



# Addressing the needs of transient students: a collaborative approach to enhance teaching and learning in an area school

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- Dr Khyla Russell, Otago Polytechnic
- Keren Brooking, our NZCER contact person.

## Note for readers

This report uses the terms “transience” or “transient” to describe families and students who have changed schools frequently. Gilbert (2005) noted that the term transient is the most commonly used term in New Zealand, but there is no “official” nationally agreed definition of what this term means in educational contexts. She also noted that the term has negative connotations. In this report, we have used this term for ease of communication, but are aware that the continual use of the term may contribute to the exclusion of students through a process of negative labelling and categorisation. We ask the reader to be aware of this issue.

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# 1. Background, aims, objectives, and research questions

## Background

This Teaching and Learning Initiative (TLRI) project emerged out of a request from the principal and teachers in a small rural area school. School staff observed that student transience complicated the learning and social experiences of some students. At the time of the request, the school had 17 transient students from Year 2 through to Year 13, five of whom were of Māori descent. In 2005, 37.6 percent of students on the roll were considered to be “nonstandard” school arrivals or leavers. Teachers and leaders in the school wanted to learn more about the effects of transience on students’ learning and social experiences, and to develop their teaching to enhance these students’ school experiences.

Transience at this school was described as affecting increasing numbers of students, with students attending school temporarily, or repeatedly moving in and out of the local community. These students faced unique issues in relation to their school experience. While the participating school had some procedures for tracking and uplifting transient students’ records, the teachers identified isolation, relationships with their peers and teachers, social outcomes, achievement (including “gaps” in learning), and participation in the school as issues that needed to be addressed. The school’s status as an area school was thought to add to the challenges, particularly when students engaged with a range of teachers across the school day. In this regard, the principal asked:

What is best practice for engaging these kids, for picking them up, and motivating them?

The research literature describes transient students as having difficulties making friends and socially integrating into their school, as being vulnerable to bullying, and as being academically and behaviourally at risk (Kariuki & Nash, 1999; Lee, 2001; Sanderson, 2003; Shafft, 2003). Significant gaps in students’ knowledge and poor prior records of their learning also place a strain on teachers who do not always have the time needed to adequately assess student achievement and engage them in the curriculum (Sanderson, 2003). Teachers in the participating school alluded to other barriers that compromised student learning. They described some students as having low aspirations for their learning, and as not engaged at school because they were aware that their stay was temporary, a point which is reiterated in the research literature (Sanderson, 2003; Shafft, 2003; Walls, 2003). The literature also refers to schools being financially and pedagogically stretched to meet the often high needs of its most mobile students:

. . . these high need, highly mobile students—through no fault of their own—increasingly are viewed as liabilities by school districts. . . . It is clear that the academic and social needs of highly transient students are going unmet and that schools and school districts have only limited capacity to address this challenge. (Schafft, 2003, p. 26)

In the New Zealand context, Lee (2001) noted that the experience of transient students is poorly understood, and systems and shared practices to support them are generally lacking. A recent study by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) on student movement (Gilbert, 2005) looked at educational issues in 20 schools in four communities. The study recorded high levels of overall student mobility in New Zealand, and participating schools reported a “major impact on their ability to manage, plan, and resource their core work” (p. viii). Gilbert looked at all students’ progress cards (the E19/22a cards) in Years 5, 8, and 11 to examine student movement between schools. She noted inaccuracies and wide variations in the way that student information was entered. Student achievement records were also difficult to analyse, because schools kept different types of records which were not always comparable to those found in other schools. The study found few differences in achievement between frequent movers and other students in the same year group, with some differences in mathematics achievement, especially in the earlier years, and possible differences in reading level at Year 8. No differences were found in attendance rates between the two groups. Gilbert also acknowledged that it is difficult to tease out the effect of transience on student achievement from other factors associated with transience, such as low income.

The main finding of Gilbert’s study was the negative effect of transience on schools. Transient students are regarded negatively because they are considered to disrupt school routines; they have a negative effect on schools’ performance; and schools must undertake further administrative work that is not provided for in the budget. Transient students are perceived as taking resources from other pupils, and disruptions occur because funding and school organisation is based on stable and predictable student cohorts. Schools in Gilbert’s project felt that they did not adequately address the challenges posed by transience, and argued for consistent and systemic communication and record keeping across schools and other agencies. However, it was acknowledged that changes in these areas would not reduce the disruption felt by schools (Gilbert, 2005).

The present project provided an opportunity for participating schools to identify, discuss, and research the particular effects, or disruptions, of transience within their own school, and to do this within the context of a learning community that focused on existing research and an action-research project. The researchers in the project explored the literature on school transience, particularly as it related to student achievement, social experiences, and effective teaching. The project focused on the process of change, and on the actions of teachers in classrooms and in a “community of practice” comprising teachers and experienced researchers (Lewis & Andrews, 2000). (see Research design and methodology)

## **Relationship to the strategic priorities of the TLRI**

This project was related to four strategic priorities of the TLRI in that it sought to contribute to New Zealand's educational and research efforts to reduce inequality, to address diversity, to understand the processes of teaching and learning, and to explore future possibilities.

### **Reducing inequality and addressing diversity**

The project was particularly concerned with the school experiences of transient students whose relationships with teachers, school achievement, and social experiences were compromised by frequent shifts between schools. Both Gilbert (2005) and Lee (2003) have argued that one of the biggest problems is that schools "have just come to accept that little can be done about transience" (Lee, 2001, p. 3). Transient students may be labelled as "the problem", and schools struggle with unresponsive educational systems, placing transient students at risk. The principal in the present study, for example, acknowledged that transient students could become "invisible" in the classroom.

While teachers are generally aware of transient students' social and learning difficulties, Gilbert's (2005) research suggests that teachers can find it hard to address these issues in the classroom. Some teachers fail to acknowledge the importance of positive and supportive social experiences for all students, and seem unaware of the centrality of these to student learning. In this context, teachers may not seek to address the difficulties that transient students experience socially (MacArthur, Kelly, & Gaffney, 2004). In contrast, Lee (2001) has suggested that change at the level of school culture can be achieved by:

. . . developing a welcoming culture within the school, creating non-violent environments so that the children are comfortable and won't be bullied, and adapting the classroom programme to meet the needs of these children. (p. 3)

Similarly, Alton-Lee (2003) argued that schools can support marginalised students, including transient students, by actively promoting inclusion through the development of caring and supportive relationships with students and adopting strategies that respect and meet the needs of diverse groups of students. The literature identified key issues that need to be addressed in education. These include eliminating social, educational, and structural barriers to students' participation, and supporting marginalised students' agency as they actively shape their own social and learning experiences (Davis & Watson, 2001). This project aimed to address barriers to transient students' learning and social experiences by exploring some of these processes.

### **Māori and Pasifika researchers**

This project acknowledged that the cultural experiences of Māori students must be understood, respected, and supported in schools and through the research process (Bishop, 2001; Bishop & Glynn, 1999). The project included Māori students who moved frequently between schools. The Donald Beasley Institute's cultural advisor, Hine Forsyth, provided support and advice about how

to include Māori students in this research. Sarah Sharp, the Donald Beasley Institute's Māori researcher, provided research support for Māori students and their families participating in the project. Also, Dr Khyla Russell (2006) provided useful information and advice about research with Māori in a self-reflective workshop for the Donald Beasley Institute staff, including the researchers on this project.

## Understanding the processes of teaching and learning

This project aimed to understand the school experiences of transient students and, through this understanding, enhance teaching practices that challenge barriers and support student learning. It was concerned with transient students identified in the research as at risk in school, both academically and socially, and it aimed to build on the seminal work undertaken by Alton-Lee (2003) that teased out elements of teaching practice that enhance learning for diverse groups of students.

## Exploring future possibilities

Through discussions in a community of practice, combined with a range of other data, this project wished to contribute to innovative initiatives for teaching that are based on students' and teachers' lived experiences. Students' perspectives, in particular, are under-represented in the research data on teaching and learning, despite calls to highlight these in the development of teachers' work (Davis & Watson, 2001; Smith et al, (2000). These experiences have the capacity to challenge adult-dominated constructions of childhood and school experience and open up new ways of thinking about teaching marginalised students.

It is also rare for research to explore different approaches to teaching and diversity within one school, the teacher agency associated with these different positions, and the various opportunities afforded for student learning. The proposed study allows such analysis to be undertaken, and contributes to an understanding of the complexities involved in moving whole schools towards inclusive teaching practice that addresses the needs of diverse students.

## Aims and objectives

The project aimed to coconstruct teacher knowledge about teaching and learning through teacher professional development focused on a community of practice and action research. This approach emphasised research-based teaching practices.

This project involved a qualitative case study of one school and involved enquiry at two levels:

- **Level one:** A study of the impact of an action-research project and a community of practice on teacher behaviour and student learning and social experiences.

- **Level two:** An action-research project to be developed by the researchers, principal, and teachers within a community of practice, to enhance transient students' social and learning experiences.

The project had three main objectives:

1. to enhance teachers' understanding of transient students' learning and social experiences through an exploration of data from extant research
2. to support teachers to coconstruct knowledge about teaching and learning through a community of practice, and to critically reflect on their teaching and on students' learning
3. to develop and evaluate through action-research teaching initiatives that address barriers to and enhance transient students' learning and social experiences.

## **Research questions**

Teachers and researchers collaborated to develop the research questions. The following questions guided the project. Further questions relating to the development of research-based teaching approaches emerged as the project proceeded.

### **Research question 1 (level one)**

How does a community of practice and action research:

1. enhance teachers' understanding of transient students' learning and social experiences?
2. contribute to changes in teachers' assumptions and beliefs about classroom practices and student learning?

### **Research question 2 (level one)**

How does a community of practice involving researchers and teachers:

1. develop and sustain itself?
2. with action research, contribute to the coconstruction of knowledge about teaching and learning?

### **Research question 3 (level two)**

How does a community of practice:

1. develop and evaluate teaching initiatives to improve student learning, and social experiences?
2. identify what specific school initiatives contribute to improved student learning and social experience?



## 2. Research design and methodologies

The study used qualitative methods of enquiry. This approach allowed the voices of transient students and their families to be heard so that teachers could reflect on their experiences (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Schwant, (2000); Smith et al., 2000; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2003). Qualitative enquiry is concerned with understanding what others are saying or doing. Social actions are understood to be inherently meaningful and the researchers' task, along with that of the community of practice, was to understand a particular social action and the meanings that constituted that action (Schwant, 2000). Social constructivism is one philosophy used to explain the aim and practice of understanding human action through qualitative enquiry. A social constructivist approach rejects the idea that knowledge is discovered and argues that it is actively interpreted and constructed through researcher participation, as is inherent in a reflexive community of practice and action research. This study involved a single school, or case study, and provided an opportunity to learn in detail about complex social phenomena and transient students' lived experiences in their natural context, the school, and to study teaching qualitatively through a close relationship with students and teachers (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2003).

A researcher and teacher partnership approach was considered most appropriate to the project as it encouraged: an ongoing process of critical reflection which is a central tenet of a community of practice (Buysee et al., 2003); teacher initiation and direction; and the personal and whole-school pursuit of change in teaching practice (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Teachers in the school were involved in all stages of planning and decision making in the project. An action-research model and the development of a community of practice was initially discussed with the principal and deputy principal as a method by which teachers could explore and improve their own teaching practice. This study, at both levels, received ethical approval from the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee, and adhered to key principles of confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, and right of withdrawal (see Appendix A for the participant information sheets that were used in this project).

All data from level one of this project were collected by Dr Jude MacArthur and Dr Nancy Higgins. Level two data were gathered by the researchers and teachers in community of practice. Level two data comprised information about students' learning and social experiences in school, and was discussed within the community of practice. Transient students and their parents or caregivers were interviewed by the researchers—teachers did not have direct access to the transcripts of these interviews. Salient issues from these interviews were shared through the community of practice. While students were identified in these discussions, identifying features of participants have been removed from this report and pseudonyms have been placed in the data for

presentations and publications about the project. The pseudonym, Wooldon, is used for the school and community in this report.

## **Participants**

Participants in the community of practice were the principal, deputy principal, and four teachers at the participating school. Participants in the action-research project included community of practice members themselves, as well as identified transient students at the school and their parents. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Student participation required the informed consent of the students themselves, and from their parents or caregivers. A total of six families and 13 students (see Table 1) participated in the project.

Table 1 **Participating students**

Family and student name	Gender of students	Age	Year	Ethnicity	No. of Schools Attended	No. of School Moves	Changed school during project	No. of Interviews
Family 1								1 (parents/ caregivers)
	Female	12	8	Pākehā	6	6	yes	2
	Female	13	9	Pākehā	5	5	yes	2
Family 2								1 (parents/ caregivers)
	Female	8	4	Māori	6	7		2
	Male	11	7	Māori	10	10		2
	Female	15	11	Māori	13	13		2
Family 3								2 (parents/ caregivers)
	Female	10	6	Pākehā	6	6		2
	Male	13	9	Pākehā	8	8		2
	Female	15	11	Pākehā	11	11		2
Family 4								1 (parents/ caregivers)
	Female	10	6	Māori	5	12		2
Family 5								1 (parents/ caregivers)
	Female	15	11	Pākehā	5	5	yes	1
Family 6								1 (parents/ caregivers)
	Female	10	6	Pākehā	6	6	yes	1
	Male	14	10	Pākehā	10	12	yes	1
	Male	14	10	Pākehā	10	11	yes	1
Total	F=9 (69%)  M=4 (31%)	Age R/ge from 8-15	Year R/ge from 4-11	P=9 (69%)  M=4 (31%)				5 (38%)

## **Community of practice (level one)**

The project began with the development of a collaborative community of practice between researchers, the school principal, deputy principal, and four teachers. A community of practice comprises a group of professionals and relevant others, who learn and work together around a particular topic to improve their educational practice (Buysee et al., 2003, Lewis & Andrews, 2000). Using Palincsar et al.'s (1998) example of communities of practice, researchers met initially with the principal, deputy principal, and teachers for a professional development day about reflective practice techniques, transience, and action research. Following this, meetings were held to work through an action-research process, and for teachers to share their classroom practices and experiences and, thus, coconstruct knowledge about teaching transient students. The school was funded for the equivalent of 40 days teacher-release time to be used for research activities such as community of practice meetings, meetings with other staff, and planning for teaching. Two teachers also attended the New Zealand Association for Research in Education (NZARE) conference at the end of 2000 with the researchers, and participated in a joint presentation based on this project.

The emphasis on developing a community of practice in which researchers and teachers coconstruct knowledge about teaching and learning changes the linear manner by which knowledge is traditionally handed down to teachers, and instead promotes an organic approach whereby teachers can contextualise their learning in their own classroom experience (Buysee et al., 2003). Communities of practice provide opportunities for deep learning, although it is acknowledged that some teachers can find such an approach challenging since it eschews the notion of a “quick-fix” or expert oriented approach (Graham et al., 2004).

## **Data gathering (level one)**

Data within this study was gathered through an ethnographic approach, using field notes, observations in classrooms and in the school grounds, and open-ended conversational interviews with participants. Data included:

- in-depth and open-ended interviews with the principal, deputy principal, and teachers in the community of practice about their teaching practice and professional development ideas relating to their action-research project
- researchers' field notes and transcripts from community of practice meetings
- researchers' field notes from classroom observations (including notes from informal discussions with students and teachers)
- archival notes (school mission statement and school policies)
- interviews with transient students and their parents or caregivers about the students' educational experiences during the project.

## Interviews (level one)

Open-ended and conversational-style interviews were conducted at the beginning of the study with all participating transient students, their parents, and teachers in the community of practice. One family arrived during the study for a short time. This family was interviewed after they moved to another community. The other students in the study were interviewed again at the end of the project. Some of their parents were also interviewed at this time if they were available. The participating teachers in the community of practice were interviewed in the middle of the project, and at the end. Students were interviewed in their own home, either alone or, if they wished, in the presence of their parents. In all the interviews, opportunities for free interaction, clarification, and discussion were pursued through the use of open-ended questions. Questions were framed carefully to maximise reciprocity through the negotiation and construction of meaning between the researcher and participant, ensuring that the researchers did not promote their own agenda or see the interview purely as a data gathering exercise (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). All interviews were digitally recorded, and transcribed for analysis.

Interviews with students focused on their perspectives on their school experience and included general questions relating to their learning and social experiences at school (see Appendix B for the student interview guide). Interviews with parents focused on parents' interpretations of their children's school experience (see Appendix C). Interviews with teachers focused on professional development and adult perspectives on transience and teaching, including the contribution and role of teachers in relation to students' educational experiences (see Appendix D).

A Māori researcher was part of the research team and was available to interview families identified by the school as Māori. While no participating families were identified in this way, two families indicated they were Māori in the first interview. Subsequent perusal of school records revealed one family was correctly noted to be Māori and the second was not. The researchers informed the families that a Māori researcher was available to work with them on the project if this was their preference. Both families stated that they were happy to continue the relationship with the Pākehā researcher. The researchers informed the school and sought advice from cultural advisors and the Māori researcher on this issue, and continued to work with the advisors and Māori researcher throughout the project.

## Observations (level one)

Field notes were recorded during community of practice meetings, and the last meeting was audiotaped for transcribing purposes. Minutes from the notes were provided to the community of practice members for future planning purposes. One researcher facilitated the meeting while the other took notes. The researchers met regularly to discuss the project and their observations.

### **Archival data (level one)**

The school's mission statements, annual reports, and professional development policies were examined by the researchers to contextualise this case study (Stake, 2000).

### **Action research (level two)**

The principal, deputy principal, and teachers were supported by the two researchers working with them in the school to develop an action-research plan (Mills, 2003) and work through the steps in an action-research and professional learning and development process. Action research involves providing opportunities for teachers to critically reflect on their own and others' practice and on the underlying theories, values, and assumptions that inform that practice. It provides a method for "testing and improving educational practices, and basing the practices and procedures of teaching on theoretical knowledge and research organised by professional teachers" (Carr & Kemmis, 1993, p. 221). Action research encourages action for school change (Kember, 2000; Mills, 2003). It is a research process and strategy that is collaborative, relevant, and practical in that the research is not divorced from what happens in classrooms and schools (Meyer et al., 1998). Professional learning communities can encourage the development of a shared school vision so that successful and positive change occurs in a school's culture (Lewis & Andrews, 2001).

At the first meeting of this project's community of practice in Term One of 2006, the researchers introduced the project and facilitated a discussion of the key themes about transience arising from the literature. The teachers, in turn, reflected on the salience of these themes in relation to their own teaching practice, and identified areas of strength and weakness in the school. A book of relevant research reports and readings was compiled for teachers about teaching diverse groups of students and transience. In subsequent meetings, strategies to address the school's specific challenges in regards to transience were discussed so that an action-research plan could be devised. At the end of the term, it was agreed that the action-research plan would focus on developing school-wide guidelines to enable the school to enact a consistent enrolment process for transient students, and to enhance their sense of belonging at the school. The second area of focus was to concentrate on developing improved teaching practices for transient students that were grounded in the child's lived experiences, strengths, and interests. Eventually three specific students were identified through their initial interviews as having particularly poor social and learning experiences that needed immediate attention and research.

The action-research process involved proceeding through a research cycle of five steps across the period of one school year, although initially it was hoped that two research cycles would be completed. The research cycle included:

- Step 1. The teachers began with self-reflection about issues and concerns relating to the experience of transient students, and the implications for teaching at the school. This meeting also included a focus on issues for transient students identified in the research literature.
- Step 2. The community of practice developed a plan for improving their teaching practice to enhance transient students' educational experiences.
- Step 3. This plan was implemented through teaching practice and data were gathered.
- Step 4. The plan was evaluated through critical reflection by individual teachers and the community of practice.
- Step 5. The final step was to begin a second research cycle taking into account the knowledge gained from the first research cycle (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Mills, 2003).

### The school's action plan

The school's plan aimed to develop and implement an organisational protocol (referred to in the community of practice and in this report as "the guidelines") and structure that supported transient students' learning and social life at school and in the community. The challenges that needed improvement included: school structures (facilitate, identify barriers); relationships with families; assessments; teaching practice; community relationships; and social relationships. Thus, the school decided to develop a protocol and structure based on developing:

- positive relationships between transient families on the one hand, and both the school and community on the other
- students' interests and strengths
- students' social relationships.

Homeroom teachers would implement the new guidelines by:

- developing a supportive home-school relationship
- leading discussions with other involved teachers
- collecting assessment data (including data on students' interests)
- implementing related teaching programmes
- fostering community involvement.

Data on the implementation of the guidelines in general and about the subsequent educational experiences of transient students included:

- data on developing the guidelines
  - meetings with COP members
  - meetings with other teachers
  - meetings with whole staff

- data on students' interests (children's "Me" statements)
  - interests
  - strengths
  - family
  - friends
  - pets
  - important people
  - things I need help with
- data on teachers' classroom practice and their relationships with students, families, and community members, which teachers would record in a daily teacher diary. Diary entries could include:
  - what the teacher did in relation to students' strengths/interests
  - informal observations of and discussions with students
  - assessment data
  - personal reflections on teaching and learning
  - discussions with parents/other teachers about students' learning/social relationships.

## **Data gathering (level two)**

The researchers and the teachers gathered data for this level of the project to document changes in teaching practice and student learning and social experiences through:

- community of practice members' diaries (from observations in classrooms and the school grounds, and in community of practice meetings)
- researchers open-ended interviews with community of practice participants (as in level one)
- researchers' open-ended interviews with transient students and parents (as in level one)
- archival data (teaching plans, student work samples, and student achievement data).

## **Observations: level two**

For this level of the project, the researchers observed students and teachers in classrooms and in the school grounds. To understand teachers' and transient students' experiences of school, the researchers engaged in a process of two-way exchange with students and teachers. The community of practice, in general, was encouraged to use the observational approaches in their classrooms that Davis (1998) recommended, which is (i) to be reflexive and have a clear role within the student's world, (ii) renegotiate the power relations between researcher/teacher researcher and the transient child to establish the best possible "participant" relationship, and (iii) accept that throughout the research process the teacher's and researcher's ethics, roles, and tools will be put under strain, questioned, and negotiated. Also, it was expected that ideas about giving primacy to the perspectives of all participants, rather than subsuming them to the researchers' own views and interests, would guide the community of practice's data collection process (Smith et al.,

2000; Luttrell, 2000). The researchers also used their observations to talk with the participating teacher or child about surrounding events, and to check the teacher's or child's own understandings and interpretations of those events. Participating teachers and researchers were expected to record these events and discussions in field notes.

