. Transition was found to be an event (e.g. first day) and process (e.g. school engagement). Being present on the first day of the school year appeared to have lasting effects for students, indicating robust enrolment and school placement processes were essential; this topic area emerged as a direction for future investigation.

Transition process and practice knowledge was found to reside predominately with secondary school managers, while all classroom teachers were not entirely comfortable about catering for new students' learning needs; suggesting students' learning needs may not be accommodated optimally in general classrooms. Information transfer systems operated throughout the district but may have been under-utilised and not always accessible for classroom teachers. Secondary classroom teachers required support to become more versed about transition matters and practice, including assisting students to adapt to routines and demands over time. It was suggested that transition pedagogy be incorporated into classroom teachers' repertoires and prioritised for all students.

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P.M.H.

*I also loved the sweet feeling of privilege which never failed me as I presented my ID card to a bored guard in a black uniform sitting behind a clear desktop. You enter a room lined with long desks and lamplight that is not too bright or too dim, but just right. Everything was just right. I loved the fact you could call up anything ... and within the hour that material would be found in the bowels of this great library. (Jones, 2006, p.213)*

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

<b>Term</b>	<b>Description (as used in this thesis)</b>
āiga	close and extended family
aroha	love
AsTTle	Assessment Tool for Teaching and Learning
haka	traditional Māori dance or challenge
hāngi	traditional Māori cooking method in a pit oven
hui	meeting or gathering
intermediate school	separate school for Years 7 and 8
iwi	tribe
kai	food
kanohi ki te kanohi	face-to-face
karakia	prayers
kura kaupapa Māori	Māori language immersion school
Māori	Indigenous people of New Zealand
Māoritanga	Māori culture
marae	sacred meeting ground
mihimihi	introduction about self
pākehā	Non-indigenous New Zealanders of European descent
pānui	newsletter, news
Pasifika	Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Islands
pōwhiri	Māori welcome ceremony
rumaki	Māori medium learning unit
tamariki	children
taonga	prized treasure
Te Marautanga o Aotearoa	New Zealand Curriculum for Māori medium schools
te reo	the language
third form	Year 9

<b>Term (cont.)</b>	<b>Description (as used in this thesis)</b>
tikanga	best practice, custom
tuakana-teina	older-younger buddy relationship
waiata	song
Whaea	title of respect for woman
whānau	close and extended family
wharekura	Māori language immersion secondary school
Year 8	last year of primary school
Year 9	first year of secondary school

*...to turn a square into a cube,  
a triangle into a pyramid,  
a circle into a sphere...*

(Ihimaera, 2007)