



## CHAPTER 2

### Introducing the Mangere Bridge Project

Many researchers have identified that a child's experience of transition into primary school is linked to children's emotional wellbeing, social competence and cognitive development, and they discuss the impact of a successful transition on ongoing educational outcomes and later life skills (Brostrom, 2005; Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Early, Pianta, & Cox, 1999). The overarching rationale for the teachers and researchers in the project discussed in this book was to work towards a successful transition to school for the children. Giroux (1992) has described the desirability of creating conditions in which people can become border crossers who try to understand a new culture or setting in its own terms rather than applying their own cultural lenses to something new. Gaining insights into the 'other' or new culture can disrupt existing divides and open new possibilities. Seeking this understanding on many levels, rather than making judgments about the other setting based on their own early childhood or school culture, and trialing ways of supporting learners to make these border crossing transitions, were central to the work of the teachers in this setting.

#### **The communities**

Three communities were involved in this project: the Mangere Bridge community, the education community and the kindergarten community. Mangere Bridge is a suburb in South Auckland, New Zealand. Geographically, it is situated on a peninsula between the Manukau Harbour and Mangere mountain, surrounded by foreshore park and the regional park of Ambury Farm. This area was settled first by Māori and then by diverse groups of immigrants. Pākehā<sup>4</sup> built baches beside the sea in a holiday settlement. Later,

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<sup>4</sup> Pākehā: Māori term for New Zealander(s) of European descent.

Chinese families developed market gardens, and later again Pasifika people came here as part of the greater Mangere area development in the 1950s and 1960s. These earlier immigration waves were followed by immigrants from India, South-East Asia, Fiji and the African continent.

The waves of immigration have resulted in a community that is ethnically, culturally and economically diverse. The sea and the mountain are very significant in the lives of both local iwi<sup>5</sup> and the families of the community. The community is close knit, with some parents who grew up in Mangere Bridge now raising their own children here. Many families begin their community involvement with Plunket<sup>6</sup> play group and the puzzle library. Then they attend kindergarten or Playcentre,<sup>7</sup> and later become involved in community and sports organisations such as scouts, guides, soccer and baseball. The township is small but very active, with community events such as the Christmas Santa parade, the Ambury Farm Day, and music and food festivals.

The local education community comprises Mangere Bridge Kindergarten (established in 1975), a Playcentre, a private education and care centre, a Pasifika education and care centre at the local Catholic Church, and three primary schools. There is no intermediate or high school in the area, and local children cross Mangere Bridge each day (by bus or car) to attend Royal Oak Intermediate and Onehunga High School. Although there are three primary schools in the area, the majority of children from the kindergarten transition to one of two local schools, both of which are within walking distance of the kindergarten.

Mangere Bridge Kindergarten is a sessional early childhood education facility situated in a cul-de-sac within the residential community. The families at the

<sup>5</sup> Iwi: confederation of related tribes.

<sup>6</sup> Plunket: a national child health community organization for children under 5.

<sup>7</sup> Playcentre: a national parent cooperative early childhood organisation.



kindergarten identify with approximately 15 different cultural backgrounds, and many identify with more than one culture. Shortly before the project began, a 2005 survey showed the demographic mix as approximately 40 percent Pākehā, 20 percent Māori, 15 percent Pasifika, and 10 percent Asian or South-East Asian, with the remainder made up of people from Middle Eastern, African, Australian and British ethnicities. By 2008 our ethnicity statistics showed some changes: 36 percent Pākehā, 27 percent Māori, 20 percent Pasifika, 10 percent Asian or South-East Asian, and 7 percent other, which includes Australian, South African, British, Czech and Spanish<sup>8</sup> people. The kindergarten has a strong and interested parent/whānau group, who work actively to provide resources, information and support. Many families are also actively involved as members of other local community organisations, even though both parents often work full or part time.

## The schools

The two schools in this transition project are Mangere Bridge School and Waterlea Primary School. Both of these schools are in mixed socio-economic communities. It is perhaps best to let the schools describe themselves:

Mangere Bridge School is over 100 years old. It has a multicultural mix of children, with equal numbers of Māori, NZ European and Pasifika students and a smaller number of Asian and Indian children. The school has always enjoyed huge support from the community, and many students at the school have parents and grandparents who attended this school. For many years the school has run a popular weekly *Wonderful Wednesday* programme for children under 5 years of age. It also hosts a weekly Gifted and Talented preschool programme called Small Poppies. The facilities are superb for learning, with a swimming pool and auditorium, as well as grounds referred to by the younger students as ‘The Park’.

Waterlea Primary School has a strong family atmosphere. The school culture is enhanced with everyone at Waterlea Primary School living by the Waterlea Primary School Way where we look after ourselves, we look after others, we look after our environment and we look after our learning. The school’s Awhi<sup>9</sup> programme assesses the hauora<sup>10</sup> needs of the children. Using the results of the assessment, programmes are planned and implemented to ensure that children get all the help and support they require both in and out of the classroom. The school enjoys strong support from our parent and wider communities. Mums’ and Dads’ Day, a student initiative, is a popular event on our annual calendar. It is a chance for families to be hosted by their children, to enjoy learning something together and see what goes on in their child’s school day. The school has a biennial gala where the whole school’s community members pool their energy to raise funds and have fun together. Leadership is fostered at all levels of the school. This can be seen in student led activities such as the

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<sup>8</sup> Auckland Kindergarten Association (2005, 2008) Unpublished Statistics Data.