## **Data analysis**

Level one data, on the impact of an action-research approach and a community of practice, was the responsibility of the researchers. Level two data, on the impact of the action-research plan, was shared and analysed within the community of practice. The data for both levels of this project comprised archival document analysis, field notes (observations and recorded conversations between the teacher researchers/researchers and students), and transcripts of interviews. Some archival material (student work samples and student achievement data) were used as data to contribute to an understanding of teaching practice and transient students' educational experiences.

The data were analysed through a process of collaborative analysis and coconstruction between the researchers and within the community of practice as the project proceeded. Coding the data was done through the sharing of meanings and the identification of common themes and emergent patterns. Also, at the end of the project, the researchers undertook some inductive analysis of the data and identified key thematic categories that had particular implications for teaching practice and transient students' educational experiences. These themes included:

- rural mobility is linked to a better life
- mobility can be a consequence of negative school experiences
- good teachers explain things, are friendly, are fun, and are not grumpy
- transient students are at risk academically
- transient students have difficulty making friends, are bullied, and are at risk of becoming “an outcast”
- rural communities are “way too small” and have unique challenges in regards to difference.



### 3. The lived experience of transience

This section describes the key themes relating to students', parents, and teachers' lived experiences of school transience.

#### **Rural mobility is linked to a better life**

The six families in this project shifted to Wooldon for positive reasons and described lifestyle improvements as their main motivation for moving frequently. Four of the families moved because they believed the community was safe, the school was responsive, and housing was affordable. One family, for example, moved there because the community was described as safe by a friend who lived locally:

He was the one that basically talked me into moving. But the main reason was I arrived home one night when I was in the city, and a guy held a knife to my throat. I just couldn't go back in the house after that. So I thought Wooldon was a quiet place and safer for the kids hopefully. . . . And then when I was away from the house, it got broken into two or three times. All my whiteware got pinched. . . . It just felt really unsettling and quite stressing basically.

One parent had searched for a community where she could buy a house and live a reasonable lifestyle with her disability, and Wooldon met her requirements. Another described Wooldon as a place where her daughter could have more freedom. She said:

You have got more freedom, like you have more freedom here because you know where your kids are. In the city, if Tania wanted to go out and be out until 9 o'clock at night I'd say "no", because it is a big place. Whereas here, you actually roughly know where your kids are.

The Waverly family moved each year to follow seasonal work. They moved to Wooldon because they knew people in the area. Mrs Waverly described her son, Mark, as "running amuck at his previous school", and she valued the fact that Wooldon was "kind of like a kid jail" because "there was nothing to do except sport basically".

The Connor family had moved to follow work opportunities for the father. In six years, they had lived in six different places. Mrs Connor said:

Okay, around about six years we have been in the South Island, so we moved from the North Island, to Town A. We went from Town A to Town B, from Town B to Town C, from Town C to Town D, from Town D to Town E, and then up to Wooldon.

Overall, their three students had attended between six and eleven schools. The Smith family's children had attended between 6 and 13 schools and while the family had moved for a variety of reasons, these were mainly work- or income-related. Mr Smith worked in a rural industry, and they had decided to live in a house in Wooldon where rent was comparatively inexpensive.

Families in this study moved for a variety of reasons, and this variation in families' experiences is reflected in the research literature (see, for example, Gilbert, 2005; Sorin & Iloste, 2003). Three families followed opportunities for work, but others moved in search of a better and safer lifestyle. Poverty was a concern for some families, and Wooldon provided affordable rents. What seems most important is that families' decisions to move within and between districts were positive, and were motivated by a desire to improve their circumstances, including improved opportunities for their children.

## **Mobility can be a consequence of negative school experiences**

In Gilbert's (2005) study, the participating principals stated that it was very uncommon, but not unheard of, for children to be moved because families were dissatisfied with their school. In this study, three families described changing schools within the same district as a consequence of their dissatisfaction with their child's school experience. Anna had a disability that affected her learning, and had attended 13 schools. Her parents would inform schools about this, but in their experience some schools took too long to acknowledge Anna's needs and to organise learning support:

Mother:        Some of the schools Anna moved from. We were in the same district but the school wasn't actually doing what we had asked them to do for her because of her problems. And she was not getting the help that she needed so we moved her to a school that gave her the help. A couple of times that happened.

Father:        That you move in to a new school and go and see the principal and you tell them about Anna's problems. And it is normally six months before they come back and say "Do you realise that Anna has got problems?"

For this family, transience could interact with unresponsive school systems to cause another school move. Consequently, Anna faced further challenges to her learning.

One mother noted that she and her daughter were abused by a teacher in a small community they had lived in previously:

We had a breakdown with the teacher where he had assaulted her and made a bruise like this on her arm. He grabbed her, and he wouldn't speak to me. So her father rung him and said he had never been so insulted in his life because the guy threatened us and said that if we took any action that he would make sure that we wouldn't have (our daughter), that she would be taken off us. So I spoke to my mum . . . and she just said 'look, you have got to live in the bloody area, best take her out of school.' At the time I was working in the city. So

every day for a year and a half we traveled. . . . You had to leave here by 7.30a.m. to make sure we got her to school on time and me to work on time.

This student then moved again to a school where she and her parents had enjoyed positive experiences in the past. This was her fourth enrolment.

Inga, who had an intellectual disability, changed schools within the same city because her parents, who no longer lived together, could not agree on a school that would be best for her. Mrs Jones said:

And when Inga finished Standard Four, she had to go to a different school. And I wanted to send her to (A school) where I was living. . . . So I enrolled her there and her father turned up, took her out and went and enrolled her at (B school where he was living). . . . So I took her out of (B school), put her back into (A school), and he just left it at that. That's when he stopped seeing her.

## **Good teachers explain things, are friendly, are fun, and are not grumpy**

Consistent with the findings of Adrienne Alton-Lee's work (2003), this study found that the relationship between teachers and students is a critical part of quality teaching approaches. Alton-Lee describes pedagogical practices that enable classes to work as caring and inclusive learning communities. Caring interactions between teachers and students enhance student learning, and responsive pedagogies encourage teachers to focus on students' experiences and learning processes. Students in this study consistently described "good teachers" as those who formed positive relationships with students; were kind; were "nice"; and took time to explain school work so that students could understand what was required. Now in secondary school, Jeanna described the teachers she had liked at school:

Jeanna: At X College the teacher explained our science . . . . I just liked my form teacher, she was nice. . . .

Researcher: Like what does that mean if you are a nice teacher?

Jeanna: She is just nice with it. If you don't understand something she will explain it to you until you do understand it.

She also said that good teachers were able to get along with students:

Researcher: What makes a good teacher?

Jeanna: They would have to get along with the children which not very many teachers do here. . . . They get grumpy.

Inga similarly described her favourite teachers as helpful, fair, and trustworthy, and she said that she liked to reciprocate her teacher's help:

Well (the best teacher) would have to be at School A and it would be Miss Q. . . . She was really nice and stuff. . . . Miss S. She was really nice. . . . When someone was naughty, she would like give detention but like she won't yell at them like the other teacher that was there. Like, Mrs T, she grabbed you by the wrist and pulled you. . . . And at this school (good teachers) would have to be mostly Miss B, and Miss C. . . . Miss C is just really nice. She like helps me with problems. . . . She's just like really helpful. I like to help her. . . . She's a really friendly teacher. And Miss B, what I like about Miss B is if I tell her stuff she won't tell anyone, and yeah.

Britney (aged 10) explained that good teachers made learning “fun” and were understanding when students experienced difficulties in their life:

Brittney: Mrs I, she would always make things really fun and make sure everything is there. And she always used to bring her pet rabbits to school. And we had spare time with her feeding and playing with them and they would hop around. . . . When we have been good, sometimes she would let us have things like (part of) a day off. . . . She would get us to like work together as a team and then she would give us challenges like a treasure hunt, but you would have to work out a certain times-table and then do it, which would give you a hint to where the next clue is. So it was like working but playing.

Researcher: Right so what do you think makes a good teacher then?

Britney: Um, I think fair and an understanding teacher. Like if something bad happened to you, like someone who might at least try to understand and not say like ‘Oh well that’s no excuse’, kind of thing. And someone who is nice and things like that.

Researcher: Right, that sounds like a good teacher. And here, if you had to make suggestions to a teacher here, how do you think they could teach better.

Britney: Make it a little more funner, because it is just like plain out boring. Maybe add some like games into it and make it more funner.

Tania (aged 15) described her favourite teacher as having personality characteristics that made her easy to relate to:

Her attitude was amazing, she was just the best teacher that I have had in any school. . . . She was fun, outgoing, she was just more like a student. . . . She was an older teacher but she always looks young.

Kate (age 15) stated that good teachers were empathetic and listened to students:

Um, just kind of putting their feet in someone else’s shoes and kind of going back and trying to explain the way that they would understand if they were our age. And just by actually listening rather than saying ‘do this and do that’. (Good teachers) try to make it practical and know what you are trying to say.

Students consistently told us that they did not like teachers who were “grumpy”. One student said that good teachers were caring and not intimidating:

- Child: She was just a brilliant teacher. She cared for everybody. She treated you nice. She didn't raise her voice ever. . . .
- Researcher: Do you think that your teachers could teach you better.
- Child: I think they are doing as good a job as they can. . . .
- Researcher: Would you have any suggestions for them to make them better teachers.
- Child: If Mrs X. would stop intimidating my sister. . . . Yes, my little sister come to find me one day and she was in tears and miserable.

This student felt that teachers helped students to learn when they listened to students and acknowledged their learning needs:

- Researcher: What do teachers do that make it hard for you to learn?
- Child: Um, I don't find it hard to learn. I find it hard to concentrate because all the kids are being annoying and talking.
- Researcher: Have you ever talked to your teacher about that?
- Child: Yeah, in my wee notebook I do. I have got a notebook. I take it home and get it signed by dad or mum. . . . Yeah, what I have done at school, like 'the day was great', or I don't know, 'the day was crap'.

The parents in this study, like their children, also agreed that teachers needed to like children, and be approachable, fair and consistent. When speaking about possible school improvements, one parent said that schools needed to be understanding of, and communicate with parents about, transient students' social and academic experiences. She said:

I think maybe that they could be a bit more understanding that the kids have moved a bit. I don't think the schools are that understanding. It is not the children's fault that they leave schools so often. It is the parents'. I don't think they support them enough in that respect. Like for instance, with my daughter, to me when they got her file and they seen the struggle that she has had throughout her school, that they could have kept in contact with me over it. I hear nothing so I don't really know whether she is doing any better than what she was.

Another parent acknowledged that parents should be aware in turn that the home-school relationship goes both ways, and that teachers, like parents, can have their "off days". She said:

I mean even though she is a teacher, she is human and we all have our bad days. God knows my child knows when I am having one because I yell and scream. I mean I can be horrible.

She described good teachers as child focused, consistent, and fair with clear rules for all of their students. When describing her child's favourite teacher and school, she said:

Miss P was lovely. In fact that school went through quite a few teachers and they just seemed to have the knack of getting brilliant ones. I mean really kid focused and fair. . . . Clear rules and don't bend them. . . . They can't have one rule for one kid and another rule for another because that's wrong.

Mrs Smith noted that good teachers were able to quickly assess her daughter, Anna, address her learning needs, and listen to parents' perspectives on their children's learning and social experiences. She said:

I transferred Anna because of bullies . . . and her teacher and I had an interview after a week and her teacher had picked everything up. You name it – she picked it all up in that one week. She was brilliant.

## **Transient students are at risk academically**

All but two of the students in this study experienced academic and/or social difficulties in the classroom. Three of the students had significant academic needs. Two of these students had a diagnosis of mild intellectual disability and they experienced both social and academic difficulties. Overall, some of the learning difficulties were linked to transience, with participating students describing inconsistent progression through the curriculum because schools do not work to a standard timeline for curriculum delivery. Some students described repeating the same work, or missing out on areas of the curriculum altogether. Kate (aged 15) said:

(Moving) makes it hard because like one school will be doing the subject and then you go to another school and you have only done half of it and they have already done it so you kind of miss that bit out. . . . Different schools just do different things. . . . Last year these guys did Year 11 things and my school didn't do them, so I missed out on the credits and now I have got to do them. And they have already done it. So it is a lot of work to catch up after you first started.

Anna (aged 15) said that she was repeating work that she had already done through Correspondence School, but that she didn't mind this at times:

Um, for English and maths it is stuff I have already done last year when I did correspondence . . . It is doing it again. . . . Some days I think its okay to do it again and some days I don't.

Anna's parents were also aware of these issues, and suggested that more consistent curriculum delivery between schools would be advantageous:

Mrs Smith: I think the curriculum should be mapped because for the likes of us and thousands of other transient type people, especially in the farming community, you move to a different area, the kids move to a different school, and well that school did that part of maths last year . . . But now they are doing this part so they miss certain parts of it.

Mr Smith: They totally miss.

Mrs Smith: Or they redo so much

Mr Smith: Yeah they double up on stuff or miss out on stuff, and I think that (the curriculum) should be mapped at least. . . . So, for example, in the first term, this is what has to be covered, then they are not missing as much.

The teachers in the community of practice also described their frustration at students missing out or doubling up on aspects of the curriculum, but they were unsure how to address the challenges that they presented. One teacher stated:

Often these kids are behind the others. They don't quite fit in and they come in at odd times of the year so you are half way through something and you have just got to make do. . . . I mean I have got one in my class and she is extremely demanding. She is coming up and kind of touching base with me all the time. . . . Yeah, physically and mentally. It is quite intriguing. So there's gaps. . . . And it is just the luck of the draw what they have (learned).

Another teacher found it difficult to keep transient students interested in class when they had either missed the work or were redoing it:

When you are constantly on the move there are going to be areas of education missing, (and) if you have gone into a class room and you have done something before, it must be really boring for that child. They turn off easy and you have lost that interest. How do you get it back? You have got to. And I do feel sorry for them.

One student had lost her interest in school, was truant, and was going to be moved to a foster home and new school because of this, illustrating again that issues relating to transience can bring further transience:

Researcher: How do you think you do at school.

Jeanna: Bad. I hardly ever come to school.

Researcher: Oh is that right, how come?

Jeanna: Because like um Christine my social worker, was meant to be getting me correspondence but she hasn't and I don't get along with school. I just stomp off and stuff. . . . I might be moving tomorrow, like going with CYF into a foster home.

Researcher: Is that something you want to do.

Jeanna: No. That's the law, if I don't go to school.

Three students also had significant learning needs that required responsive assessment and teaching. These students' experiences highlighted the need for accurate record keeping and for timely and fluid information sharing between schools. For example, as this project progressed, it became clear that one of the student's records in this study was incomplete. Inga's mother indicated that Inga had been diagnosed with a mild intellectual disability, but the teachers at Wooldon School, which was her sixth school, had no record of this. This record was later obtained, but Wooldon School did not have time to make the relevant contacts and referrals needed before this family moved on to another school. Inga's mother had asked for teacher aide support in previous schools, and had stopped asking because she was consistently told that

resources were not available. Inga occasionally had additional reading support on a one-to-one basis. During Mrs Jones' interview, she brought Inga's reading books out to demonstrate Inga's reading level:

Researcher: So this is a level 2 book she has got here. It says on the back here. 'Age 5 to 8. For people that are beginning to read'.

Mrs Jones: Yeah, and she is 12 and she has trouble with some of the words as well.

On the whole, though, the parents of the three students with significant learning difficulties in this project appeared to be poorly informed about the education support that was available, and the exact nature of their child's learning difficulties. For example, one parent stated:

It started off at School B when she used to walk with one foot in that way and everything would flow like she is only just coming up to her reading level now but that wasn't due to moving schools. That had something to do with the way her foot was. I can't remember, but it was under that moderate needs thing, and they used to come and do a study on her every now and again at school. And the last one she actually got clearance that they didn't need to look after her any more.

However, later in the interview, she acknowledged that difficulties remained, and she was uncertain about how whether these were being addressed at school:

Researcher: (Have you) had any contact with the school at this stage about where your daughter is at with her reading and whether she needs extra support?

Mother: No

Researcher: So you are not too clear about where she is at in that regard.

Mother: No I have no idea where she is now. . . . That's just as much my fault as the school's, I should have kept in contact but with working here (over an hour's drive away), I just can't.

Students and parents also talked about the importance of appropriately matching teaching with the student's ability, so that students would experience success and not failure. For example, Mr And Mrs Smith did not want their daughter to fail, and were unsure about the NCEA system. They were confused about Anna's achievement across the curriculum at secondary school, noting variations in teacher's description and knowledge of her abilities:

Mr Smith: One teacher . . . in the end of last year's report, was saying how he wants her to be mainstreamed. He said she is coping really well (but) one of her hardest things is English, trying to comprehend the whole thing. Comprehension is one of the things she struggles with the most and to say that she could be mainstreamed in English, for School C, well NCEA Level 1 or whatever it is.

Mrs Smith: They have changed everything so much. I never know what it is.

Mr Smith: I know how hard School C English was.

Mrs Smith: And Anna would never be able to do it.

Mr Smith: It is just something you are setting her up to fail, so why.

Mrs Smith: That would be heart breaking for her and she would stop trying whereas with what she is doing now, at least they are not setting her up to fail.

Mr Smith: It wouldn't just be an almost pass/fail. It would be a drastic fail. But it would be good for her to work harder on (school work that) she can handle.

Jodie was achieving significantly below her peer group in reading. She said that it would be easier for her to learn if her homework was not so difficult, and she asked for the work to be matched to her abilities and to have questions she could work on independently:

Researcher: So you wouldn't have any suggestions for them. What do teachers do that makes it harder for you to learn?

Jodie: Probably the homework sheets.

Researcher: Too much homework?

Jodie: Yeah.

Researcher: Why is it hard for you to do homework?

Jodie: They put questions on it that you don't know.

Transient students are described in the research literature at being at risk of academic failure (Kariuki & Nash, 1999; Lee, 2001; Sanderson, 2003; Shafft, 2003). In a review of North American research Hartman (2002) described the "long-term effects of high mobility" (p. 229) that included lower achievement levels, slower academic pacing, and reduced likelihood of high school completion. In the present study, two students nearing school leaving age talked about their desire to leave school as soon as they could, despite their parents' and teachers' encouragement to stay on and gain academic qualifications. A parent of one of these students commented that it was important for schools to have high expectations for students in this regard, and to ensure that students understand the real disadvantages associated with leaving school at an early age. It is also important to note that some students in the present study were doing well academically and were achieving at or above the level of their peers. It was clear that some families had a resilience that allowed them to transcend the potential problems associated with transience, but it is noteworthy that these particular families did not face the additional burden of living in poverty. This issue of resilience in transient families may be one that is worthy of future research.

## **Transient students have difficulty making friends, are bullied and are at risk of becoming “an outcast”**

### **Friendships at school**

Friendships and peer support in school are described in the literature as essential for students' social and emotional development, and for their learning (Alton-Lee, 2003; Alton-Lee & Nuthall, 1992; Bayliss, 1995; Bukowski et al., 1996; George & Browne, 2000; Heiman, 2000). Morris (2002) emphasises that students' interactions need to be understood as central to their school lives and to learning:

There is little recognition in current policy and practice that, from children's point of view, friendship is the main motivation for going to school and that difficulties with making and maintaining friendships are a key barrier to getting the most out of education. (p. 13)

Social connections enrich students' private worlds by providing practical and emotional support; offering a means for relaxation, fun and enjoyment; and providing opportunities to voice frustrations, to self-disclose and encounter new experiences (Fraser, 2002; Heiman, 2000).

In this study, variations were found in transient students' social experiences at school. Three students had no “real” friends and felt they did not belong at Wooldon. The issues were serious enough for the community of practice to make a decision that these students would be a priority for intervention through the school's action-research project.

Six of the thirteen students interviewed described being part of a social group at school. Alec, for example, said that “pretty much everyone” in his Year 9 class were his friends, with one particular friend considered to be “my mate”. Out of school, Alec spent much of his time doing odd jobs in the community and like some of the other transient students, he rarely spent time outside school with friends because “. . . pretty much everyone lives out of town here . . . on farms and stuff”. Both Alec and another student, Tania, enjoyed sports and named friends with whom they played sports at school. Alec loved rugby and in winter would play in the same team as his friends, often driving out of the district to attend games. Alec's love of sports meant that much of his break time at school was spent playing sport with “pretty much all the Year 9 boys”, and with an adult sports and physical education facilitator employed by the school.

Alec's two siblings, Kate and Jodie, also had friends at school. Kate said she got on well with the other three girls in her Year 11 class, and that she had friends out of school. She also stayed in touch with friends from her previous school:

Researcher: Have you got like a best friend would you say?

Kate: No, not really, no, I treat all my friends the same so

Researcher: What sort of things do you like doing together?

Kate: Um, we talk, and just hang out and party. I don't know, just do a lot of things really, walk around and talk and hang.

Researcher: Okay, what do you do during the break times at school.

Kate: Just hang out with friends.

Researcher: And what about at lunch time here, what sort of things do you do at lunch times.

Kate: Sometimes we play basketball or rugby or touch or we just talk again, other times I go on the computer so I can talk to my friends in the city.

Sarah, in Year 4, said that the best thing about school was her friends, and she described active break times at school playing games with her peers. The only difficulties she had encountered involved maintaining friendships when new students arrived at school:

Researcher: You said that some kids were here before you and you were here before some other kids, is that important in terms of your friendship?

Sarah: Yes sometimes they steal my friends off me and they are being mean to me and it is like

Researcher: When you say they, is that the kids who have been here longer than you .

Sarah: The new kids.

Researcher: The new kids, right. . . . Do you worry that your friends might be taken away by the new kids?

Sarah: Yeah

Researcher: Does it work like that at other schools too?

Sarah: No, only at this school.

Three students described feeling “different” and having no friends. Two of these students, Anna and Inga, had diagnoses of mild intellectual disability. Inga (aged 12) named Anna as her only friend at school, noting that Anna was older and in a different class. Other students in the school were “younger” and Inga said that she was not allowed to play with them because of the school rules. Anna felt that she was not part of her peer group, because she was not interested in parties and alcohol. Like Inga, she also preferred to play with younger students. The school had a rule that older students could not play in the junior students’ play area, ensuring that younger students had good and safe access to playground equipment. Unfortunately this rule was misinterpreted by some students and parents in the study, who thought that students were required to have friends their own age. For example, Mrs Scott and her daughter, Britney, said:

Britney: I play with my friends of a different age (at my favourite school). It wasn’t allowed, not up here.

Mrs Scott: Yeah, they have real strict rule about this and I think that’s really bizarre/ I don’t like that rule at all because I had a girl friend from Christchurch come and stay with us for a while and we sent her wee girl to school with Britney and this girl was 6 years old and she was petrified. Because I mean being 6 and going to a school that has got kids up to 7th form, I mean that’s pretty

intimidating and Britney was told she was not allowed near her and not allowed to talk to her and that to me is just. . . . Yeah, that's a really bizarre one. That really blew me away, I mean I can see good points of it in that you must socialise people your own age, but at the same time, how many of us socialise with only people our own age. One of my closest friends is 55 years old. I am only 30, you know. . . . I mean we all have to learn to deal with people of different ages anyway and a good place to do it is at school. We learn it

Britney: And I am not allowed to play with my friend and she is only a year older than me.

Anna said she had different interests from her peer group, no friends in her age group, and liked to play with her younger friends. However, she also believed that she was not allowed to do this:

Researcher: Can you just tell me again what you think the problems are with friends? Is it just that you are not interested in the same things that some of the other girls are interested in like boys and parties?

Anna: And parties and drinking and all that stuff.

Researcher: Right, and that's not your thing at all. [Nah] Do you have any particular friends here at school?

Anna: Not really no. . . . I do hang around with the little kids quite a lot but then I get told off because I am too old to be hanging around with them and I think that's kind of unfair. . . . (The teachers) tell me to go away because I shouldn't be there and this is the junior school and to go off to your own area where you are supposed to be.

Researcher: Right, but if you go up to your area the other girls don't like to play with you or don't want to spend time with you. That's difficult isn't it? [Mm]. So are you enjoying being at Wooldon school.

Anna: Not really, no.

Researcher: Who are your friends at school?

Anna: Don't really have any. . . . I just hang around with the little kids or my brother and sister will be my friends. . . . (At lunch times) sometimes I walk along by myself.

Aaron, Anna's younger brother, said that he "got on" with people at school, but did not consider other pupils to be "best friends". He played sports with some of the boys at break times, but because he lived a long way from school he did not have friends to his home. He conceded that he was a soccer fan in a school where the boys played rugby and described himself as "different":

Researcher: Does your teacher help you to get new friends.

Aaron: I am different.

Researcher: Why are you different, what is it that makes you different?

Aaron: I don't know.

Researcher: You don't know but you feel different from the other kids do you?

Aaron: Yeah, I try to fit in but it's not that easy. . . .

Researcher: You said to me our teacher tries to help you make new friends, what sorts of things does she do?

Aaron: She tries to help me fit in, tries to—I don't know, I find it hard to fit in because I don't like rugby. I find it hard to fit in because I am not like them.

We asked students whether their teachers helped them to make friends at school, and indeed whether this was expected to be part of the teacher's role. Students varied in their response to this question, and most commented that teachers did help them to get to know their peers when they first came to Wooldon School. Several students referred to "buddy" approaches set up by their class teacher. Alec and his sister, Kate, both thought the buddy systems were helpful as newcomers:

Researcher: When you first came here, did your teacher help you to make friends with the other kids at all.

Alec: Oh yeah, I suppose so. They had somebody to help me around and show me everything and showed me who everyone was, the teachers, just what every school has done pretty much.

Researcher: Were you pretty happy with those sorts of things that they did. Did you want them to do any more than that?

Alec: Nah, its not really their job to anyway.

Researcher: Okay, do you think that teachers need to be able to help kids with their friendships sometimes?

Alec: No, I reckon they should just leave it . . . it is going to happen sooner or later.

Most students said that they appreciated their teacher's support but felt that it was really up to them though to work out new friendships themselves. Kate said:

I pretty much sorted (friendships) out myself, like (the teacher) kind of put me with one person for the day and then one person gets you the next and the next and you just get the whole group sort of thing. . . . That's how I got to know everyone else and we just all kind of combined and talked and became friends. . . . There is not a lot (teachers) can do because if you decide you don't like someone, you decide you don't like them and they can't really tell you, 'Oh you have to be friends with so and so'. So it just makes more trouble and harder probably really. . . .

She was aware that some students had no friends, and suggested that while teachers might be able to intervene to help in this area, they could only be expected to do so much, and that having friends at school involved individual responsibility:

There is about three kids in my class that no one actually likes—I don't have any problem with them, I talk to them but I am not actually friends with them and maybe if something was done about it, though I don't know what, they would probably have more friends. . . . I don't know what they can do because they kind of keep to themselves, they don't sort of get out and get involved and if they got out and got involved and kind of stop making up excuses they might actually have more friends, so kind of they have got to help themselves for others to help them.

In contrast, Anna, who struggled to have friends, felt that her teachers had not helped her with this aspect of her school life, and she did not feel confident that they would be able to provide the support she needed:

Researcher: You have been telling me you have got quite a few issues with friends like you don't feel as though you have got a group of friends at all. Do any of your teachers help you to get new friends.

Anna: No, not really.

Researcher: None of them have tried to set you up with a buddy or do they help you to work in groups with other kids and that kind of thing? You know like in class, do you ever get to work in groups with other kids or do you just mostly work on your own.

Anna: Mostly I work on my own. Michael is doing the same stuff as me in English and science.

Researcher: Right, what would you like the teachers to do around the friendship thing, would you like the teachers to help you to make friends with the other kids?

Anna: No, because I just think they are pretty useless.

Parents generally agreed that teachers could not force friendships, but they did need to support students' social life at school, and be aware of their particular experiences resulting from transience. One parent said:

Probably a bit more (focus) on the social side of things because like my daughter . . . has always had difficulties in making friends and with us moving she always seems to just get a friend and then we end up moving. That just sort of keeping an eye on that so that she is not just a loner because for the first couple of months at Wooldon School, she was following my son all around the school all day long. I know that's probably just as much our responsibility but I am not there during the day at school so I can't see that. So it is just really keeping an eye on them to make sure that they are fitting in and they are not getting bullied or pushed away.

Mrs Jones also recognised that aspects of Inga's impairments could present further challenges for teachers wanting to encourage friendships at school:

Mrs Jones: ODD, yeah she was diagnosed with ADHD, ODD and borderline mental retardation. . . .

Researcher: Has that affected her through friendships or school relationships?

Mrs Jones: Definitely her friends because she tends to be bossy—would you call it bossy? Probably even to the point of bullying, dominant . . . she hasn't really got to the point of physical, like actually hitting her friends and that. But the verbal abuse is probably just as bad and is quite foul and disgusting for a child of her age. She could teach us a word or two.

Some parents stated that supporting friendships was also the role of the family and other community members. One parent said:

Well there's a girl at school and my daughter said, 'She is strange mum.' And I said 'You have got to give people a go. . . . She might be quite a nice girl for all you know'. And um she was quite a nice girl. And I think, parents need to communicate a lot better with their kids. Like I am straight with my kids and plenty of parents in Wooldon can communicate with their kids to give people a chance . . . to find out what they are like.

Teachers' beliefs were mixed when it came to their views about their role in the promotion of friendships for students in their classrooms. It was common for teachers to feel that "they could only do so much", and a few teachers attributed a lack of friendships to transient students' personalities. The research literature encourages teachers to be alert to students' social experiences at school. Teachers need to develop an understanding of the features of students' social relationships because these can provide them with a framework for making good decisions about supporting their students' social lives (Cushing & Kennedy, 2003).

In this study, teachers were aware of some variations in students' social experiences as a result of age with one teacher suggesting that older students may experience greater difficulties with friendships:

There is not that shyness as much at that younger level as there is when they get older. I mean certainly in the teenage years that's really important for them to be able to feel comfortable with meeting new people and trying to fit in.

The teachers also explained that secondary students at Wooldon, who did not go to boarding school became even closer, or 'tight knit', and developed their own specific mores and norms. For example, one teacher said:

There is a core group of kids who have been Wooldon kids all their lives basically and they are a quite happy go lucky bunch. And they are willing to accept anyone that conforms to their mores or norms. If you sit outside that, then it can become very difficult, very quick.

Gender was considered to be less influential, with teachers agreeing that for girls and boys, sport was popular and involvement in this promoted the development of social relationships at Wooldon School.

## Bullying

Most of the students in the study referred to bullying both at school and on the way to and from school. Kate was one of the few who said that she had not encountered bullying at Wooldon School because usually “it gets sorted out because they go and talk to everyone sometimes because it is so small and you can’t really avoid everyone and they get told to get over it. And they get over it and they are talking the next day”. Bullying had been a problem for her in other schools she had attended and had involved “your hair colour, simple stupid things and boys”.

Inga said that getting bullied and having no friends were the worst things about school. She was bullied by one girl in particular and by some of the boys who called her names. She said:

Inga: I don’t want to do netball if Claire is around. . . . she beats me up and stuff. . . . she’s like bigger in the waist and taller. . . . She still calls me names and stuff but I don’t care. Names don’t hurt and I don’t really care if she tries to beat me up either as long as she doesn’t give me a black eye or anything, so that’s okay

Researcher: So the teachers don’t know about it, does anything ever happen at school or do the teachers know about it do you think?

Inga: I don’t know.

Researcher: Do things happen at school (to stop bullying)?

Inga: No not really.

Britney (aged 10) also said that bullying was one of the things she hated about school, but that with time things had improved:

Um, one of the things that I hate about school is bullies. And how people like write things like ‘I hate you’ on other people’s belongings. And that happened to me last year and this year. . . . they don’t like to give new people a chance. And they were like that with me but once I had been here for a while it was like ‘Oh she is okay’ and they were being my friends

One parent described how her child was bullied on the school bus and how she had taken matters into her own hands by going on to the bus and making an “announcement” about the issue:

Let’s face it kids can be the nastiest pieces of work. My daughter has had a hard time on the bus. . . . I mean (called) ‘slut’ and all this. . . . by (older) kids. . . . I mean ‘nice’. I think the school has a lot to do with this. They don’t really back up. Like as far as I am concerned, they condoned bullying because nothing was ever really said. No punishment was ever dealt out. . I mean I expected firm discipline over this. I really did, and it got to the point where I was dragging her out of bed, ‘Get up and go to school’, she wasn’t wanting to go. That was hard, because she knew what she was getting on the bus for. . . . I (got on the bus) and threatened them.

One student felt that school was characterised by “a lot of bullying” and said that in response he was capable of behaving “in an unsocial manner” himself. He was aware of the school’s anti-bullying procedures but did not think they worked very well:

Ah the first step is um, report to the teacher, walk away, then report to the teacher, um, that's step one, and then there's step two and then step three and step four. That's primary school and here (in Year 7), you just get a detention.

Another student said that older students picked on her and teased her “because I have got big teeth and I have got short hair and I look like a boy”. She usually dealt with it by telling them to go away and would also report to the teachers, although her perception was that “they don't really punish the kids, they just let them get away with it”. A younger primary age student also said she was teased a lot about her physical appearance:

The bad thing about school is that I get teased a lot about my teeth. I don't really like showing them because people laugh at me and my dad said that one day I will get braces but we don't have the money yet. . . . And next year I am going to be in (another class) and um I am not sure if I will get teased there or not but I probably will because there is this boy called Cory and there is another boy called Craig and they tease me a lot.

She did not feel she could talk with her teacher about bullying “because she is grumpy”, and she did not feel that there was another person in the school who could help her with this issue.

Child: I just walk away and go and play in the play ground and sometimes I sit in the corner and cry. . . . And sometimes our teacher sees me and she makes other kids in the class cry too.

Researcher: Because why- what does she do to make them cry?

Child: She just yells at them and tells them off and she gets really really angry and well mean.

Researcher: Do you worry about that?

Child: Sometimes—every time I go home I come back crying because of what she's done. It makes me upset.

Another primary age student thought that it was difficult for teachers to intervene effectively in bullying and suggested that more attention needed to be paid to bullying, rather than to the “little” things at school:

Well there is nothing much that they can do. Like a lot of people are getting in trouble for it but like they just keep doing it and doing it and doing it. . . . But I think like when someone does write on your desk or something, they should try to find that person and maybe like lock the doors during play time and lunch time . . . . or maybe like more cameras in the room, just more things. And then like maybe make it a little harder, like if someone does that if maybe they spend the lunch time inside or something or just like write an apology. Like (some teachers make) people write apology notes for little things and if someone is like kind of more bigger, or might hurt someone's feelings, a teacher could go, ‘Oh well just ignore them, if they want to be stupid they can’ and not really worrying about it, it is just the little stuff that they are (paying attention to) most of the time.

In the interview with her mother, this student complained that in the past she had been given a detention that she perceived was unfair, because she had supported another transient student who was being bullied:

(That teacher) was a cow cause she made me stay. . . . She made me because I was the only one sticking up for Heidi, because the teacher didn't do anything about it. Everyone . . . . was picking on Heidi. And she didn't know and didn't do anything about it. And I said "Did you know while you were there, everyone was picking on her? And Heidi was very upset and crying." . . . And then she yelled at me. . . . And just because of that um Peter, Heidi, Jo and me got a detention, writing an apology note to (that teacher). I reckon she should be writing an apology note to us.

One family noted that it was important to have clear lines of communication between families and schools when bullying occurred. Mrs Connor described an incident at another school where she made a direct complaint to the principal after her daughter was bullied as a new student:

There was one lot that were actually stopping her from going home at night and saying that they were going to beat the crap out of her. And if she told anybody that, they were going to get all their families mixed in with the gang to come and sort her out, which wasn't good for a nine year old to be hearing. When I finally found out that it was happening and I took it to the school, the principal told me she was going to go to the police and I never heard anything else from it. . . . I felt I could have been kept informed. They could have rung me and said "Look this is what we have done. This is what is happening." So I got to the point where I was too scared to send my daughter to school.

The Smiths felt that many rural schools their children had attended had a "bullying culture" that was not always addressed:

Well there is a bullying culture that seems to be just happening in so many of the country schools that we have gone to. The principals have the idea that 'if we don't accept that there is a bullying problem, we don't have a problem.' And in our daughter's case . . . . we have been forced to move. . . . We moved from one school because of bullying, and it seemed that the principal's policy was that 'if we get rid of the kid that is being picked on, we don't have a bullying problem.'

Bullying at school is a major issue that can affect students' safety, well-being, and healthy development. Bullying has been shown to have serious and often long-term effects on students' mental health, including depression (Keisner, 2002; Juvonen & Gross, 2005). One study looking at students' transition to a new school showed that those who were bullied were more likely to avoid their peers and experience distress and that being bullied was associated with subsequent problems including leaving school at a young age, social avoidance, and depression (Vernberg, Abwender, Ewell, & Beery, 1992). The research literature points to the need for positive change in school-wide cultures in order to address the issue of bullying at school (Dickinson, 2001; Gaffney, Higgins, McCormack, & Taylor, 2004; Higgins, 2005; MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001; Sullivan, 2000). A school's beliefs and values help to create its culture and this culture forms the foundation for a school's pedagogy, structure, and relationships (Hardy, 1996; Neville, 1998).

## Outcasts

Transient students may be more at risk of rejection because they may not “fit in” with the existing peer group. This may trigger bullying and rejection that further complicates their social acceptance in the school as they withdraw further from the peer group and experience further rejection. Juvonen and Gross (2005) suggest that rejected students are more likely to be distressed and more sensitive to social rejection, and that this affects their ability to easily fit or belong to their peer group. Thus, there is potential for a downward spiral effect for rejected students that makes the development of positive relationships even less likely. Through this process, students may become outcasts.

In this study, eight of the thirteen students said that there were times when they did not feel that they belonged at school or in the community, and they worried about being different. One family described constantly feeling like “outsiders” in several communities and described feeling ostracised because of their origins:

Mother: So we find with moving around a lot, you are constantly an outsider. And with us being outsiders it is almost impossible for the kids to break in, too. . . . And the other thing we have had is we are North Islanders.

Father: Oh yes, a lot of people don't like that either.

Mother: ‘What are you doing in the South Island? Go back home’.

Kate suggested that this could be a particular problem in some schools but not in others. She said that it could be difficult to get to know other students, but in some school situations everybody “was in the same boat”. She described having her best social experiences at Intermediate:

. . . from the first day you are all in the same boat and then you just kind of grow up together and then you branch out and you have to go to high school . . . it was an intermediate and it was big enough that there were heaps of people but it was real good after you knew everyone.

Inga felt that she did not belong at school. She described being embarrassed to walk into class late, and she worried about mufti days:

Inga: . . . I am really embarrassed to go to the class room when I am late at school... I don't like walking in the classroom when I am late, especially on mufti days. I sit in the toilet all day and morning.

Researcher: You sit in the toilets all day, why is that?

Inga: Because I don't like to go in the class in mufti. . . . just in case it's like not mufti or something and I forget.

Researcher: Oh in case you make a mistake or something, or forget. I see. So what do you wear when you do mufti, what kind of things do you wear.

Inga: I just wear pants or something or shorts. When I was, ages ago when I moved here, I never had any sweat pants or tops and even on cold days, and rainy days, I used to always used to wear jandals and shorts.

Aaron said that transience meant it was very difficult to “fit in” at school. He appreciated that his teachers had tried to help him, but he felt that he had no “real” friends at Wooldon school:

Aaron: All it is really is kids who like you and kids that don't, kids who bully you, kids who scare you, kids who are annoying, all those things. . . . It is just popular kids, unpopular kids, extremely unpopular kids, and extremely unpopular kids.

Researcher: Where would you say you were on that

Aaron: Extremely extremely.

Anna also felt socially isolated at school. She had no friends and perceived that her teachers did like her. She described the worst thing about school as “the older kids picking on me . . . and giving me a hard time”. Anna, who had attended 13 schools, said that her best school experience had been at the Correspondence School, where, interestingly, there are fewer interactions with a peer group or teacher.

Most of the teachers believed that the size and closeness of the community, combined with the effects of transience, itself, and students' individual personality characteristics affected how easily transient students fitted into the school:

. . . the kids (in Wooldon) have been together since the day dot. They all went to nursery school and play centre and everything. It could be quite hard for some of them to break in, especially coming with some of the issues that they do have. And they have got their barriers up already as well. Fitting in would be something they might have trouble experiencing. Everyone is generally really friendly though on the staff, So everyone would go out of their way to make sure they know where they are going and that sort of thing. It can be quite a shock for them coming in, though. . . . Everyone knows everyone and knows what everyone gets up to and probably everyone knows about them before they even come here. And they come to school and they go ‘Oh you are the new kid. I heard such and such’, but that's just a small town.

One of the primary aged students suggested that it would help if teachers could select buddies carefully using students who understood what transience was like:

I think they should buddy (new people) up with someone maybe like Emily, she just came here, and maybe that Jodie can go and play with Emily because Jodie was the new girl and now that's Emily. So they both know what it is like to be new and then like since Emily's old school was different than this school, well maybe she could go ‘Oh well at this school we don't do that here’ . . . Like, Emily, she is different because it is obvious that her (old) school was maybe more relaxed about things. Like she gets in to trouble but the things she is getting in trouble for are like playing with her dolls during school time and obviously at her old school they allowed it. And everyone is going ‘look at her, she keeps getting told off all the time’ and not actually giving her much of a chance . . . and like Samantha goes ‘How come you are being so nice to her?’, and I go ‘Because I know what it feels like.’

Rural communities are “way too small” and have unique challenges in regards to difference.

Students and parents in this study felt that the small size of the community could have both positive and negative effects on families' attempts to "fit in". Parents described the community in a variety of ways. It felt welcoming for some and unwelcoming for others. It was considered to be "tight-knit" and some thought it was monocultural. The school was described in similar ways and, in addition, was noted for its strong sporting culture. Illustrating Wooldon's complicated nature, Mrs Green, for example, who had lived in Wooldon previously as a child, described it as a friendly place where everyone knew "everyone's business", and she wasn't able to advise a new family about how to become a part of the community. She said:

Researcher: So would you describe it as a friendly place?

Mrs Green: Yeah, it is, because everyone wants to know everyone else's business {laughs}.

Researcher: Is that a friendly thing?

Mrs Green: Yeah it is. It gets around the town pretty quick about different types of people. So if someone that came into the town that was into drugs it would be around the town pretty quick.

Researcher: So very small community.

Mrs Green: It's very close knit.

Researcher: So for new people trying to break in as well to that, how can they best do it?

Mrs Green: Oh I wouldn't have a clue.

Only one new family felt welcomed by the community:

When we moved to (one small South Island town) . . . they basically ousted us because we were from the North Island. . . . In Wooldon, you don't get that.

Because of the community's small size, one of the students in this family had found it relatively easy to find after-school and weekend work within Wooldon:

Yeah, I cook and I take orders and make things and clean tables and do dishes and a few other things. . . . Yeah, and I have also been told I have got another job and I am waiting for that to start. . . . It will be doing the pamphlets. I have done it before and they had my name down and they rang up and said that they needed someone so I will be doing it once a week.

However another family felt that it had taken about three years to be accepted:

Mother: We had a wonderful lady up the road here . . . and they totally pushed her because she wasn't a local.

Researcher: Oh so it is a closed (community)?

Mother: Oh very, very very clicky. I started playing pool three years ago and I am at the stage now where it is 'Sue', it's really funny. They nod and go 'Sue'. It is so funny. . . . Before that I wouldn't even get looked at and they are just very into their locals.

Because of the size of the community, the participants said that they had fewer opportunities to make friends, as one parent noted:

It is very hard in an area like Wooldon, it is not the number of kids, and like there is only a few kids of their own age group who actually live in the town, so they don't have a great deal of choice who to have as friends and who to associate with.

Some parents and teachers stated that the small size of the school also did not guarantee that classes had a gender balance of girls and boys in each class, which made it difficult for some students in this study to find friends in their own year. On the other hand, Kate noted that the small size of the school made it easier for her to get to know her teachers and classmates:

Kate: It's okay, because it is small. It is kind of better because you get along with the teachers better and like other students . . . and you actually find out what they are like quicker so you can judge for yourself. It's good being small.

Researcher: Do you feel as though you have managed to fit in reasonably easily?

Kate: Yeah. It hasn't been difficult or anything because there are (only a few) girls in our class and we all get along and we will go out if there's things or kind of be friends.

Researcher: I can see how you would get to know people really well because that's all there is, just the three of you.

Kate: Yeah

Researcher: What's it been like in other schools, have you found it more difficult in bigger schools to get to know people.

Kate: Yeah, it is kind of different. Like in School X, because it is an all-girls school there is a lot of fighting and cattiness. And then you go to a co-ed school and it is quite big again and it takes a while, like having about 20 people in one class and 32 in another so you never get to know people.

The students, parents, and teachers agreed that the school's small size made it difficult to offer a wide range of subjects at the secondary school level. This was a concern for students who had different or unique interests. Kate noted that taking a subject of interest through the Correspondence School was difficult because teachers did not always have the curriculum knowledge and experience needed to support students:

Kate: Yes, well this school doesn't really offer you that many subjects. . . . And they are not really a help at all, like accounting is nothing I imagined I would have ever done, but it is my other subject. . . .

Researcher: Are you doing accounting by correspondence.

Kate: Yes, you have to do it for that. . . . It is different because we don't actually have any teachers in the school that know it. It is kind of hard because you don't have a set teacher to help you and you kind of ask questions and they go, 'I don't know what it is'. And it is, 'Oh well okay.' It is pretty difficult.

## The community and Māori culture

Jeanna, even though she was not Māori, enjoyed kapa haka, which she took at her previous school. However, this was not offered at Wooldon:

There is like no kapa haka group, no choir group, no rock band, which we did at School P. We had kapa haka, choir and rock band and everything like that. And I was in them apart from choir.

The two participating families who were Māori also noted that their children were interested in their Māori culture, but Wooldon School did not teach Te Reo Māori. One mother believed that this reflected 'real life' and that it was up to her daughter to research her Māoridom:

Mother: I don't think they do a lot of Māori at school, do you? They do more religious studies crap rather than Māori. And we are not religious at all to the point that her father actually kicked up a fuss about it.

Researcher: Do you do any Māori at school?

Daughter: When we say hello.

Mother: I thought that was part of the uniform curriculum throughout New Zealand schools as well. . . . We have got a redneck town {laughs}. But then in a realistic world - this is going to sound really harsh- but if she gets what she wants at school, that's sort of saying to her that life should be like that. And I don't think life is like that. So I mean if she was that interested, I mean she could find somewhere to do it herself.

Another family said that their daughter enjoyed learning Te Reo Māori in the past and they had asked Wooldon School to enrol her in the Correspondence School for this, but that this had not happened:

Father: She did like and was doing really well with Māori. And then that's one of the things that when we moved to Wooldon and I said I wanted her to keep up with her Māori. [They said] 'We don't do Māori here' and I said, 'Yes and that's why I would like her to stay dual enrolled with the correspondence school'. . . . They didn't listen to a word we said but then another teacher got involved and things started happening (in other parts of the curriculum).

Researcher: Is she learning some Māori?

Father: No, they have just completely wiped that. . . .

Mother: And actually these days just in terms of their future, it would be a good thing.

Father: That is their language that is growing. It really is growing. . . .

Mother: What concerns me is how they took it off her when she was really doing quite well with it and it was something that was a little piece of her.

Participating teachers at Wooldon felt that Māori students were not any more likely to be transient; however two out of the six families in the study identified as Māori, and two other

Māori families arrived and left during the study. Teachers did not feel they had the expertise themselves to fully promote Te Reo and Tikanga Māori in the school, although we did observe some primary classes undertaking work in this area of the curriculum. In the past the school had employed Māori from the local community to provide support in these areas. One new teacher said:

Well the new students since I have been here (ethnicity) wouldn't have an impact. By looking at the list of students that were transient, and there is a few Māoris that have been moving. But I haven't been here long enough to really understand how the Māori culture is and to really understand how that would impact on anybody.

## Sports

The project's participants all agreed that Wooldon School's culture revolved around sports, particularly rugby. One parent felt that:

They are very sports focused, a bit too much, I mean they tend to fade away on the other stuff. But don't get me wrong because I think sports is very important for kids.

One of the teachers noted that boys who played rugby, as opposed to boys who read books, would find it easier to fit in at school, and that the girls played netball or were into horses:

Teacher: If they are a boy, and they come around rugby season and they play rugby, then they fit in a lot easier than if they were into books. And I am not saying that's wrong because especially in like the level that I am teaching here, all the boys are rugby mad. And yeah, they are in the team, and that sort of thing would help them fit in.

Researcher: What about girls?

Teacher: They will play netball. Most of them will play netball. They are all horse mad around here.

One parent said that she believed that rugby could eclipse other activities, like school camp, if the class had more boys in it:

Mother: Yeah, it is like my daughter was saying with school camp coming up, apparently she is not going to go because it is a rugby trip. The teacher is organising some trip to do with rugby games and stuff. And I mean that's not something that girls are interested in.

Mr Brown: I don't know why she can't go on camp with the year above her or the year below with the smaller kids. And (my daughter) ended up missing out on camp as well because of that.

The three students who played sports did fit easily into the school, while the students who did not were more likely to encounter difficulties. Mark, Alec, and Tania were very "sporty", played rugby, and stated that they had many friends, although Mark felt that his team-mates were

acquaintances rather than friends. Alec was the only participant who named Wooldon School as his favourite school and this was because of its sporting culture. He said:

Alec: Yeah, and I like the sports and it is a real sporty school, I like that. . . . I play rugby for the team but I play every sport.

Researcher: I have got a son who is just like that. He is a little bit younger than you but he is into all the sports too. And you like the PE?

Alec: Yeah. It is my favourite

Researcher: Your favourite subject. Of the schools that you have been to, which school did you like the best?

Alec: Probably Wooldon. . . . Because it is the most sporty school I have been to.

The participants noted that the small size of the school prevented it from offering a variety of sporting activities like swimming, soccer or archery. Aaron enjoyed soccer, but playing against other teams would involve travelling. He said that he disliked school because soccer wasn't played there, and his family could not regularly transport him to such activities:

Researcher: Do you like school ?

Aaron: No. . . . Ah it is boring. They don't play soccer.

Inga, who had few friends and said that she was bullied at school, said that she was prevented from playing sports because she was not permitted to interact with another girl with whom she had had a conflict. She said:

I'm not allowed to play sports. Well, I was playing netball but I couldn't because I am not allowed to play anything when the girl Claire is around.

However the community was described by several participants as "tight knit", and one teacher suggested that a negative perception of a family could prevent their children from being accepted, even if they did play sports:

Oh yes we have got two that just arrived at the end of this year. They were ready before they walked in the school gates and the community really tends to be quite accurate. . . . And it is not very nice. They make it very difficult and then, of course, the other kids stick to their current social group. This child is coming in and trying to break in . . . . And I can't make the kids be friends. I can group them in class. We can put them in teams for sport but . . . . you can't say 'You must be friends'. . . . And some of the parents don't want their kids to be friendly with those people.

### *An ethos of clemency*

Notably, Inga, finished her interview by recommending that to improve her experiences in Wooldon there needed to be an increase in population and an ethos of clemency be developed in the school:

Researcher: Good, okay, anything else you want to say for the tape about what Wooldon could do to make things better?

Inga: Get more people in. Try and make more kids at this school be nice and not bully people around and beat them and like call people names.

### **Summary of findings: The lived experience of transience**

#### *Reasons for family movement*

Families moved between districts for a variety of reasons, but primarily to improve their circumstances. Some families came to Wooldon because it was thought to be a safe community with affordable housing and a good school. Others came in search of farming-related and seasonal work. Some families also described past experiences of moving within the same district because they had been dissatisfied with their child's school experience. This variation in families' experiences is consistent with findings in the wider research literature (see, for example, Gilbert, 2005).

#### *"Good" teachers*

Students in the study described "good teachers" as those who formed positive relationships with students and were friendly and easy for students to relate to. Their favourite teachers were kind, nice, caring, fair, and trustworthy. Teachers helped students to learn by making learning fun, by listening to students and acknowledging their learning needs, and by explaining school work so students could understand. One student made the point that it was good to be able to reciprocate her favourite teacher's help. Students consistently told us that they disliked teachers who were grumpy or intimidating. Relationships were also salient for parents who valued fairness, consistency, and approachability in teachers. One parent said that schools need to be understanding of, and communicate with parents about, transient students' academic and social experiences. She encouraged teachers to recognise that transience is an adult problem inherited by students, and not the fault of the students themselves.

#### *Students' academic experiences*

Academic and/or social difficulties were experienced by 11 of the 13 students in the study. This finding is consistent with the research literature that associates transience with academic and social challenges at school (Gilbert, 2005; Kariuki & Nash, 1999; Lee, 2001; Sanderson, 2003; Shafft, 2003). Three students had significant academic needs and two of these students had a diagnosis of mild intellectual disability. Students, parents, and teachers described transience as contributing to students' learning challenges. Students could repeat work undertaken at other schools and miss out on other parts of the curriculum altogether, and social difficulties could interfere with their learning in the classroom. Issues relating to transience can bring further experiences of transience. One student had lost interest in school, was truant, and was moved to another foster home and school. Three students had significant learning needs requiring responsive assessment and teaching, and their experiences highlighted the need for accurate record keeping and the timely transfer of information between schools. One student with an

intellectual disability had incomplete records that did not convey her diagnosis, and she had no support from GSE despite this being required. Over the years parents of these three students seemed to have received limited information about their children's learning challenges and progress, or about the education support that was available. Two senior students wanted to leave school at age 16, despite their parents and teachers discouraging this, and one parent emphasised that schools needed to demonstrate to students the real disadvantages associated with leaving school without qualifications.

#### *Students' social experiences*

The majority of students in the study had experienced social difficulties at school in the past, with seven out of thirteen continuing to experience social difficulties at Wooldon School. Three students had no real friends and felt they did not belong. Variations were noted, and six students described having friends and being part of a social group. The school had a strong sporting culture and transient students involved in sport reported close friendships and strong social links as a consequence. Of the three students who did not have friends, two had diagnoses of mild intellectual disability, and a third said that he was "different" because his interests (including his sporting interests) were different from those of the other boys at school. Anna, in Year 11, also said she had different interests from her peers and Inga preferred to play with younger students. Students appreciated the support of their teachers to develop friendships, but most felt that this was not really the teacher's job, and that it was up to them, themselves, to make new friends. Anna was the only student who felt that she had received no help from teachers in this area of her life and she was unconvinced that she ever would. Parents emphasised that teachers do need to recognise the challenges their children faced having to constantly work on developing new friendships, and to see the social domain as critical to their children's learning. Like some of their children, they also alluded to children themselves carrying some responsibility to make friends. Teachers' views on their role in this area were mixed. Several agreed that students' social experiences were important and that teachers played a role in developing these in positive ways. However, it was common for teachers to feel they could only do so much, and that students and families also carried responsibilities. A few teachers attributed a lack of friendships to transient students' personalities.

Some students showed a resilience, ability, and willingness to adapt to the many changes in their lives. Some had progressed very well academically, and some students were part of a supportive peer group and had close friends. Further research could productively investigate the factors and contexts that contribute to these students' positive experiences.

#### *The community is small*

Some teachers felt that the small and "tight knit" nature of the Wooldon community could have positive implications for some families, but it could also make it difficult for new families and students to be accepted. Parents agreed, and only one family described feeling welcome. The small size of the school meant that students had few students their age with whom they could forge friendships, and it was difficult to offer a wide range of subjects and curriculum expertise.

Some students liked the small size, however, commenting that it was easy to get to know everybody.

### *Bullying*

Most of the students referred to bullying at school and in the community, and several described this as the thing they hated most about school. Students knew about the school's bullying procedures, but some felt that these were not always effective. One child felt that more attention should be paid to bullying rather than to the "little things" that concerned some teachers. Students talked about wanting people to be nice to them and to be accepting towards newcomers, and one child concluded her interview by saying that school would be better if it had more people, and if kids were made to be "nice and not bully people around". Families described bullying as a concern in several schools and one family had moved their children between schools because of it. They asked for clear lines of communication between school and family when bullying occurred and for bullying incidences to be taken seriously and addressed effectively. Bullying is a major issue that can affect students' safety, well-being, and healthy development (Keisner, 2002; Juvonen & Gross, 2005). For some students in the study, the negative effects of bullying simply compounded other problems resulting from transience, and relegated them to the position of "outcast" (Juvonen & Gross, 2005). The research points to the need for positive changes in school culture in order to effectively address bullying (Higgins, 2005, Gaffney et al., 2000; MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001).

### *Tikanga and te reo Māori*

Two of the six families in the study were Māori and two other Māori families arrived and left during the study. Another transient student who was Pākehā was interested in participating in kapa haka. Parents asked that their children's interests in this area be responded to at school, but while some teachers undertook classroom work in te reo and tikanga Māori, the teachers did not feel they had the expertise needed to fully promote this aspect of the curriculum at Wooldon. They had received local community support to do this in the past, but currently this support was not available.

## 4. The action-research process

This section describes the processes, decisions, and teaching initiatives within the community of practice.

### **Establishing the community of practice**

The difficulties faced by transient students were highlighted as being of particular concern at Wooldon School. For this project, a community of practice was consequently established in the school by the principal and deputy principal to collaboratively and, with the researchers, reflexively explore issues relating to teaching and learning for transient students. The six participating teachers (two male, four female) included the principal and deputy principal, and had a wide range of educational and teaching experience. The four classroom teachers within the group had taught for between three and five years and had been at Wooldon School for approximately two to three years. They all had transient students in their homeroom and were asked to join the group by the principal. The deputy principal and principal, had a total of 55 years of teaching experience between them, and had been at Wooldon for four and five years respectively. They were both interested in this project and the principal had initiated it at the school. One stated that she hoped to see an improvement in the school's teaching practice by sharing information:

I think our practices . . . aren't as solid as they should be. We want to improve our practices in terms of the ways in which (teachers) . . . operate, in terms of taking a session on sharing student information. And that would apply to all students, including families that have just arrived. So we know that we could benefit collegially by better sharing of information.

All of the teachers in the community of practice stated in their initial interviews near the beginning of the project that the issue of transience had not been addressed in their pre-service training or in any other professional development activities that they had undertaken. They all believed, though, that transience was associated with social and academic difficulties. For example, one teacher stated:

Generally I think that they (have) broken experiences for one thing. They form bonds of trust and because they move the bonds of trust are broken and I think that transient kids at times have greater difficulty in forming solid relationships with their teacher. . . with other people within the school, (and) with peers as well.

Another teacher pointed out that the child's social life and academic life were intertwined in that if a child was not accepted at school, then this would affect their ability to learn in the classroom:

I mean it is very hard for a child that has been shifted around to pick up the routine and go with it because they have had so many different routines. . . . When they can't pick up the routine they can't manage their time and therefore their work doesn't get done on time or doesn't get handed in. . . . Like this is a generalisation, but . . . sometimes they are not accepted socially. That can have a really negative effect on their education because they are not a hundred per cent engaged in what they are doing in the class room.

One teacher believed that transient families also generally had social and economic issues that they were seeking to improve by finding cheaper housing:

I think there are social and economic issues. I don't see that gender is a particular issue and in terms of ethnicity or race, I don't think that's a particular issue. I think it is across the board. But I think it is based around the economic situation. I think most transients, from my opinion and my experience, many transient families are those who have very limited income and possibly limited background in terms of occupations and probably social skills too. . . . Once upon a time in this community, transient families would have been based around the shearing industry. It is not so prevalent now. Many local contractors are employing local people and basing people locally. So our transient families now are generally families that have come for cheap accommodation. They are generally on government fixed incomes and therefore are not necessarily looking for work. They are in a position where they are maybe not able to work for whatever reasons.

Another teacher said that she believed that even though some transient families were hoping to improve their lifestyles through moving that they also brought their unresolved difficulties with them:

Some people run away from whatever. Some people think they are 'running to' but people don't handle their baggage well. And . . . we get a little bit of that, like debt, economics, job opportunities perceptions. Perceptions are that 'things are going to be better when we move there' but . . . after nine months it has all gone hard again because we haven't got a history of handling whatever the issues were in the first place. . . . It all goes with you.

Like the principals in Gilbert's (2005) study, teachers in the community of practice meetings could label and categorise transient students in negative ways. Transient students were considered to be a disruption to the school and to their teaching. One teacher stated that this disruption was further compounded by the size of the school and the mobility patterns of transient students.

. . . the class sizes are so tiny here that any entrance of a new kid during the year is a disruption because they become a high percentage of kids in the class, just in that one person. . . . Socially, they can be quite disruptive with the current cohort or the current culture of the class. That can be an issue and . . . I have noticed that they don't just come once. . . . The transients will come and then go and come back again.

Some teachers also indicated that there were limits on what they could do, and that the social difficulties that students experienced were also caused by their own behaviours or personalities:

I know where he is coming from and feel sorry for him that he doesn't have anyone to play with and (know) how to handle his behaviour leading up to now. He has created the division. . . . And his interests are so different to the rest of the boys in the class. . . . I do encourage him though but there is only so much you can do at times.

I have seen kids come in and fit very very quickly and they know the basic things like where the toilets and the office and the sick bay are quite quickly. And other kids, still, after a couple of days, are struggling to find things. And sometimes it is learned helplessness. And sometimes it is the fact that their personality puts people off and they don't want to help them.

All of the teachers acknowledged, though, that there was much to be learned about transience and that they expected that the community of practice would increase their knowledge and awareness of issues. Their own preferred mode of learning was discussed in their interviews, and most stated that they learned by reading and "doing". One teacher said she liked to read information, discuss it, then put it into practice, and evaluate it, which was a similar process to a research activity. She said:

I think you have got to do lots of reading. You have got to do lots of reading, and lots of discussion, and share ideas, and then trial something, and then go back and suss out how it works. And then perhaps go back to the theory behind it all, and then start again. So the whole process for research type of processing.

Another teacher explained that report writing and assignments encouraged his learning:

The accountable way that I learn best is receive information, make sure I process it by, maybe an assignment, and then do some work around that. And then share that in a collegial situation. So a report back situation. That works best for me because otherwise I am not accountable and I just won't do it.

It was intended that the community of practice would be a site for the coconstruction of knowledge about teaching and learning by researchers and teachers, and that the community of practice would ascribe to constructivist principles of learning (Applefield, Huber, & Moallem, 2001; Buysee et al., 2003). These principles encourage learners to speak openly; communicate ideas; be challenged by and challenge ideas; engage in reflection; have opportunities for dialogue; and work with theoretical ideas that can be applied in the classroom. The conversation below at the end of the project suggests that both researchers and teachers valued this learning context and benefited overall from the community of practice experience:

Researcher: And would you do this project again?

Teacher: Yes.

Researcher: You would?

Teacher: Yeah, definitely.

Researcher: I quite enjoyed it I have to admit. It was new and different for me, and it is nice working with a school. I thought it was quite interesting really and also talking with the children.

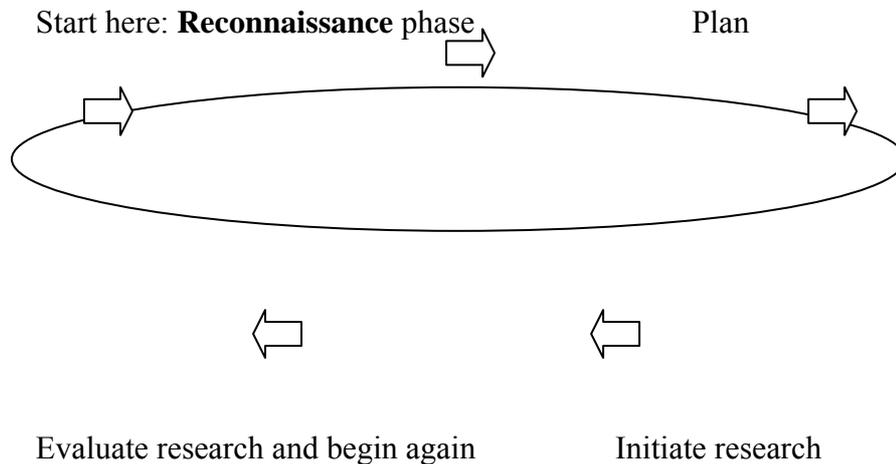
Teacher: Yeah, it is quite good to have people like you who are objective. You know you come in and you have got ideas that are (different)—because of your non-involvement. You can have quite objective ideas and there is a lot of—‘Oh okay, maybe we need to stop and think.’ There was a lot of that. . . . And that would come up in teachers’ discussion afterwards.

## The action-research reconnaissance phase

### Community of practice

The process for developing Wooldon School’s action-research project followed an action-research cycle as suggested by Mills (2003). (see Figure 1)

Figure 1 **The action-research cycle as suggested by Mills (2003)**



The research cycle begins with the reconnaissance phase, or taking stock of the issue in its context. The community of practice meetings began with the researchers facilitating meetings that focused on:

- the aims of the project
- research themes about transience
- how a community of practice operates
- the action-research process.

Wooldon School’s strengths and weakness in regards to transient students were identified in the reconnaissance phase through meetings and brainstorming activities. These included:

- areas of challenge in the school
- areas of strength in the school
- areas needing more attention
- areas of challenge in the school.

Areas of challenge in the school included:

- difficulties with social relationships and friendships, and fitting in (although there were some interesting and notable exceptions)
- the rural nature of the school and the small, close-knit community
- low levels of involvement in community and extra-curricula activities
- poor attitudes toward learning, with teachers describing students as:
  - having a “defensive wall” around them
  - underachieving—doing “the minimum to get through” and asking “what’s the point?”
  - not aspiring to change
- teachers’ attitudes—“Here we go again!”
- student peer group attitudes are variable—some are supportive but some labeling of transient students takes place
- significant gaps in learning, including in basic skills, and in maturity
- significant interruptions to class programme and to peer group learning.

Areas of strength in the school included:

- good systems for tracking down student records (although this could be variable)
- feeding assessment data and information to other schools
- the initial reception by school administration
- some successful examples of school entrance (although overall this was very variable)
- older students have a good understanding of issues faced by transient students
- the way rugby provided a context for introductions to other students and to members of the wider community.

Areas needing more attention included:

- the previous school’s response/records
- implementing buddy systems systematically and with training available for buddies (there were particular issues about how to do this at senior school level)
- accessing sufficient support from the RTLB service and from GSE
- matching students with teachers and peer group
- addressing students’ learning gaps in ways that support their self- and group-identity, and not marking them as “different”
- addressing issues of “difference” in specific health and safety areas; in behaviour; and with different teachers
- improving the focus of team meetings about students
- maintaining high expectations for student learning
- ensuring the availability of transport (to allow students to fully participate in school and community life and to support parent involvement at school).

## Initial interviews

During the first term and the reconnaissance phase of this project, the teachers within the community of practice were interviewed by the researchers to document their personal perspectives about teaching and learning in regards to transient students. They were asked to reflect on the approaches they used in their classrooms to include and teach diverse groups of students in general, and transient students in particular. Teachers were aware of the need to support students' sense of belonging at school by making them feel welcome and staying "up to date" with their learning and social experiences, although there was no "formal" approach to induction. Talking to students and getting to know them and their learning history was considered by some teachers to be critical, with one teacher using her professional contacts to stay up-to-date with transient students' progress through schools:

I will be inclusive. Oh you just try and get them involved as quickly as possible so they don't stand out in the periphery, even if they come in the middle of the year you sort of find something they can do to fit in. At the same time you are assessing what they can actually do. . . . I think connecting with the kids is really important, finding out, if necessary home visits. . . . It is just touching base. I have contacted other schools when kids have come in, particularly—you know within half an hour (to see) what the kids are like. If you have got them in the class and you think 'Mm, okay, I need to touch base with (another teacher)'—and I have got lots of contacts so I use them. When the kids have moved on, we contact the schools to make sure that they turn up. . . . not losing kids is really important.

Most of the teachers recognised that in addition to getting to know the student, it was important to quickly assess and ensure that transient students had the prerequisite knowledge needed to undertake class work, and that they knew what was required of them. For example, one teacher said:

Whenever I have got a new student, (I want to know what) their background's been and what they have done in the past, have a word with the child, what have you done, where have you been, do you know how to do this? So I generally just deal with it at the time and from my point of view it is possibly more important that I deal with it myself anyway (so I can) help the kids. . . . and then I worry about what they have done. As far as welcoming them to the class, I always try and make room for them in the project, rather than starting somebody new and trying to catch up.

One teacher talked about trying to make a fresh start for students by not judging them on the basis of labels and previous negative reports:

I just think there are a lot of kids that know they are labelled as 'this' or 'that', and perhaps they have come from a school where they have had a difficult time, or the staff knew them as 'that kid'. I think it would be nice for them to come to a new school and have a fresh start, and for us to just sit back and make our own judgements of them based on what we see rather than what we have heard from other staff. I mean sure you do take notice of what other staff say because they have taught them. But to make it obvious to the kid that you are not already judging them on what you have heard, and you are making your own judgement based on what you can see. I think that can sort of build a better rapport with that child.

Another teacher referred to the need to focus on academic standards, with goals set over time to ensure that students lagging behind their peer group will catch up:

My expectation is that if the kiddy is behind we can have a programme that is going to catch them up. . . . over a time span, maybe 18 months or even 2 years or you know, always looking at more than a year's growth in a year . . . if a child is 9 and they are working at a 6 year old level, you have got to say at the end of this year I want that kiddy to be working at 7½ , and do some catch up. . . . A lot of kids we see with heaps of potential, and you think positively that they are better than average, but their work to date is worse than average. So you think, 'well I have got to shift this kid from one point to another'. Provided you have enough time with that kid and they don't move on.

However, he conceded that "nine times out of ten" there was insufficient time available to meet these goals.

Two teachers described making few, if any accommodations in terms of curriculum delivery for transient children and one noted the challenges of including transient children in secondary school within an existing class programme that is up and running:

As a class room teacher, I have got to introduce them into my learning area and the rules and requirements of that. Quite often if you go through what that kid has been doing in the year already you get—'Oh I have done this, it is boring' . . . . You can't, if a kid comes in to the school and they have already covered the work and we haven't done it yet, there is nothing I can do about that. They have to just fit in. . . . As far as what the rest of the class is doing. I am not changing that for one student to come through, and who is probably likely not to be here for long.

Deliberate and productive sharing of assessment and teaching and learning information relating to new students was mentioned by several teachers as important. Some teachers felt the small size of the school was advantageous in that informal opportunities to share information were readily available.

Here we tend to do it informally rather than formally. Conversations at morning tea and lunch time are really, really important, just to say 'this is what I have found', or 'that kid seems really with it and switched on, how are you finding her?', and going from there. If someone has an issue you can deal with it quite quickly. The fact that we are so small is great.

Nonetheless some teachers felt that while syndicate meetings were used to share information about students, a more formal, structured approach was needed to ensure that information was accurate, shared and used productively to enhance learning.

## The research plan

In the planning phase of the project, issues for transient students and their teachers and educational issues, strategies, and ideas about improving transient students' school experiences from the research literature (see Appendix E) were presented to the community of practice. The issues included:

- the curriculum may need flattening—some teachers may need to “flatten the curriculum” in order to “get the transient child up to speed”. This affects the other students’ learning
- transient students are time consuming
- resources may or may not be available
- transient students are needy in terms of their social and academic experiences
- transient students may have identity issues (Who am I? Where am I? Where do I fit?)
- transient students/families may have health issues, and issues relating to poverty
- transient students/families may have difficulty participating in activities that cost money
- access to babysitters and transport may be issues for the family
- transient students risk being labeled as a “problem”, and are not seen as competent. Teachers may not have high expectations for them
- families are interested in education, and see it as a way out of poverty
- the relationships between the school and family are important
- parents themselves may not have had a positive experience of school
- transient students/families need time to settle into the community.

From these, the community of practice discussed and identified the following approaches as likely foundations for developing an action-research initiative in their own research project.

### ***Establish the school as a place that helps families***

- set up a second-hand uniform and sports uniform shop.
- establish a “Help fund” to pay for events and activities that students or parents may not be able to afford.
- help students to budget for activities through deposits to the Credit Union
- help families budget (the “Help funds” that are available are too bureaucratic and families do not want to fill out forms)
- develop personalised “Starter Kits” for students (books, stationery, pens, paper).

### ***Ensure smooth transitions***

- develop a school induction programme that takes students through special aspects of the school and makes them feel at home (give students their Starter Kit)
- establish a buddy programme with peers trained to assist
- use anecdotal assessments more
- create inter-district collaboration through a community of schools) to look at:
  - streamlined record keeping
  - youth risk prevention programming
  - strong networks between school and local services
  - sharing ideas about teaching and learning
- improve record sharing between schools because the information is crucial and there are gaps in records.

### ***Establish the class teacher (or homeroom teacher) as a liaison person for contact and support***

The aim of this objective was to provide an effective outreach to families and build a trusting relationship and partnership between school and home:

- draw up guidelines and protocols for homeroom teachers to meet families (e.g., things to be sensitive to, contact requirements)
- teacher/principal meets new families at gate
- initial phone call to home, and follow-up calls to check on child's progress, feelings about school etc.—to be documented
- home-school notebooks for daily communication.

### ***Build supportive relationship between teachers and students***

- establish caring homerooms
- see transient students as competent, capable and able to participate
- provide opportunities for students to demonstrate initiative, competence, responsibility
- consult with students and give them choices. Listen to the students' perspectives and use this information for planning (e.g., identify students' unique interests)
- identify the barriers to learning that transient children face (e.g., no place to study, no resources, have to work in family) and look at ways to overcome these
- withdrawal for 1:1 or small group support may work, if all students in class participate in this withdrawal
- have a clear school wide behaviour plan—expectations and consequences for class and playground.

### ***Encourage parental involvement and participation in all aspects of education***

- check that families have the support they need to be involved—babysitting, transport, and so on
- provide specific guidance, support, resources, and feedback on how to support their child's learning
- involve parents in their child's education at school so that parents can see first-hand the benefits of school and be role models for their students (provide transport to support this if necessary, e.g., parent car pools).

### ***Community involvement***

- establish a mentoring (grandparents/retired persons) or parent tutoring programme in school to address students' strengths and interests, and learning needs. This could also be used for after school homework support. Use the ACE programme for this or SET funding
- school has funding to run evening classes—perhaps have one to one tutoring for parents.

### *Belonging and social experiences*

- be open to students’ cultural, sporting and social interests—build opportunities into the school day to recognise and foster these, and remove barriers to participation (e.g., waive fees).
- encourage involvement in extra-curricula activities to build self-esteem and build a positive attitude towards school—focus especially on activities in school time as work responsibilities or transport problems could pose obstacles to after-school participation
- support students to develop a positive self and group identity by encouraging friendships, participation in social activities, and being part of the peer group.

### *Planned and structured syndicate team meetings*

- have a holistic planned approach by a team of people to meet child’s learning, physical, emotional, safety and social needs
- establish the child’s class teacher or homeroom teacher (secondary) as the lead teacher to co-ordinate assessment, planning, and teaching.

## **Wooldon School’s protocol for transient students**

After this discussion, the teachers in the community of practice suggested that developing and researching a school-wide protocol about transient students could include some of the strategies identified above. A *Wooldon School Starter Pack* was to be developed for new families in the area to provide information about the school and wider community, and it was decided that this pack would include:

- photos and names of teachers
- stationary and pens
- second-hand uniform information
- school and community information
- map of school
- stationary list.

This pack would also include a set of forms for parents and students to complete that would provide information on:

- interests, strengths, and needs for support (for each child in the family)
- transport needs
- after-school responsibilities of their child/children
- parent strengths and interests.

The protocol was also to include a set of guidelines for the induction and teaching of transient students for teachers to follow. These were developed by the participating teachers in the community of practice through dedicated meetings, and comprised a “tick box” list of “to do” items for classroom or homeroom teachers (see Table 2 below).

Table 2 **Wooldon School Guidelines for the induction and teaching of transient students**

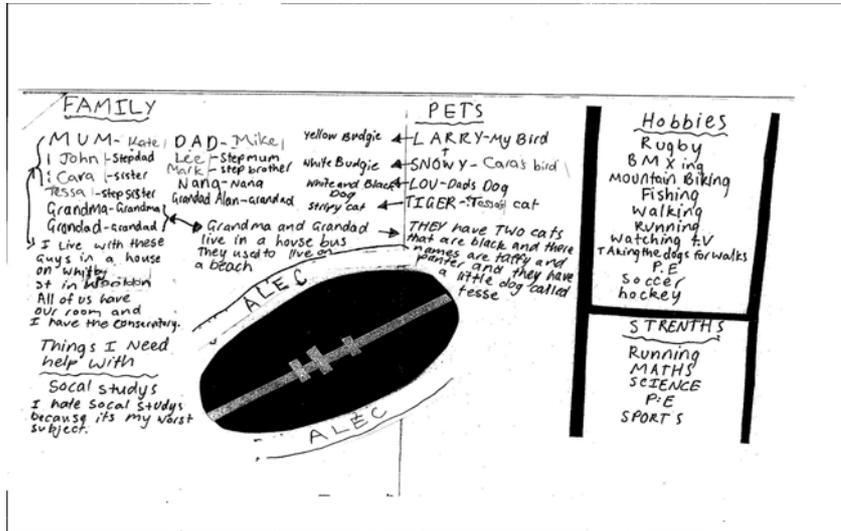
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- Organise enrolment/ initial meeting with family
    - Meet at the school gate
    - Organise time for a tour of the school (whole family)
    - Open door policy for visiting classrooms
  - Complete enrolment forms
  - Give child (in presence of parents):
    - "All about me" sheet
    - Starter pack
    - Stationary List
    - Enrolment pack
    - Map of School
    - Photo of Uniform—school and PE, girl and boy
    - Prospectus from previous year
  - Organise Class Buddy (use child's INTERESTS as a basis for this)
  - Contact previous school (Dean/teacher)
  - Compile general report for relevant staff identifying students' interests, strengths, areas where they need support.
  - Meet with staff to discuss report and plan curriculum.
  - Feedback given to staff on teaching implications and innovations within 2 weeks
  - Transport arrangements, experiences and expectations discussed and confirmed with Bus Controller
  - Family Contact via telephone
    - At 2 weeks
    - At 4 weeks
  - Icebreaker Activity in Homeroom Class
  - Give family page of:
    - Services Associations
    - Important Numbers
    - Wooldon Sport
- 

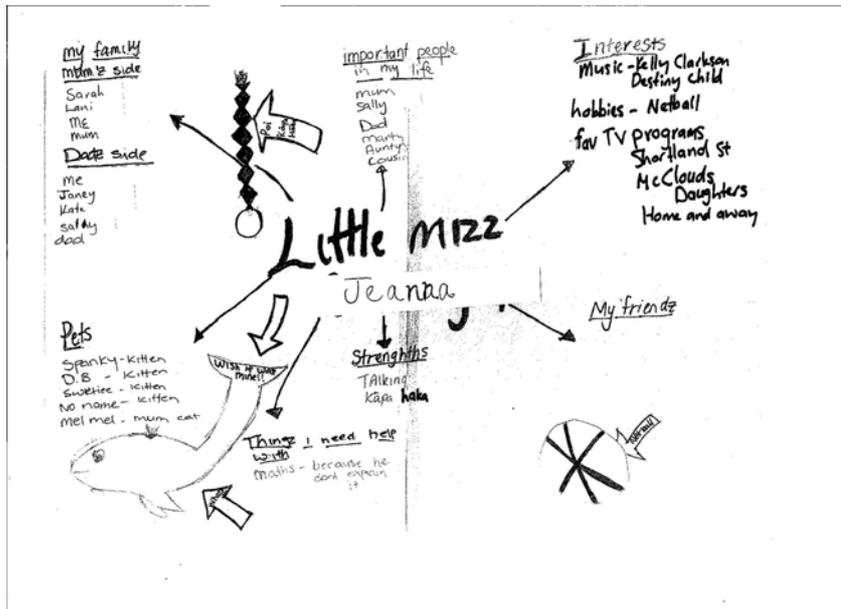
The school-wide protocol also included a focus on developing curricula based on students' interests, so that positive changes could occur in teaching practice and in transient students' learning and social experiences. In order to understand the participating students in the project and to better plan for their own teaching, the teachers in the community of practice collected "Me" statements from each of transient students in their class. (see the two examples in Figure 2) These statements were designed for students to represent their families, pets, interests, strengths, and areas where they need help at school.

Figure 2 "Me" statements

Alec



Jeanna



## The school's action-research project and its implementation

Wooldon's School final action-research project was developed, and agreed to, by all of the community of practice members. It involved systematically researching the effects of the new school-wide protocol, which included the starter pack, the Wooldon School guidelines for the

induction and teaching of transient students, and teaching initiatives that focused on students' interests. Data were collected through:

- daily narratives that participating teachers would write in a teacher diary
- field notes and observations of the participating researchers
- student assessment data
- interviews with teachers, students, and families
- community of practice discussions.

Once the project, had been decided, an overall action-research plan (adapted from Mills, 2003) was written about the school's study in this project (see Table 3).

**Table 3 Wooldon's action-research plan**

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**Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study is to develop and implement an organisational protocol and associated structure that supports transient students' learning and social life at school and in the community.

**What are the variables we are interested in changing?**

Through the organisational protocol we are interested in changing and developing:

- existing structures within the school (facilitating students' participation and identifying barriers)
- relationships with families and their involvement in their child's education (building positive relationships and focusing on students' strengths and interests)
- assessment strategies (including informal assessments, and those that harness students' strengths and interests)
- teaching practices
- relationships between students and their families and the wider community
- students' social relationships.

**Research questions**

1. How are the organisational protocol and associated structures developed?
2. How do the organisational protocol and structures impact on teaching practice and on student learning and social experiences?
3. Does a specific focus on students' interests result in positive changes in teaching practice and in students' learning and social experiences?

**Innovations**

We will develop a protocol (a planned and structured set of organisational guidelines) to support our teaching of transient students. Guidelines will be focused on developing the following as a foundation for students' learning:

- relationships between the child and family on one hand, and the school and wider community on the other
- students' strengths and interests
- students' social relationships.

The homeroom teacher will be the key teacher and these teachers will be responsible for implementing the guidelines for their students. This will involve:

- developing a supportive home
- school relationship

- leading discussions with other involved teachers
- collecting assessment data (formal and informal, including data on students' strengths and interests)
- implementing related teaching programmes in class
- fostering community involvement.

### **Roles and responsibilities in the community of practice**

#### *Principal*

1. explore approaches used by other principals
2. develop a set of guidelines for principals
3. collect informal diary
4. type data on developments and issues in the community of practice.

#### *Homeroom teachers (primary and secondary)*

1. Develop teacher guidelines for teachers at primary and secondary level
2. Collect data on:
  - the development of the guidelines
  - teaching innovations based on the guidelines, particularly focusing on students' interests and their impact on teaching, learning and students' social experiences
  - student learning and social experiences before, during and after implementing the guidelines
3. use the data to shape their own and others' teaching
4. support students in the study to complete a personal statement about their interests, strengths, and things they need help with (variable formats depending on students' age (e.g., hero books, anti CVs).

#### *Jude and Nancy*

1. support teachers with data collection (including formats and data types)
2. describe the negotiations that need to be undertaken and ethical considerations
3. develop a timeline
4. develop a statement of resources that are needed to implement the plan
5. continue to develop ideas for data collection and analysis
6. collect data on school experience from:
  - students and families
  - meetings and discussions within the community of practice and with individual teachers in the community of practice
7. collect research information on school transience, and look at a possible PD day to meet experts/visit other schools

### **Negotiations that need to take place**

1. ethical considerations
2. negotiating with other class teachers to take suggested approaches on board in their own classrooms
3. negotiations with community members as necessary.

### **Statement of resources**

Teacher-release time (e.g., for meetings, student assessments, meeting parents, meeting other teachers, community meetings, visits to other schools)

### **The data we collect and how we will analyse it**

1. develop the guidelines (by 14 May)
    - record data from meetings with community of practice members and with other teachers
    - record data from whole staff meetings
  2. the “Me” statements (by 14 May)
  3. various formats depending on students’ age (do with whole class). Students complete a personal statement on their:
    - interests (cultural, sport, music, clothes, etc.)
    - strengths
    - my friends
    - my family
    - pets
    - important people in my life
    - things help needed with
  4. Daily teacher diary (ongoing after 14 May). Record:
    - what you did as a homeroom or class teacher today that focused on students’ strengths and interests (e.g., lesson on horse on horse
    - riding; maths lesson on riding distances; class discussion on interests relating to horses)
    - informal observations of the child at school (learning and social experiences), including informal discussions with the child
    - personal reflections on teaching and learning experiences
    - discussions with parents and with other teachers about the child’s learning and experiences.
-

Table 4 **Timeline for Wooldon School's action research**

<b>1. Cycle One</b>												
Objective	May 14	May 21	May 28	June 5	Jun 12	Jun 19	Jun 26	July 2	Jul 9 (hol)	Jul 16 (hol)	Jul 23	Jul 30
1: Complete Guidelines, 'Me' statements, & initial family/student interviews (Nancy & Jude)												
2. COP meeting												
3. Present Guidelines to staff & hold child centred team meetings												
4. COP meeting												
5. Gather Data regarding guidelines	<b>Use Teacher Diaries for documenting guideline meetings</b>											
6. Gather Data regarding curriculum adaptations, community networking, parent/school relationships, child's social and learning experiences while using child's interests/strengths as a catalyst for change					<b>Use Teacher Diaries to document teaching practice, student participation, daily reflections, meetings, observations, examples of student work</b>							
					<b>Send copy of diary to Nancy &amp; Jude on July 2nd.</b>							
7. Jude/Nancy complete organization for PD in Term 3												
9. COP meeting												
10. Jude/Nancy observation days												
11. COP meeting												

<b>2. Cycle Two (to be completed)</b>											
Objective	Aug 6	Aug 14	Aug 20	Aug 27	Sep 3	Sep 10	Sep 17	Sep 24	Oct 1 (hol)	Oct 8 (hol)	Oct 15
1.											
2.											
3.											
4. COP meeting											
5.											
6. Gather Data regarding curriculum adaptations, community networking, parent/school relationships, child's social and learning experiences while using child's interests/strengths as a catalyst for change											
7. PD DAY											
9. COP meeting											
10. Jude/Nancy observation days											
11. COP meeting											



## 5. Results and discussion

This section explores the changes at Wooldon School as a consequence of this project. The end-of-year interviews, community of practice discussions, and meetings formed the data set for this section. The data have been analysed according to the original objectives and research questions and informed by the themes of the lived experience of transience (see chapter 3).

### Research question 1 (Level one of project)

How does a community of practice and action research:

- (i) enhance teachers' understanding of transient students' learning and social experiences, and
- (ii) contribute to changes in teachers' assumptions and beliefs about classroom practices and student learning?

### Teachers' understandings, assumptions and beliefs

The teachers in the community of practice agreed that the project was useful in that focused discussions about transience helped them to understand transient students' experiences and their implications for teaching and learning. Some teachers emphasised that this had influenced the way they interacted with their students. For example, one teacher stated:

I definitely have become a lot more aware of the disabilities of transient students and definitely become more aware of having to find that spark early on. The faster you can find that thing they are interested in the better. It proves it with Sam. . . . Once you have found out the issues around him and what his interests are, like his computer and his lap top, then we could bring that in and use that in the class . . . or just have a discussion about something at the beginning and help him think 'Oh this teacher's not so bad.' . . . You get involved with him . . . and you get a much more willing person.

This teacher noted that the community of practice experience had highlighted students' experiences and perspectives for him. This had a direct influence on his teaching approach.

It's probably for me being a lot more aware of the issues, a lot more sympathetic to the issues. Like before I would probably have a growl at them. But instead I would take the time to have the conversation and find out, and try and do more than just having a little growl and telling them to get on with their work.

Another teacher described becoming more aware of how teachers can exclude transient students and also of the need to view these students in positive ways, and as having strengths to which all

teachers can respond. This implies the need for teachers to collaborate with each other in a focused manner.

I have always been aware of the issues of transient students mainly because of my experience when I was a student and watching students come in and leave again. . . . I have seen how (teachers) can exclude them because you are not sure about them and so they didn't fit in. . . . One of the main things I think I have learnt is how we as a school need to look more collaboratively at the transient students, not just the ones that are in your own home class, although we are responsible for our own students in terms of making them—getting them settled in. I think it is really important that we communicate about all the other transient students in the other classrooms as well. . . . I think sitting down in the meetings like we have, and discussing other students who haven't been in our class has been very beneficial.

It was also noted that teachers needed to maintain their awareness of students' experiences and perspectives and use these in an ongoing fashion in their teaching. This implies continuous meetings with other teachers about transient students to ensure that everyone is kept up to date with students' circumstances and subsequent teaching and learning initiatives.

Researcher: What would be the main things that you think the school needs to look at.

Teacher: A number of things. One would be just to keep up the communication. I know everyone has got their own things to do but we do need to keep coming back as a whole group and discuss them and say "Where are we at with these children? What are we going to do now? What worked well and what is not working well?" Second to that would be just being aware of their home life as well because I think that is an issue that we can't change but we need to be aware of. So sort of giving us answers as to why there are issues with these students if there are any. Just being aware of what they are having to go home to, or on a positive side, what is going well at home for them. Definitely keeping in touch with their parents, I think that it is something that we need to be doing.

This teacher also acknowledged that collaboration with families and other teachers takes time and that it can be difficult to find that time to collaborate professionally in a busy school day:

And I think another issue is time constraints. Trying to balance it out because the more you go and do for transient students, then it is less time to keep up doing for all the other students as well. But that's always going to be an issue and I don't really know how to address that. . . . You would put in extra things and extra supports for students who need them whether they were transient or not. So it is not so much an issue in the classroom but I think the issue lies in the whole school and what we are meant to be doing as a whole school.

While the community of practice helped to identify some of the challenges faced by transient students, it also raised for teachers questions about how to develop a more inclusive school culture when the wider community was considered to be "tight-knit". One teacher recognised that negative community values could be a barrier to achieving positive change at school:

It would take a lot more and a lot longer to change the town's culture. There are some really strong, strong people here and I think a lot of the kids' intolerance comes from the community. I mean teachers come and go. And we have got young teachers who have got strong minds but they are not prejudiced and it's ah yeah. I am trying to figure out which way really. I think the tightness of the town works pluses and negatives.

The principal of the school acknowledged that the project had encouraged him to see, and recommend to another principal, that a positive and active approach to teaching and learning was critical for transient students:

It is difficult at times and you wonder about how schools and how people within the school actually view certain kids. Sometimes kids come in and they present behavioural issues and that's relevant to the fragile nature of their family generally at that time. And therefore schools are probably somewhat reluctant to invest a huge amount of time and effort into those kids. I was talking recently to a principal from a dairy farming school and she was pulling her hair out wondering what to do because on Gypsy Day they have a huge number of kids go out and a huge number of kids come in. She said it is incredibly difficult to assimilate a lot of kids into the culture of the school. . . . Her opinion was that her school was going to do less, not more. I said, "Well that is not really what we are finding from our study. It's about trying to do a little bit more and be constructive. This is at least helpful for a number of families and a number of kids."

Did the community of practice contribute to changes in teachers' assumptions and beliefs about classroom practices and student learning? While most teachers did describe changing their attitude towards transient students, as described above, this did not always translate into specific and sustained changes in classroom-based teaching approaches. Teachers felt that the school had made some positive changes. One teacher said that maintaining close relationships with families was important, and she valued the focus on students' interests developed out of their "Me statements". She recognised that the knowledge gleaned from these did not fully impact on teaching practice:

I quite liked the 'Me statements' but I don't think we implemented that with the new kids terribly well and I actually think that was a good idea, so that would be something else (to continue with).

Another teacher described specifically changing his approach with one transient student by developing a positive relationship based on the student's interest in soccer:

I would probably say I have got a relationship with Aaron as well because of (the project). Because I have learnt through (the project) . . . that he is into soccer so therefore, I like soccer, I am from England, I am bound to like soccer. I am going to have a conversation (with him about it), I even wear soccer shirts now and again and I see him down the street and have a chat and I can get a lot more out of that boy and my relationship is really improved. . . . Yes, its got to the stage where I was out there doing tennis with them and he was getting a bit angry because he was losing so I took him to one side and said, 'If you can't do it then sit down'. But he stood up at one side with me, and I showed him a few different shots and showed him how to change his footwork and improve his game, and he went back out there happy again. So that was me being again more aware of Aaron's issues

struggling to cope . . . (in the past I might have said) ‘Just abandon this’, but I was more willing to help.

This teacher valued the focus on students’ own descriptions of their strengths and interests, suggesting that these provided fresh information and a valuable foundation on which to build a positive and supportive relationship between student and teacher:

(Teachers) would hardly think of these kids except in this (negative) way . . . (their records would say) this kid is not great, just scratching this area and . . . there wasn’t anything about their personality or about them, it was always just ‘good at maths’, good at English. No, we do actually need to have an integrated (approach). (At the moment) you get more information about the child (from records) before you really get the chance to (learn about the child) for yourself.

Another teacher thought that the teaching and learning initiatives promoted through the action-research project were consistent with what she already did in her classroom, although she could see positive benefits accruing for other teaching staff at school:

I think I was pretty much probably doing most things anyway without probably realising in a formal sort of way what I was doing. Like that’s just the way I would introduce any child in to any of my classes so yeah, (I don’t know) whether that changed or not. . . . But I do see the benefits for other staff members that if they tried (these ideas it) might help . . . like maybe home contact, like establishing a relationship between home and the teacher right from day one.

In terms of implementing whole school change, the principal felt that the project had highlighted the need for focused and concerted effort, but he noted that teachers could become disillusioned because they did not always see the rewards for their work:

It has confirmed for me lots of things in that schools can be inclusive but they do have to work at being inclusive. It just doesn’t happen naturally, you have actually got to well and truly go the extra mile and I think that’s what wears people out, when they have gone the extra mile and it still comes up with a disappointing result so. You know, harking back to my dairy teaching principal saying they have done it and it has worn them out. Therefore they are going to invest less time and effort. I don’t think that’s the best way to go.

Teachers could be very challenged by transient students’ behaviour, and the principal felt it was important to support teachers to see past the behaviour and prioritise students’ learning needs:

Our problem is that often kids come in with significant behavioural issues and that really drives the teachers nuts. And then once you get through the behavioural issues, you find out exactly where their learning is . . . and that’s what you need to be addressing in the first place. Deal with their learning needs and you will find that a lot of their behavioural needs will disappear. The kids become so much more like the rest of their peers. And sometimes the behaviour is to disguise the fact that they are not up with their peers and there is a wee cycle in there I think.

## Transient students as “the problem”

High levels of student transience presented challenges for the teachers at Wooldon School. The principal described teachers as having an “Oh no, not again” response to their arrival, and it was not unusual for teachers to air their frustrations about teaching these students in the community of practice. Teachers sometimes asked why it was necessary to focus on this particular group of students when others also needed attention. Students’ personal characteristics (such as their personality; preferences; behaviour; achievement level; ability or disability; physical characteristics; or their reluctance to join in the group) were sometimes used to explain why it was not possible to explore alternative approaches to teaching and learning.

One teacher openly reflected that this feeling came from a sense of frustration at having to deal with yet another transient child on top of everything else. Also, it was not always clear to teachers why their efforts were not bringing positive changes in students:

Researcher: Where does that [blaming transient students] come from do you think, is it teachers are sensitive or too much work to do?

Teacher: Yes and sometimes just not stopping to think, but sometimes it is easier to blame the kids for their shortcomings than to look at our own. And sometimes you know quite honestly you bend over backwards and you turn yourself inside out and it doesn’t make any damn difference at all. And you have to say “Well how much more can you do for this child, or this kid? And is it something that is inherent in them that it is so annoying that it drives you to it? And it is true, so there are two sides to that one and I know the theory is that the kids aren’t to blame. Okay kids aren’t, but the environment and their family are. But how far can we go?”

Another teacher also commented that students in transient families could be disadvantaged by poor access to learning experiences:

The impression that I get, and I could be wrong, but they all do tend to be low socioeconomic families that don’t have a lot. . . . They have huge barriers that they have erected and I guess that’s . . . a way of coping. . . . In our situation, transient students are from disadvantaged backgrounds where there isn’t a great general knowledge. Maybe money isn’t as readily available as for other students, but there is definitely no time in a stable home life for kids to spend time with parents learning, instead of watching the cartoons together, they could watch the news together. They don’t seem to do that. Life is being treated at a different level, without being horrible, it is a different level where the kids aren’t getting any background support in learning. They come to school to be taught but they have got no learning experiences in their own background . . . (and) they are never anywhere long enough for them to get that social experience.

Interestingly, while these teachers suggested that family issues could be the foundation for some students’ problems at school, parents in the study explained that they moved to seek better conditions for their family, including better school experiences for their children, and some families talked about playing an active role in their children’s education.

Teachers also described how they could just run out of energy sometimes, trying to meet transient students' needs:

(Student) didn't come to camp, he was absolutely gutted, and his father and I had words over that. I got really upset about it. I got myself worked up but I was tired and it took a huge amount of organisation—I just thought you are letting this kid down. We want to take him, we want him to come, we want him to be involved. . . . I have been at times quite confrontational and it doesn't help. But it gets to the stage where a parent can come in and they can (accuse us), 'You are not doing this'. And sometimes it is like well 'Listen here . . . we are doing this, this and this, and you need to wake up and smell the flowers'.

This teacher emphasised the negative toll taken on teachers when they are required to deal with difficult situations involving students and their families on a daily basis:

. . . I find the emotional stuff, not the study but in general with some of these families, is so draining and being blamed for things that I know I should be able to just go (and not think about it at home)—and it is almost in the too hard basket and some nights I will go home and I think I don't want to go back. I love the kids, we have got a really good staff, but sometimes the combination of, and it would be the same at any school, and I just think I am at a time of my life when I don't need to do that any more.

Some parents also referred to the challenges faced by teachers, and acknowledged that they were “only human”, and we as researchers do not want to fall into the trap of blaming teachers (Codd, 1999). Teachers' reactions to look to the child to explain problems at school may be understandable, particularly when schools are not specifically resourced to meet the kinds of challenges transient students can present. As one teacher in our study pointed out, there is no attention paid to issues of school transience in either pre-service teacher education or in teacher professional development. A teacher commented that the issue of transience needed urgent attention by the Ministry of Education:

Yes I think the Ministry needs to pull finger and deal with it . . . particularly for kids of dairy farmers. (Schools) are having a dreadful time. See they know, as of the 1st June every year . . . in a school like ours, that's half the school population and the incoming population, we have no idea who is coming until they arrive after the school holidays. And you could end up with 120 students one day. You can have 85 the next. Or you can have 200, depending on the incoming families. That's a bit of an exaggeration but that's how it is done in school. And the needs that these kids bring with them are tremendous. . . . But you have still got to deal with your stable population and that is just dreadful. The Ministry need to look seriously at it and are choosing to ignore it.

In conclusion, though, it is also important, to acknowledge that negative attitudes, which blame transient students for their difficulties, can present barriers to addressing their learning and social needs. One teacher agreed that this approach was not productive as it discouraged teachers from looking critically at their own teaching. However, she felt that there had been some change over time, and that the action-research project had sensitised teachers in the community of practice to the dangers of blaming the students. This would ultimately benefit the school:

Yes, some of that goes on. . . . Preconceived ideas [about transient students] become self-fulfilling prophecies, it is as simple as that. The one thing that we will benefit collectively from is the fact that we now know we have got a set of colleagues who are aware of these issues. And [we know] there can be more collaboration in terms of deciding on the learning needs [of students], the guidance stuff, whatever support for kids coming in, rather than perhaps just the teacher battling on their own.

## Research question 2 (level one)

How does a community of practice involving researchers and teachers

- (i) develop and sustain itself, and;
- (ii) with action research, contribute to the coconstruction of knowledge about teaching and learning?

The community of practice began this project with a number of meetings in which the lived experiences and educational issues of transient students were discussed and researched in the literature. From these meetings, the community of practice brainstormed about Wooldon School's strengths and weaknesses, and agreed on two initiatives that they would put into practice and research (the guidelines and developing the curriculum by focusing on students' strengths and interests). These meetings were facilitated by the researchers who allowed time for the group to discuss and explore their own thoughts and beliefs about transience so that their action-research project would be relevant to them (Carr & Kemmis, 1993; Mills, 2003). Some members of the community of practice enjoyed these meetings because they gave teachers the time to talk about transience, gather data about themselves, and share their experiences:

Teacher: I actually thought it was good to look at the data and I think there have been some things that we have sharpened up on. I think having the chance to have a focus and meet together on that focus and nothing else was really valuable. . . . Just the literature that we shared. . . . But even like the discussion and you would say, "oh yes but how about this." And Jude would say, "Look this is something that I have heard about that happened." Those sort of things are really useful.

Researcher: Right so you enjoyed just getting together and having the time to focus?

Teacher: Yes, time, time is very important.

One teacher, however, noted that it was difficult to sit for long periods of time during the meetings because she was "action focused", and explained that she is "the child that can't sit still and has the ants in the pants." She suggested that an improvement to these meetings would be to stick to the set agenda without allowing too much lateral discussion, and to identify stringent outcomes:

Teacher: Probably just more focused so sit down and do what you have to do and do it better. . . . Yes, I struggle with meetings at the best of times anyway. I am probably one of these people: ‘Write a list. That’s already done. That’s already done.’ Sit down and work through it and you have done it. That sort of thing. We kind of got side tracked quite a lot I felt.

Researcher: Right so you didn’t like the lateral discussions?

Teacher: Well they have their value at times, but yeah.

The literature states that action research should be teacher initiated so that research is not divorced from teacher activities, and there is a commitment with active involvement to positively change educational practice (Higgins, 2005; Mills, 2003). Within this project some of the members of the community of practice, though, were more interested in the issue of transience than others. The principal had initiated the project and had invited other teachers at Wooldon who had transient students in their classroom to be part of the project. Some of these teachers noted that at the first community of practice meeting that they were uncertain of what would be expected of them:

At the start we were really sitting there going ‘What exactly do we have to do?’ and we weren’t really onto it until probably the third or fourth meeting, because we didn’t really know. . . . Jude (researcher) was trying to explain exactly what was going on and where we were heading and we were just sitting there learning from scratch really.

Another teacher stated that, in future research about transience, teachers with a specific interest in research and transience would probably participate in action-research projects again, but that other teachers may consider the project as a “one-off” experience:

Teacher: Some people are very interested in that (research) side of things and others aren’t. . . . Some people, that’s right up their alley but others possibly it’s been an experience and they may not participate again.

Researcher: Yes so it just depends on the individual.

Teacher: Yes, and it depends on the topic too like different topics might interest different people.

As time progressed in the project, it became clear that the initial proposed timeline of the project was too ambitious for a range of reasons. Reasons included the illness of members of the community of practice and the participating students, and inclement weather that prevented researcher travel. Staffing changes were also identified as a possible reason for delays in the project because the principal was on study-leave for three months. Consequently, although, the principal had initiated the project, the deputy principal was perceived to be the leader of the project in the school. One teacher stated:

Researcher: Is there anyone here that was really leading the project?

Teacher: Our deputy principal probably was.

Researcher: Do you think she knew she was leading the project.

Teacher: She did, well I think she did. It worked well because she would have had the information.

The deputy principal, herself, though, said that there was no leader in regards to the project and that this allowed open discussion and challenges:

I think everybody was an integral part. At times I felt there might have been some vying for leadership. I don't know whether you noticed that. . . . And there were some times when there was some fairly blunt speaking by the various members and that's fine because we have to be able to do that. But generally as teachers we rely heavily on teamwork and that's crucial. And as a team I think we did quite well really. And you need someone bolshie in education, so you can go either pat them down or let them go and let them rip into it. Because it is quite good seeing people enriched. Because you never know, I mean I never knew where I was going to go in my future and I don't know where these people are going to go in their future and it is a different feeling striding out and challenging leadership.

Because the project used a multiply led and fluid approach, which allowed for self-reflection and professional growth, the one-year time period to develop an overall shared vision for the school and to effect change became too short. More specifically, Wooldon School spent a significant amount of time agreeing to the action-research plan and developing their school-wide guidelines in Terms 2 and 3, because they felt that this was a priority, and would be a useful, long-lasting tool for teachers. Consequently, only a few teaching initiatives that built on a transient students' strengths and interests were developed (also see Research question 3 below).

Another issue that arose for all of the teachers in regards to their research was finding the time that was needed to systematically gather data about the implementation of the school's action-research project. Data were supposed to have been gathered in a variety of ways, including a daily teacher diary; a transience checklist booklet to record how the guidelines were used; student assessment data; teacher and researcher observations at the school in regards to transience and transient students; teacher, student, and family interviews by the researchers; and community of practice minutes and notes. Teachers actively participated in the meetings, interviews, and observations, but none wrote in their transience checklist booklet or in their daily teacher diary about the implementation of the school's *Guidelines for Transient Students*, or about their teaching initiatives for the three focus students and other transient students in the project. A few teachers stated that this was because there was little time in the day to complete them:

I don't think the teachers' diaries worked. Definitely not from my point of view. . . . I think it's—maybe it was just the time. I mean . . . you cover something with one child and then you think about the next person and you are thinking about the next day . . . and go with the things. And I just never got around to the book.

Another teacher similarly said:

Yes, (the diaries) too much on the 'be able to sit down and write'—There are 101 things that always have to be done before you can actually sit down and write. So maybe a different format might have worked.

One teacher seemed to misunderstand the diary's purpose in that it was believed to be a tool from which participating teachers could learn, and a way to document things that participating teachers needed to remember, even though the front page of the diary stated that it would form the data for their research project. The teacher said:

I think we covered a lot more . . . and put more ideas forward in group discussion than we would ever have got out of the diary. I think the diaries could have been just little boxes to tick (in your spare time) as you go. For example, to have a sheet on your desk, but you can ignore it and then leave it and then bring it to the discussion. . . . I was getting a mental note at the (meetings) when someone else mentioned something. And it would spur on, and it was easier for me to do that than do the diary.

A few of the teachers commented that if the narrative diaries resembled a running record; were in a tick-box format; were placed in convenient places on the wall (e.g., in the staffroom); or were monitored on a weekly basis by the researchers that they may have used it. One teacher recommended:

Oh single sheets, single, no complicated things, single things for a week. The amount of stuff on those was almost formidable for us, and a page for a week with just times on it. . . . And (the researchers should) monitor it as well, collect it, so that we remember to write it up.

Interestingly, though, the teacher diary was actually a single piece of paper for each day, but it was decided in the community of practice, that these should not be given to the teachers separately but should be included in a bound book that would include all of the information about the project. The book comprised:

- the action-research plan
- the project's timeline
- a section to record student assessment data
- a section to record their thoughts about the development of the guidelines
- a daily teacher diary
- a final section to record teachers' free flowing thoughts about community of practice issues and any issues that may arise in their day to day practice.

Following the teachers' end of year suggestions, the researchers discussed the issue and concluded that single diary sheets that are returned by email at regular intervals on an assigned date may have been a more successful method of collecting self-reflective data from teachers. It was also suggested that perhaps other data collecting methods, such as weekly audio-taped peer interviewing, may have been more effective. The deputy principal noted that peer interviewing would encourage teachers to use the release time that was available for the project:

(Peer interviews) would be quite effective and I think maybe at the beginning (the principal) and I didn't "Say well look we can release you . . . to go away and do the project thing." I think people really didn't know. I mean sometimes you have to take them by the scruff of the neck and say "Do you realise that you can actually take some time off to do this?"

The deputy principal also noted, though, that it was difficult to find relievers when four to six teachers were being released at the same time because of the co-ordination involved and the small pool of available relievers in the community.

Another suggestion which came from two of the participating teachers was to shift the beginning of the project to mid-year. This would allow teachers in the community of practice to take stock of the relevant issues and develop a research plan, which could be implemented at the beginning of the following school year. This approach would allow teachers to integrate new teaching and learning initiatives into their planning for the school year, as opposed to integrating new initiatives into a programme that is already in progress. The teacher said:

Maybe it would have been a good idea to have done the research at the end of term, before the start of term 3 and have maybe a spread over the year. So we would get the back end of the year, and at the start of the year we can say “Right, this is what we have discovered in this area. How are we going to adapt?” That’s when we do the planning at the beginning. . . . It will still work over four terms

This teacher reflected on the possibilities for teaching and learning in relation to Aaron. Planning at the start of the year would allow him to fully include innovations to enhance Aaron’s sense of belonging at school:

Yes, so I would have to think at the start of the year: ‘How can I bring soccer in? What can I link it to and then go from there?’ So I could link it in with graphics because the boys started graphics this time and for Aaron . . . I could then link into some sort of model making around soccer, soccer stadiums, designing of strips or a logo and things like that.

Wooldon School was only able to complete one cycle of their action-research plan in the one year time period, which is similar to other action-research projects in which the researchers have been involved (MacGibbon & Higgins, 2006). Schools, even with funding, may not have enough available staff to meet the demands of a full action-research plan that involves implementing and evaluating new teaching and learning initiatives and multiple research cycles. Based on this and previous experience, the researchers would suggest that future projects of this nature would benefit from a timeframe of 18 to 24 months.

### **Research question 3 (level two)**

How does a community of practice

- (i) develop and evaluate teaching initiatives to improve student learning and social experiences, and
- (ii) what specific school initiatives contribute to improved student learning and social experience?

The community of practice agreed that developing a positive and effective school-wide protocol for the teaching and learning of transient students was its goal. For this protocol, the teachers

developed a *Wooldon School Starter Pack* for new students; the *Wooldon School Guidelines for the induction and teaching of transient students*; and curricula based on students' interests. During the community of practice meetings and after the interviews with the participating students and their families, bullying was prioritised as an issue that needed to be addressed. The data to evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives and any positive changes that occurred in teaching practice and in transient students' learning and social experiences were gathered through the end-of-project student interviews with the researchers, teacher interviews with the teachers during the project, researcher observation and field notes, student assessment data, and community of practice discussion notes, meeting transcripts and minutes.

## Using the starter pack and the guidelines

The community of practice agreed that establishing a school-wide protocol for transient students needed to be informed by consistent school guidelines and policies that the entire school would be ready to use when transient students appeared for enrolment at the school. Teachers agreed that this approach would mean that the student's teaching and learning needs could be more effectively addressed. For example, one teacher described the starter pack and guidelines as good "fall-backs".

They are good fall-backs, and they are good check lists and also it is a support. It is a crutch for some teachers too, (but) you see the interesting thing about transient kids is we have no idea who is going to be the next. You can't plan for a particular kid. We can plan and say on average we would anticipate say for three families or four families moving through in the year being 12 kids, we could probably statistically say that.

Following the development of the starter pack and the guidelines, only two transient students enrolled at the school during the year. This was unusual, and one participating teacher noted that this also caused delays to the project:

I think if we had more families come in this year then we would have been moving quicker. We had the guidelines and we were sitting there waiting for a new child to come and then the new child comes and it is already term 3. (The student) showed up so it didn't give us much time to really do anything, so I think there was a bit of fluff really. It's a bad year in terms of transience.

Some of the teachers felt that the research about the starter pack and the guidelines would be limited, and one teacher suggested that properly evaluating these initiatives would not be possible until the school had documented the experiences of four or five transient families. One teacher said:

To . . . evaluate what the guidelines show depends on how (transient families) come and then you can question how to do it. How do you think it worked? Can we do anything better and also see how the kids settle in. And ask them some of the questions. And then you can take it from there. . . . Change the guidelines to make them more suitable if necessary. . . . Yes, once we have got some positive feedback from four to five families . . . just to say what the value was of the guidelines.

However, the initial results about the effectiveness of the starter pack and the guidelines for the two transient students who enrolled were positive. The first child to enroll at the school was only there for a few weeks, but her teacher stated that her family was pleased with their welcome to the school:

I had Atasha, . . . so I just did what we talked about. But she only lasted two weeks but her mother was really happy with the way that we introduced her to the school.

Atasha's teacher made an effort to keep in touch with Atasha's mother when she dropped into the school because they did not have a phone. She also provided the family with additional information about preschools in the area.

I caught up with mum this week and just had a chat. . . . It is pretty hard to get hold of them by phone, but her mum has called in, and (that was how) I kept in contact with mum. . . . One thing we did do was they had a preschooler and I got them information about play centre and that sort of stuff.

At school, Atasha was provided with a buddy; given a tour of the school; asked informally to complete a "Me" statement; and was assessed in regards to her achievement levels. Atasha's teacher indicated that she quickly got to know Atasha, and that, despite Atasha's shyness, she was accepted at the school:

Teacher: Atasha and her mum came in on the Monday morning I think. (The principal) did all the 'meet and greet thing' in the office and then brought her over. We buddied her up with a child. We did a tour of the school. . . . Atasha had a truckload of schools since she was 5 and they all commented about her absences. . . . I got reading, maths and spelling assessments, and then they left. So I passed that on to (the next school)

Researcher: So you do that pretty much right away.

Teacher: Yes I did in that case. . . . She was just normal, just into the same things that all the other kids are in to, horses, and books and dancing . . . . She was very shy for a start but she fitted in well.

The second transient student, Sam, was not as easily accepted by his peers. The researcher's field notes in his first week at Wooldon indicated that he seemed to be considered an outsider:

Sam seems very unhappy and is sitting six seats away from peers and on his own. He seems isolated. He is a big boy, unlike his twin, Mark, who is sporty and popular. . . . Sam tells me that he has just come from Aussie, but that he didn't really like it there . . . but he says that he would rather be in Aussie than in this small town.

However, the teachers at the school collaborated, and used the guidelines to quickly assess and discuss relevant information about Sam so that as one teacher stated they "were all on the same page". In Sam's case, the assessments heightened teachers' awareness of his capabilities. His homeroom teacher said:

I talked to the teachers a lot more as the homeroom teacher, about the boys and what needed to be done. Especially after we'd done that research into Sam's actual ability, because he was quite cunning to start with about hiding his ability, and we all presumed that he was similar to his brother, and he wasn't, he was well above on all assessments, academically, the whole lot. We thought that he was suffering the same problems that his brother was so we had him tested. We did running records and Star assessments, and the results were incredible. So then we thought right, you can do some work young lad!

Sam, himself, noted that his favourite teacher at Wooldon had challenged him and encouraged him:

Researcher: Yeah, you said (your favourite teacher) challenged you. What kind of things did she challenge you at?

Sam: Well she just made me time how fast I was every time we did a run. Because when I first came I walked the whole thing and it took me most of the period because they run half the town sort of thing. . . . And she used to time me. One time I actually came in first which surprised me and everyone else. . . . She just would challenge you with something, (and was) very encouraging.

Despite, Wooldon's attention to Sam's enrolment at the school, Sam felt that Wooldon "was quite a small community. Real tight knit and hard to get in to sort of circles". He said he still felt unwelcome in Wooldon, and it was difficult to find friends there because his class was predominantly female, and there were only three boys in it. Sam's mother agreed that the culture of, and other families in small communities, made it difficult for teachers to effect change in students' social lives:

I don't think [teachers can encourage friendships]. I mean a lot of it—especially in country towns, a lot has got to do with their parents because you have these small towns where you have got people that have lived there all their lives. And they get these clicky little 'We are the locals', 'you are the outsider.' And get that funny attitude and that is an attitude that has spread through the years.

Sam's mother explained that teachers could only ease a child's transition to a new school by teaching positive values:

Researcher: Is there anything teachers can do to help the transition from school to school. What can schools do?

Mrs Waverly: Teach tolerance. Teach acceptance, empathy, I don't think they are taught enough of that to be quite honest.

## Addressing bullying

As described earlier in this report, students in the project reported that bullying was a problem for them at school, and several students commented that it was the thing they hated most about school. Bullying was raised in the community of practice as a priority issue, and as one area where intervention by teachers could improve transient students' school experiences. Teachers in

the community of practice initially took a “defensive” position (their own words) on the matter of bullying, and questions were raised about the role of transient students, themselves, in provoking bullying incidents. However, on reflection and with time, teachers changed their viewpoint. It was agreed that the students’ perspectives on this matter were important, and that the school needed to ensure that procedures were in place for students and teachers to deal effectively with bullying. In addition to existing procedures, the deputy principal placed a “Bullying Box” in her office for students to anonymously report bullying incidents and to seek help. Interviews with teachers at the end of the project also revealed that teachers were alert to bullying and to issues of “fairness”.

The principal was also aware that teachers could blame students for their academic and social difficulties. He emphasised that it was not acceptable for teachers to suggest that a transient child was bullied because they thought that “he started it”. However, the principal also recognised that teachers can yearn for social stability in their classrooms, and argued that they needed support to be reflexive about their teaching and to respond in positive ways to their students’ experiences:

I know people do that [blame students for starting bullying] and there is a rhyme and reason why teachers do that—‘I had this dynamic in my classroom that was going along pretty smoothly, thank you very much. And it has changed and I will blame the child’. And I don’t know how you change that mind-set, it’s just—the teachers have to—sometimes it is a maturity thing maybe, but for some it is a reflection thing. At the end of the day the teacher must reflect.—I always reflect on everything. That has happened, and I think in that situation “That was fine. That was fine. No. That wasn’t a good resolution. What do we do next?” And it is the same thing with the child not getting on (with their peers). Teachers need to say, “Well that is not conducive for any child in my class room, let alone the child having a hard time.”. . . You are the professional who is in charge and you have the responsibility for that classroom.

Dealing effectively with bullying was difficult, and the principal concluded that teachers needed to be vigilant and responsive. Bullying could be subtle and it was difficult to see everything that happened. He was also alarmed that:

. . . some reasonably good kids have been drawn onto the bullying stage too and I just, I will talk to them and they don’t even know why they are there. But it is a peer pressure thing, I am sure of it.

He felt that no school was ever free of bullying and that keeping on top of it would be an ongoing concern at Wooldon:

But in terms of schools and in terms of addressing bullying, it never disappears, there is always something, a sharp word that is said, and a kid excluded from something so it never stops. There is no utopian situation here, we just have to keep on working on it. . . . but the point is, if it is marked and pointed at one person all the time that has got to be dealt with. And it is being dealt with. But to say it has been dealt with means that it is finished which is not the truth.

However, the research literature suggests that schools can achieve a positive “bully-free” culture when the whole school is committed to positive change and values the creation of a culture that

does not tolerate bullying but instead values diversity (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Gaffney et al, 2005; Higgins, 2005).

## Focus on students' strengths and interests

Transient students' strengths and interests became another topic of discussion within the community of practice. These were to form the foundations of teaching interventions to improve students' learning and social experiences across school staff and the curriculum. The community of practice had reviewed some of the 10 characteristics of quality teaching identified in Alton-Lee's (2003) *Best Evidence Synthesis on Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Teaching*. Because these students described being socially isolated, the group looked closely at characteristic II –“Pedagogical practices enable classes and other learning groupings to work as caring communities” (p. 22). Alton-Lee's work emphasised the interdependence of the social and academic in optimising learning conditions, and the need for teaching practices to proactively value and address diversity.

In this project, undertaking a class-wide activity aimed at finding out about students' strengths, interests and needs for support, *as the students described them*, the participating teachers endeavoured to demonstrate a concern to learn about their students, and what was important to them. In addition, teachers were encouraged to think about how their teaching (including their use of instructional organisation, task design, and teacher-student and student-student interactions) contributed to or undermined the representation of a class community in which all students belonged. Focusing on students' strengths and interests also promoted a positive view of students who were historically viewed as problematic.

Within the community of practice itself, a child-focused meeting was held to share information about the participating transient students' strengths, interests, and areas of support needs. The meeting highlighted students' perspectives, with relevant data being drawn from interviews with the students (by the researchers), and the students' personal “Me statements” that were completed in class. Of interest was the heterogeneous nature of transient students' school experiences. While some students faced learning challenges, others excelled academically. Some students were socially isolated, yet others had made friends and were well integrated into their local community.

Three students were identified as having priority needs due to their social isolation, and two of these students had significant learning needs relating to both their transience and disability. It was agreed that these students, Aaron (Year 7), Inga (Year 8), and Anna (Year 11), would become the focus of a particular teaching approach based on the strengths and interests of each of these students. These students' “Me” statements were used, along with key issues from interviews and observations, to define an area of focus for each child, and to identify responsive teaching approaches. During classroom observations the three focus students were observed initially to rarely interact with other students, to sit separately, and to either totally focus on their study or to show no interest in it at all. Some of their teachers were observed to give them individual

attention to encourage their participation in the classroom, while other teachers focused on the whole class with limited attention given to any individual child.

A further decision was made in the community of practice to hold child-focused meetings with other school staff, and to share information about Aaron, Inga, and Anna. However, these meetings did not eventuate. Few results were recorded for this part of the project primarily because teachers focused much of their time on developing and implementing the guidelines. One teacher conceded that in consequence there were few changes in teaching practice in relation to Aaron, Inga, and Anna. She noted that teachers probably needed more time in the project and also, that they still suffered from a reluctance to invest effort in teaching and learning initiatives when the students' time at school was likely to be limited:

Researcher: Do you think there was much change around that area (teaching and learning) for those three students, Anna, Inga and Aaron, in terms of teaching practice?

Teacher: I don't think so. . . . It would need a lot more time. . . . People might make changes in their teaching to meet the needs of particular kids but if they are not there tomorrow, you would have to say, "Why the hell are we doing it?" . . . And you can see like today how busy today is. This whole term is a bit like that and if somebody comes in and you need to—not stop, but you need to just stretch things for somebody new who you think is only going to be here for two weeks, three months, a year. Then you tend to get quite defensive because there is so much else that has to be done.

Nonetheless, some positive changes were documented at Wooldon as a result of a focus on students' strengths and interests. Below is a summary of the teaching and learning initiatives developed for each child and the impact they had on teachers and students.

### *Aaron*

Aaron felt "different" from other students at school. He felt socially isolated, and perceived that his interests (information technology, soccer, and hunting) were different from those of other students. It was agreed that the school would look at promoting soccer in an effort to develop peer relationships for Aaron. Friendships would be fostered through the use of group work in class with carefully selected peers and, because Aaron found it difficult to cope in a noisy classroom, classroom noise issues were to be addressed.

Soccer was added to the list of sports played on Sports Day, and one of the participating teachers described how Aaron's involvement as "a really good goalie" earned him positive accolades from his peers. While he still had some difficulties entering into existing peer groups and often spent his lunchtimes alone, this teacher hoped that promoting soccer in the school would support the development of friendships. The same teacher had also implemented some group-work approaches in his graphics class to encourage supportive peer interactions. Classroom noise issues were not followed up on.

Some transformations were observed in teachers' perceptions of Aaron. He was more likely to be viewed in positive ways at the end of the school year, with three teachers describing him as very bright, talented, a talented soccer player and a good public speaker. These teachers expressed an interest in his peer relationships, and two observed that Aaron seemed to be at the bottom of the pecking order and was bullied. Another teacher defended Aaron against "unfair" treatment when his experiences were compared with those of other students who had transgressed the school's rules. We were unable to ascertain Aaron's views on whether or not school had improved for him as he was absent from school on the days that the researchers visited near the end of the year, and his family left Wooldon soon after.

### **Anna**

Anna was also socially isolated. There were only three other female students her age at school. Anna's preference was to play with younger students, yet the school had actively discouraged such relationships due to difficulties faced by younger students accessing playground equipment. Anna had been recently observed to spend time with Helen, another transient student of the same age, and teachers decided that this friendship could be enhanced by supporting their shared interests in drawing and music. Wooldon teachers noted that friendships were difficult to support because Anna lived a considerable distance from school and her parents were not able to provide regular transport.

She participated successfully in an ASDAN programme at school which gave her a weekly work experience placement at the local Information Centre. Teachers commented that the programme had encouraged her to take a leadership role in the small group of students involved. About the programme, Anna said, "I like ASDAN. We get to do fun challenges. . . . I liked getting a makeover and everything . . . and we get some help from the teacher aid here". Her interest in animals was to be further developed by establishing a work experience placement at a veterinary clinic once a week, but this initiative could not be realised due to transport difficulties. Anna's interest in Te Reo Māori was also raised with her teachers although teaching focusing on this area of interest was not pursued. One teacher said that

It is almost impossible to pick up the kapa haka stuff. That was definitely in the too hard basket. We don't have the resources.

Another stated that because of the community's size, Wooldon School was dependent upon the availability of local Māori to develop te reo and tikanga Māori at the school:

It is just timing thing. We just don't have a strong background in that within our school and we don't have a strong background in our community. . . . When we have had our strong people within our community we have had everything happening here in terms of Māori culture but it has just gone (at present). . . . We don't have the people. At that stage we had a learning group in the community that was Māori, and . . . they would come into the school and were very helpful with cultural programmes in the school. And whilst there are low key culture programmes within the school [at present] and kids learn waiata and what have you, and poi, we don't have large enough numbers of interested kids to have a Kapa Haka

group. And Te Reo, we have got two youngsters wanting to do Te Reo in level 1 next year. And we will get that [by distance] but I think they are going to find it reasonably difficult because the [students] don't have a background. The school that delivers is a total immersion school, so the [students] are going to find it rather challenging.

On the positive side, in the end-of-year interviews, Anna described having friends at school with whom she associated at break times. Helen was one of these friends. Overall, however, she remained discontented with school, and wanted to leave. She felt that she needed more help from her teachers and wanted to go to polytech, but said "that could be a bit too much for me". Her family left Wooldon over the summer break.

### *Inga*

Inga, who was revealed to have a diagnosis of mild intellectual disability in the initial research interview with her mother, and who had "behaviour difficulties", did not have GSE support. At age 12 she had a reading age of 6, and her school life was further complicated by poverty at home. Inga had few friends and "hung out" with two older transient students and her sister. The combined impact of these experiences was not well understood at school, and this motivated teachers to seek professional guidance and support. It was agreed that further discussions with GSE would occur and that behaviour support services would be contacted so that a school wide programme could be developed for Inga to improve her learning and social experiences.

Inga moved to another school before this initiative could be pursued at Wooldon. Follow-up interviews with a staff member at her new school, revealed that they had received progress reports from Wooldon School and a telephone call from the deputy principal, which had helped them to fill out the picture about Inga:

Researcher: Did you get all of the information that you needed from Wooldon?

Mrs B: Yes we did, so we got records, written records but we also had phone calls from the DP.

Researcher: What do you think works better?

Mrs B: I think you need both but I think that the actual phone call is great.

Further discussion revealed that Mrs B. had not seen any records about Inga's intellectual disability, or about proposals to contact GSE for support, although it was possible that Inga's dean had seen these. She was keen to follow this up as there were implications for seeking additional resources immediately so that the school could meet Inga's needs:

Mrs B: But she would still be eligible for something. That would be something that I would say is a disadvantage to transient kids, is that when they have got needs, to perhaps have some extra teacher aide hours . . . that there is a possibility that that could be missed or take longer to be picked up. So they could be here for a term or a couple of terms before it starts to surface, and then it may be that they move on. So it is incredibly important that everything is passed on to their new school.

Researcher: Is there no standard form or anything that you tick off when students are changing schools?

Mrs B: Not really, well there is, but probably not with the right kind of information. Certainly if there has been (a standard form), it would have their results, their reading and where they are at in all their curriculum areas, and any referrals that have been made to specialist services. That should be all in the report.

### **Summary of findings: The action-research project**

The community of practice focused on understanding the lived experiences of transient students and their families, and on the subsequent development and implementation of two teaching and learning initiatives:

- (i) The guidelines and starter pack—a set of guidelines for the induction and teaching of transient students that teachers could follow, and a pack for students containing school and community information, a statement for them to complete about themselves, and initial stationary.
- (ii) Teaching initiatives across the curriculum, based on individual students' *strengths and interests* as they identify them.

#### *Understanding students' experiences and changing teachers' beliefs in the community of practice*

Teachers reported that the project helped them to understand transient students' lived experiences at school and the implications for teaching and learning. Some teachers described feeling more sympathetic and responsive towards transient students, and the principal felt that the project had reinforced the need for a positive and proactive approach to teaching and learning for these students. Teachers appreciated the collaborative nature of the project, and wanted to continue with similar, focused meetings, when the research had finished. This change in attitude did not always translate into specific and sustained change in the classroom, however. Positive changes identified by teachers included the maintenance of close relationships with families; the use of students' "Me statements" to identify students' strengths and interests; improved relationships with teachers and peers for one student through a focus on his interest in soccer; and a willingness by teachers to try out new ideas in their classrooms. Challenges included the need for a sustained effort to build an inclusive school culture and eliminate bullying; and the need to overcome negative preconceptions about transient students and their families in order to focus on positive developments in teaching and learning.

#### *The community of practice experience*

Some teachers valued the opportunity to talk, gather data about themselves, and share experiences. Teachers also felt that more release time would have allowed them to dedicate their time to record project data and implement new teaching initiatives. It was felt that the one-year timeframe was too short to fully implement and evaluate teaching innovations, and only one of the two action-research cycles was able to be completed. It was also suggested that starting the

project mid-year would have allowed teachers to integrate new teaching approaches into their planning at the start of the new school year.

#### *The guidelines*

The Guidelines were developed and used with two new families and with positive results. Parents valued the immediate contact with class or homeroom teachers, and the quick response by teachers to support students' social experiences and assess their learning. In one case these assessments reversed teachers' preconceptions about a student's abilities. This student also appreciated his teachers' interest and encouragement to succeed.

#### *Addressing bullying*

Teachers initially took a "defensive" (their own words) stance when bullying was raised as an issue in the community of practice, and questions were raised about the role of transient students themselves in provoking bullying. There was a significant turnaround with the placement of a "Bullying Box" in the deputy principal's office for students to anonymously report bullying and seek help. The principal noted that teachers' can yearn for social stability in their classroom, and their response to blame the transient child needed to be understood within this context. Nonetheless, he challenged the process of blaming and emphasised the professional responsibility of individual teachers in the classroom, and the need for a committed whole school approach to stop bullying.

#### *Focus on students' strengths and interests*

Teachers used a class-wide activity aimed at finding out about students' strengths, interests and needs for support as the students described them, and were encouraged to think about how their teaching (instructional organisation, task design, teacher-student and student-student interactions) contributed to or undermined 'belonging' in a class community. Three students were prioritised for this part of the project because they had significant needs due to social isolation, and two of these students also had significant learning needs. The students' "Me" statements were used in the community of practice to identify responsive teaching approaches. Few specific changes were made to classroom practice as a result of these discussions, and collaborative meetings with other teachers to implement changes across the curriculum were not held, due primarily to time constraints, and according to one teacher, a reluctance, perhaps, to invest too much time in initiatives when the students might leave. Some positive changes were noted, however.

Aaron had some improvements in his social relationships with others when soccer was introduced on sports days; one of the teachers used this shared interest to build a positive relationship with Aaron; and teachers' perceptions of Aaron underwent a positive transformation. Anna made some friends at school and felt less isolated. She also had some community-based work experience that she enjoyed, and this had fostered positive relationships in the community. Her interest in Te Reo and Tikanga Māori was not responded to due to a lack of expertise and resources. Both Aaron and Anna shifted from Wooldon at the end of the project. Inga shifted during the project, and Wooldon school followed up with a useful phone call to her next school.



## 6. Limitations of the project

This project described the experiences of students and teachers in one rural area school. Similar studies in larger urban schools with high levels of transience may raise other issues not addressed in this project.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the timeframe for the project was insufficient to adequately pursue the implementation of new teaching and learning initiatives in classrooms. Further projects undertaken in this area would require a minimum timeframe of 18 months. This would allow schools to research, evaluate, and fully explore and evaluate changes in teaching practice that enhance transient students' learning and social experiences. Processes that involve building a community of practice that coconstructs knowledge about teaching and learning are intensive and take time. This needs to be recognised in the allocation of time and resources for research projects.

We would like to see further in-depth and data-rich projects undertaken in individual schools that allow researchers and teachers to work effectively together. Case study research of a single site allows for a detailed and substantive analysis of the phenomenon being explored (Stake, 2000). We have suggested in this report that further research could focus on child and family resilience in relation to transience.

Teachers in the present study commented that they needed support to take additional time out of the classroom beyond scheduled meetings. This would have provided further opportunities for focused collaboration with community of practice members and other staff in the school.

A flexible start date (e.g., in Term 3) was mentioned as being better suited to the curricula planning schedule of schools. This would allow schools to use their first six months to develop teaching and learning initiatives that are then implemented in Term 1 of the following year.

A flexible end date and/or additional time at the end of projects may also be beneficial to ensure that schools have the support they need to maintain and further develop their teaching and learning initiatives.



## 7. Building capability and capacity

The project was a collaborative one, and the researchers would like to fully acknowledge the support and enthusiastic participation of teachers in the partner school. The participants and the school, however, cannot be named because of the sensitive nature of the data that has been presented in regards to students' lived experiences of transience and their school lives.

This project provided an opportunity to explore a significant yet under-researched area in New Zealand, namely the experiences of transient students and the implications of these for developing teaching approaches that enhance student achievement. It should be noted that there is a significant gap in knowledge in this area in New Zealand (Lee, 2001). The project has opportunities for partnerships with other researchers, policy makers and practitioners with a shared interest in transient students. A national planning seminar is to be organised by the Commissioner for Children's Office, and researchers on this project have been invited to attend.

This project has contributed to the building of teaching and research capacity and capability in the participating school. Because the study is located in a rural Area School, the research is relevant to similar schools, and particularly to those schools facing similar issues of transience. Dissemination efforts should be focused primarily on these school communities.

The study contributed to an understanding of the complexities involved in moving whole schools towards inclusive teaching practice that addresses the needs of diverse students, and, in this case, transient students. The project responded to the school's request for support to improve their practice through an exploration of relevant research, and teachers were enthusiastic about the opportunity to work in new ways and as part of a research-focused team. The task was inherently reciprocal as it combined the knowledge, skills and experience of the researchers, the principal and teachers.

Supported by the researchers, teachers developed critical thinking skills as they reflected on their practice within the research context. The collaboration between researchers and teachers affords opportunities for joint publications and presentations. The researchers gained a deeper understanding of teaching and learning, and practitioner based action research through an engagement with teachers in their day-to-day practice.

Observations in classrooms, combined with an examination of student achievement (through observation and an analysis of achievement data), and a focus on student perspectives, provided a rich data source for reflecting on and modifying teaching practice in the school. The project prioritised the students' experiences, and included parents as key sources of knowledge about their children's learning. Because the research was located in a small rural town and school, other parents and members of the community became more aware of transient students' experiences.

In order to build capability and capacity at other schools and in a broader context, the results of this research will be disseminated in a number of ways in order to reach a wide range of people who may be interested in transient students. Dissemination will include:

- The teachers in the community of practice will invite all school staff to a final presentation about the project and its implications for the school.
- All those involved in the community of practice will be encouraged to present the results of the study through their own professional networks.
- Research reports for teachers will be written about the study for publication in practitioner focused journals (e.g., *SET*).
- Data from the project will be used in teacher education forums.
- The researchers and two teachers have presented a paper about this research at a NZARE conference.
- The researchers have presented a paper about this research at the 2007 Manaakitia A Tatou Tamariki/Children's Commissioner's Seminar - Young People on the Move: Helping High Mobility Schools and their Students
- The researchers are currently presenting at seminars and conferences, and will write a paper for publication in an academic journal.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this project highlighted students' and families' lived experiences of transience, and the effect of these on students' school life. There is limited research about such lived experiences in the literature, and, particularly, that which explores students' perspectives (Davis & Watson, 2001). Our research contributes to the recently growing body of studies that forefront students' voices and prioritises them when decisions are made that affect students' lives. It became important to use those experiences within the community of practice and in this project as a foundation for decisions about teaching and learning initiatives. This was not always a comfortable process as it involved challenging current belief systems about transient students and encouraging a positive, self-reflective, and responsive educational approach. Quinliven (2006) has challenged researchers and teachers to wade "into the dark and murky waters of fear, uncertainty, high emotionality and failure as sites of learning" (p. 7) and this was, at times, the experience of the community of practice. Positive and productive changes also took place. Teachers valued the time available to consider and discuss transient students' experiences, and to reflect on the possibilities for improving their lot at school. Interviews with teachers showed that possible transformations occurred in their thinking and practice as a result of these discussions.

We have highlighted in this report some of the challenges faced by researchers and teachers in implementing new teaching and learning initiatives in the teachers' day to day classroom activities. Within the community of practice, there was an inclination to 'stick with the familiar.' The development of the *Guidelines*, for example, may have become a priority because it was a tangible tool that could be used immediately. Whereas, the more difficult and sensitive task of changing practice in the classroom was just beginning to progress as the project concluded. As we have discussed earlier, the timeframe for this project did not reflect the complexities involved in effectively changing teaching practice through the coconstruction of knowledge, including the need to provide teachers with ongoing support. Also, given these time constraints, teachers may be seduced by 'instruments' and 'tick-lists' that seem to easily measure whether they have reached an acceptable standard of practice. As Quinlivan (2006) has suggested, in the current political climate of accountability and 'teacher blame', we might understand why teachers feel safe doing this. Self reflection for teachers, and the associated challenge for us as researchers that knowledge evolves from fluid processes, can be the murky water that we don't really want to swim in.

The students in this project showed a remarkable resilience and willingness to adapt to change, and this should be viewed as an asset that schools can work with. It is the task of schools to promote social and cultural participation and reduce marginality (Alton-Lee, 2003; Instance,

1997). In their statement on education and equity, for example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) states:

Education should not be considered exclusively in terms of meeting other ends (better employment prospects, income changes, greater security), but as promoting social and cultural participation, and thereby contributing to the reduction of marginality and exclusion (Instance, 1997, p. 103).

In this regard, it is critical that students who move frequently between schools are viewed as *children* with strengths, interests, and rights, and not as “transients”. Emily recommended to other students at the end of her interview, that finding caring and friendly people would help them to feel included and welcome in their school. Her concluding comment in the interview was a reminder that students are tuned in to the social context in which they find themselves at school, and have solutions of their own that teachers can respond to:

You might find some people that are kind of the wrong people. And they don't quite know what you are all about. So sort of go to someone who looks like a good person, and not one of those. Um. Sometimes you can tell by people's reactions and things like that. If you say, “:Hello,” they might go, “Grrrrr. Go away,” or stuff like that. So go to the people that say, “Hello. And what's your name,” and stuff like that. They are the people that are nice, and say hello, and actually show you around the school.

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# Appendices

Appendix A: Participant information sheets

Appendix B: Interview guide for students

Appendix C: Interview guide for parents

Appendix D: Interview guide for principal and teachers

Appendix E: Teaching strategies for transient children—ideas from the research



# Appendix A: Participant information sheets

## INFORMATION SHEET FOR PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS

### *Addressing the needs of transient students: A collaborative approach to enhance teaching and learning in an area school*

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate we thank you. If you decide not to take part, there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind and we thank you for considering our request.

#### **What is the aim of the project?**

This project is being undertaken as part of the Ministry of Education and New Zealand Council for Educational Research's Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI). Dr. Jude MacArthur and Dr. Nancy Higgins from the Donald Beasley Institute, and the principal and deputy principal of your school were successful in securing funding for a research project in your school in 2006, focusing on improving the educational and social experiences of transient students. In 2005, there were seventeen transient students in the school, from year two through to year 13, five of whom are of Maori descent. Transience has been identified as an area of interest and concern to staff who have raised questions about how best to support these children's learning and social experiences at school. The study will involve the two researchers working with the principal and a small group of staff through an action-research project which focuses on improvements in teaching and learning.

#### **What type of participants are being sought?**

Participants in this project are transient students who agree to be in the study, their parents, and teachers.

#### **What will participants be asked to do?**

Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to join and participate in a community of practice and action-research team comprising two researchers from the Donald Beasley Institute, the principal and deputy principal and teachers who have transient students in their classes in 2006. Together members of the team will be looking at the experiences of transient students and developing approaches to teaching and learning that will enhance these students' learning and social experiences at school. The team will do this through action-research cycles aimed at developing new educational approaches, and then assess their effectiveness and make further changes. As a participating teacher on the project you will participate in related team meetings, and have opportunities to explore new teaching approaches as determined by the team (e.g., by observing in other schools, talking to experts,

observing colleagues on the team, reading and synthesizing written material and research on transient students).

The team will initially work together to develop a timetable for team meetings and teacher release that fits with the schools' and teachers' commitments and responsibilities. The project includes funding for a total of 40 days of teacher-release time, and some of your time commitment will be accommodated by this.

The two researchers from the Donald Beasley Institute will interview participating students, their parents/caregivers and teachers (including you), at the start and end of the project. A member of the team (either Jude, Nancy or one of your teaching colleagues) may also spend some time in your classroom observing transient students. Observations will be focused on transient students' learning and social experiences in the classroom. Observers will be talking to transient students from time-to-time about their learning and participation at school, and will ask them for their opinions about those things. They will also record students' interactions with teachers, peers and others.

Jude and/or Nancy will be at school about one day a fortnight, meeting with teachers on the project and observing in classrooms and in the school grounds. They both have experience in teaching and they will try to ensure that their presence is supportive and helpful within the classroom and wider school environment.

Please be aware that you may decide not to take part in the project without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

**Can participants change their mind and withdraw from the project?**

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

**What data or information will be collected and what use will be made of it?** The study will involve the two researchers working with the principal and a small group of staff through an action-research project which focuses on improvements in teaching and learning for transient students in your school. Data will be collected for two purposes:

As an action-research team we will be collecting data on teaching approaches and student learning and achievement to help us make adjustments to teaching approaches that will enhance the educational experiences of transient students. Jude and Nancy will also be collecting data to evaluate the overall effectiveness of a community of learners and action-research approach in your school.

Data collected in the project will include the following:

- interviews with transient students, their parents/caregivers and teachers (These will only be undertaken by the two researchers from the Donald Beasley Institute. Also, participants have the right to review and change their interview transcript before it is analysed).
- observations, notes, and short conversations in the classroom and school grounds.
- analysis of school records and student work samples and records.

Observations will take place in the classrooms of participating transient students, and in the school grounds during break times, before and after school. The observer will be recording in note form activities and interactions with teachers, peers and others with a particular focus on the student's learning and social experiences. The observer may also record in notes any relevant discussions they have with transient students and teachers in the classroom. Prolonged discussions may be audio-taped. Interactions with other children will be described in general ways without identifying those children in any way. If a Donald Beasley Institute researcher wishes to interview peers or friends of transient students, she will first seek the consent of their parents and then the children, themselves.

Either Jude or Nancy will also record an interview with you at the start and end of the project. Questions will focus on your teaching approach with transient students, on student progress and on the approaches developed by and the effectiveness of the community of learners and action-research team. This means that the data we collect will include interview transcripts. We will be using an open-questioning approach in our interviews with children and adults in this project. This means that it is not possible to say exactly what questions will be asked in the interview beforehand. Some questions will come up as we talk. Consequently, although the Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas we will cover in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used. In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you will have the right to decline to answer any particular question(s) and withdraw from the project at any stage without any disadvantage of any kind. Interviews will be transcribed by one of two administrative staff at the Donald Beasley Institute. Both staff are very experienced at this type of work and are bound by confidentiality. Your transcript will be returned for you to check before the data are used in any publications.

The results from this project will be used in conference presentations and will be written into publications for teachers and researchers to learn. Any data included in these publications will in no way be linked to any specific participant or to your school. All of the observations and any interviews undertaken for this project will be confidential to the researchers and teachers on the research team. We will send you a summary of the study's results, and you are most welcome to request a full copy of the results of the project from us should you wish. The data from the study, which is not part of the usual student information used by teachers (i.e. observation notes and interview transcripts), will be securely stored so that only the two researchers from the Donald Beasley Institute will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately, except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be kept in secure storage for five years, after which time it will be destroyed.

**What if participants have any questions?**

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:

Dr. Jude MacArthur or Dr. Nancy Higgins  
Senior Researchers  
Donald Beasley Institute  
Phone: 03-479-8080  
Email: [jude.macarthur@stonebow.otago.ac.nz](mailto:jude.macarthur@stonebow.otago.ac.nz)  
[nancy.higgins@stonebow.otago.ac.nz](mailto:nancy.higgins@stonebow.otago.ac.nz)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Otago Human  
Ethics Committee

## INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENTS

### *Addressing the needs of transient students: A collaborative approach to enhance teaching and learning in an Area School.*

We are doing a research project a research project at your child's school looking at how schools can best support the learning of children who make frequent moves between schools. You have indicated an interest in your child being involved in this project. This information sheet tells you about the project. Please read this sheet carefully before you and your child make a decision about participating. If you decide to participate, we thank you. If you decide not to take part, there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind and we thank you for considering our request.

#### **What is the aim of the project?**

This project is being undertaken as part of the Ministry of Education and New Zealand Council for Educational Research's Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI). Dr. Jude MacArthur and Dr. Nancy Higgins from the Donald Beasley Institute, and the principal and deputy principal of your child's school have received funding for a research project in your school in 2006. The study will involve two researchers from the Donald Beasley Institute in Dunedin working with the principal and a small group of teachers.

The project aims to help teachers make successful changes to their teaching to improve the learning and social experiences of children who change schools often.

#### **What type of participants are being sought?**

We are looking for children, who change schools often, and their parents/ caregivers. Other people taking part in the study include the principal and deputy principal of your child's school, and a small group of teachers.

#### **What will participants be asked to do?**

If you and your child agree to participate, you will both be asked to sign a consent form that shows you understand the study and wish to participate. Either Jude MacArthur or Nancy Higgins will also come to your home at the beginning and end of 2006 to talk to you and your child. In the interview we will be asking you and your child about his/her school experiences, and about your views on these. A member of the research team (either Jude, Nancy or one of the teachers) will also spend some time in your child's classroom observing and recording in notebooks their interactions with teachers, peers and others. We will also be talking to your child about things that are happening at school and asking them for their opinions about those things.

The principal, deputy principal and teachers in the study will join together with the two researchers into a team to look closely at the learning and social experiences of children in our study. The team will be looking at information from interviews, observations and from children's school work to develop approaches to teaching and learning that will help these students' in their learning and social experiences at school. Teachers will have special team meetings to do this, and they will also have opportunities to explore new teaching approaches as determined by the team (e.g., by observing in other schools, talking to experts, observing colleagues on the team,

reading and synthesizing written material and research on transient students). To support teachers to do this, the project includes funding for teacher-release time. Information from interviews with you will be used to help teachers develop effective teaching approaches. However this information will be used in a general way and will not be linked with any specific parent. If it is considered that the identity of a child or parent is important to make a good teaching decision, we will first of all ask for your consent to use any material from your interview in this way.

Jude and/or Nancy will be at school about one day a fortnight, meeting with teachers on the project and observing in classrooms and in the school grounds. They are both experienced teachers and they will try to ensure that their presence is supportive and helpful within the classroom and wider school environment.

Please be aware that you may decide not to take part in the project without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

**Can participants change their mind and withdraw from the project?**

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

**What data or information will be collected and what use will be made of it?**

Information will be collected for two purposes:

5. The research team will collect data on teaching approaches and student learning and achievement to help us make adjustments to teaching approaches that will support children's learning.

Jude and Nancy will also be collecting data to find out how effective the research has been in improving children's learning and social experiences in your school.

Data collected in the project will include the following:

- interviews with students, their parents/caregivers and teachers (These will only be undertaken by the two researchers from the Donald Beasley Institute and participants have the right to review and change their transcripts before it is analysed)
- written and/or audio-taped notes taken during observations and discussions in the classroom and school grounds
- analysis of school records and children's work samples and records.

The data we collect also includes interview transcripts from two interviews with you and your child. We will be using an open-questioning approach in our interviews with children and adults in this project. This means that it is not possible to say exactly what questions will be asked in the interview beforehand. Some questions will come up as we talk. Consequently, although the University Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas we will cover in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the exact questions to be used. If any questions make you or your child feel hesitant or uncomfortable you will have the right to not answer those questions and to withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind. Interviews will be transcribed by one of two administrative staff at the Donald

Beasley Institute. Both staff are very experienced at this type of work and are bound by confidentiality. Your transcript will be returned for you to check before anything you have said is used in any publications.

The results from this project will be used in conference presentations and will be written into publications for teachers and researchers to learn from. Any data included in these publications will in no way be linked to any specific participant or to your school. All of the observations and any interviews undertaken for this project will be confidential to the researchers and teachers on the research team. We will send you a summary of the study's results, and you are most welcome to request a full copy of the results of the project from us should you wish. The data from the study, which is not part of the usual student information used by teachers (i.e. observation notes and interview transcripts), will be securely stored so that only the two researchers from the Donald Beasley Institute will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately, except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be kept in secure storage for five years, after which time it will be destroyed.

**What if participants have any questions?**

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:

Dr. Jude MacArthur or Dr. Nancy Higgins  
Senior Researchers  
Donald Beasley Institute  
Phone: 03-479-8080  
Emails: [jude.macarthur@stonebow.otago.ac.nz](mailto:jude.macarthur@stonebow.otago.ac.nz)  
[nancy.higgins@stonebow.otago.ac.nz](mailto:nancy.higgins@stonebow.otago.ac.nz)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee

## INFORMATION SHEET FOR CHILDREN

**(This example is written for young primary children, and was modified to reflect the language used by older children and young people in the study)**

### *The “What school is like for me” project*

**Dear .....**

We would like you to read this information sheet to help you decide whether you would like to take part in a study we are doing.

#### **What it's about**

We are really interested in finding out about what helps kids to learn well at school. We will be spending some time at your school this year doing a study about what children do at school, and what school is like for them. We have a special interest in what school is like for children who go to lots of different schools, and we are working with your teachers to help children who go to lots of schools to learn well, and to have friends at school.

#### **Who I want to talk to**

If you agree to be in our study, you will be one of the “focus children”. That means we will be spending some time with you and your classmates and friends looking at what happens for you at school. We will also be working with your teachers so that you can learn well, and enjoy taking part in all the things that happen at school. We would like to know what you think about the things that happen at school, what you like and don't like and how those things make you feel. We are interested in your opinion so we will be talking to you at school from time to time. I will also talk to your teachers, and sometimes I will talk to other kids who are in the same class as you and to your friends.

#### **What you would have to do**

You and your Mum or Dad (or a caregiver) will sign a special form, called a Consent Form, which tells me you understand about the study and you want to be in it. Then we will start coming to school to see what you do at school. One of us will be at school about one day every two or three weeks. We will write down the things we see and some of the things you and other children say in a special notebook. We will also talk to you about school. We might talk to you a little bit when we are at school, like we might ask you to tell us about things you or some of the others are doing. But we would really like it if one of us could come and talk with you at home, if that's OK. We will probably talk to you at home at the start and the end of the year. If you want Mum or Dad to be there when we talk, that's fine. You can choose.

#### **You can change your mind**

Even if you sign the form, you can change your mind later if you don't want to be in the study any more and if you don't want to talk to us sometimes (you might have other things you want to do), or if you just want us to go away. That's all OK.

If you have any worries after our talks you can come and talk to one of us. We will keep everything private but if we're not sure about something you've told us, we might want to talk to your Mum or Dad or someone at school but we will check that's OK with you first.

**How I will do the study**

When we talk to you at home we might record your voice so that we can remember what you have said. But at anytime you can tell us to turn the recorder off and we will. The tape and the copy of your words from the tape will only be seen by us, but we might want to use some of your ideas to help your teachers teach you really well. If we think it is important for your teachers to know about some of the things that you said, we will check with you first to make sure that it's OK for us to do that.

When we have written the report about our work at school the tape will be wiped clean. The copy of the words will be kept locked up at our office in Dunedin for five years and then it will be shredded. We will be writing some books for teachers about the project we are doing. We might write about some of the things you have talked about but we won't use your name, or the name of the school so people won't know they are your words.

**If you want to know more about the study**

If you, or Mum or Dad (or your caregivers), want to know more about the study you can ask us . Our names are written here with our phone number.

**Jude MacArthur and Nancy Higgins - Phone (03) 479-8080**

Thank you for reading this Information Sheet.

## Appendix B: Interview guide for students

### *Demographics*

Age, gender, how many schools attended

### *Teaching and learning*

How would you describe your time at school so far?

What school did you like the best at school and why?

What do you hate about school and why?

Do you think that your teachers could teach you better? What suggestions would you have for them to be better teachers?

What can teachers do to help you learn more or better?

What do teachers do that makes it hard for you to learn?

How do you think you do at school (same as peers or different?)?

### **Secondary students-**

What's your favourite subject, and why?

### *Friendships*

Who are your friends at school?

What do you like doing with them?

What do you do at break times? With whom?

What do you like to do after school? With whom?

What does your teacher do to help you get new friends? What would you like them to do?.

## Appendix C: Interview guide for parents

Demographics: Occupation, siblings, ages,

How many people live together? Own their own home? Rent? Beneficiary/Employed?

How often have you moved? Any particular reason?

Will you be moving in the future?

What do you think your child's educational experience is like?

Are there any improvements that can be made by teachers or the school?

Does your child like school?

Does your child have close friends at school?

## Appendix D: Interview guide for principal and teachers

Demographics: qualifications, gender, age, length of service, subject speciality, responsibilities in school, previous professional development undertaken,

Please describe your teaching experience?

What are your career plans for the future?

What do you think a transient child's educational experience is like?

Are there any improvements that can be made by teachers or the school?

How would you describe your teaching practice in regards to transient students?

What type of professional development would you need to improve your teaching practice in regards to transient children?

How do you learn best?

## Appendix E: Teaching strategies for transient children—ideas from the research

### **Home-school/ family involvement**

- Establish family, community and educational support networks
- Establish the school as a place that helps families e.g., have a practical resource available for families on where to get housing, clothing, community resources and groups, health services recreation, etc.
- Encourage parental involvement and participation in all aspects of education (including those aspects associated with high academic achievement) (Note—education is highly valued by many migrant families who see it as a ticket to the future- offering their children opportunities they did not have)
- Corporate culture that supports families and encourages strong school-family-rural community partnerships. Characterised by:
  - high expectations for school success
  - a welcoming school community
  - counsellor trained to understand and advocate for children’s needs
  - expectation that parents will participate in child’s education through parent meeting attendance and volunteer work
- Be aware of the responsibilities children have in their families to fulfil traditional adult roles (babysitting, translating, farm work, transporting a parent) and value these as necessities and as just as important as school
- Transient children can have poor health and poor access to medical resources –they may miss school because of this or come to school too sick or too tired to learn.

### **Community involvement**

- Much to be done in the community in terms of attitudes, education, and practices (outside school)
- Parent tutoring programmes for reading (need pool of trained parents)

### **Strategies for smooth transitions**

- Have a personalised pack of extra resources (books, stationary, etc.) ready for new arrivals
- Allow children to maintain contacts with their previous school, friends home, and encourage them to return contacts
- Develop school induction programmes that take children through special aspects of the school, and make child feel at home. Buddies, mentor, best friend (trained to assist)

## **Teaching and Learning**

- Very labour intensive—can require high staffing levels
- Assign a buddy/partner as a learning helper chosen for academic, personality, and behavioural reasons
- Collaboration with other children—co-operative learning, peer tutoring
- maximise personalised attention from the teacher—increased opportunities to work 1:1
- Pull-out style enrichment programmes focused on students’ strengths and interests
- Assess children’s access to the learning, social, sporting and cultural life of the school
- Consult with children, give them choices, listen to their perspectives and use these in planning
- Use anti-discrimination and affirmative action policies
- Clear behaviour plans—expectations and consequences for class and playground
- Murray neighbour’s research (in NZ, Australia, UK and USA) suggests:
  - Clear behaviour plans—expectations and consequences for class and playground
  - Tap into other resources—Health promoting Schools, Literacy co-ordinators, Alan Duff Books in Homes programme, etc.
  - Parent tutoring programmes for reading (need pool of trained parents)
  - Tap into other resources—Health promoting Schools, Literacy co-ordinators, Alan Duff Books in Homes programme, etc.

## **Social and belonging**

- Assess the physical arrangement of the room and the climate of the classroom
- Be open to children’s cultural, sporting and social interests—build opportunities into the school day to recognise and foster these
- Providing 1:1 in class is more effective than withdrawing children from class—helps integrate them socially and they are not singled out.

## **Teachers, co-ordinators and support staff**

- Holistic planned approach by a team of people to meet child’s needs—learning, physical, emotional, safety, social
- Involve school counsellors especially with adolescents
- Provide additional support from others in the school - teachers, professional colleagues, classmates, teacher aides
- Murray Neighbour’s NZ work suggests:
  - Aim for a holistic planned approach by a team of people to meet child’s needs—learning, physical, emotional, safety, social
  - Onsite training of staff and using strengths of own staff is preferred
  - Most successful solutions come when schools can target and dedicate funding and a lead teacher for transient children. Lead teacher is released from the classroom for assessments, organising class placement, programme input for the child, work with class teacher to develop/find resources and plan teaching, IEPs.

**Administrative**

- Extra admin staff hours to deal with extra workload
- Employ an attendance officer (could be for cluster of schools) who liaises with special needs teacher
- Social workers can be effective co-ordinators of services

## Biographical statements

**Dr Jude MacArthur** is a freelance researcher who was formally a senior researcher at the Donald Beasley Institute. Her background is in primary teaching, and she has worked as a lecturer in Education at the University of Otago where her work focused on inclusive education. Her research interests include the school experiences and identity of disabled children, and the implications for schools that teach diverse groups of children. .

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**Dr. Nancy Higgins** is a senior researcher at the Donald Beasley Institute. Her background is in education for blind children, and she has lectured in inclusive education at the University of Otago and Dunedin College of Education. Her research interests include inclusion and social justice; how to enhance teaching practice for disabled children in regular schools; and changing organisational culture to eliminate bullying experienced by children and disabled adults.

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