<sup>9</sup> Awhi: to embrace or cherish.

<sup>10</sup> Hauora: a Māori philosophy of health and well-being unique to New Zealand.

weekly assemblies and Cool Schools, a peer mediation programme. The school is committed to the use of smart tools to aid learning and so is gradually increasing the use of ICT equipment in all classrooms.

At the outset of this project the kindergarten team wished to develop and strengthen relationships with these two crucial partners in the transition process. Having two main schools to work with provided an opportunity to research deeply because of the bounded nature of our context. While we realise that this is not always the case for many early childhood education centres, who may have children going to a large number of schools, it did give us the opportunity to explore transition from a manageable perspective, especially when beginning to develop relationships in the community.

### **The transition-to-school project**

At Mangere Bridge Kindergarten, as for many other early childhood centres, in any given week one child may leave for school, or it may be up to four or five children. As an example, during one 4-month period of this research project 30 children transitioned to school; overall, 259 children transitioned during the three-year project. This contributes to continually changing groups, interactions and relationships. It also has a high impact on workload for both early childhood and primary school teachers.

In thinking about transition for our children and families, we like to use this photo of a child jumping out of a tree as an analogy for the transition to school process. It is not an easy process to prepare to jump—in this case the crook of the tree is a difficult place to get your feet right—and then it is a leap into space before landing on the safety mat. We think the child initially



may be feeling apprehensive, worried about who is looking, who will be there as support, and what happens if it doesn't go as planned. However, this book is about the ways in which a kindergarten and the contributing schools have provided safe and satisfying landings.

Our philosophy statement places emphasis on the principles of *Te Whāriki*, particularly partnerships with children, teachers, families and the community. Transition partnerships are a valuable part of our work as early childhood teachers, and our involvement in several research projects (see Chapter 1) had highlighted for us the need to place extra emphasis on this important aspect of teaching in early childhood education. *Te Whāriki* addresses the need for links between the early childhood curriculum and the primary school curriculum, stating: that “The early childhood curriculum provides a foundation for children to become confident and competent and, during the school years to be able to build on their previous learning” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 93). Similarly, the school curriculum recognises the importance of building on children's earlier learning and shows the alignment between the strands of *Te Whāriki* and the key competencies in the school curriculum.

At the outset of the research we believed that the specific strength of our innovative approach to transition to school in this kindergarten was the collegial and collaborative relationship with the teaching team at one local school. The innovation was the result of the culture of research collaboration between the kindergarten teachers, the junior school teaching team and the principals and deputy principal. Carol Hartley, the head teacher at the kindergarten, had built a relationship with the principal and deputy principal that extended back over more than 10 years. This ongoing relationship has been instrumental in strengthening the relationship between the kindergarten team and the school. Building on this innovation by way of the research project matched our passion and enthusiasm for exploring transition and provided a degree of continuity and complexity in our dealings with the school teachers.

This relationship is a living example of the ways in which teachers from both sectors can work together to support coherence in education, one of the ideas of the 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education, noted earlier (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 17). However, we were aware, from our own experience and from reading earlier research, that developing this level of understanding and fostering effective relationships between early childhood education and school is not always easy (Robinson, Timperley, & Bullard, 2000; Timperley, McNaughton, Howie & Robinson, 2003). For example, Timperley et al. (2003) found that “despite a commitment to collaborate, teachers from the two sectors (ECE and primary) had very different expectations of each other and most were dissatisfied with the current arrangements” (p. 32).

Dissatisfaction with existing arrangements was evident in our own experiences, too. As we developed the proposal for the Centre of Innovation

project we surveyed all the parents of children in the kindergarten and those who had transitioned to school in the past two terms. A number of parents suggested that the kindergarten could do more transition work with local schools. With these views in mind we began to develop our research questions.

## The research project

### The research team and authors of this book

The authors of this book are the research team for the Mangere Bridge Kindergarten Centre of Innovation project. Carol, Pat and Jemma are the kindergarten teaching team. All three teachers hold early childhood degree qualifications and are registered. Two research associates, Margaret and Sally, were invited to work with the teacher-researchers, based on their knowledge of the field.

### Research design

The nature of the data-gathering for the work discussed in this book afforded the opportunity to follow a strategy suggested by Mills (2000), which involved experiencing, enquiring into and examining the data as the project developed. It was an action research process, enabling unexpected directions. Change was factored into the research design to allow for flexibility and the spiralling nature of action research (Bell, 1999; Mills, 2000). This included evaluation while research was underway in order to ascertain the next step or spiral in the action research process (Aubrey, David, Godfrey, & Thompson, 2000). This approach is necessarily complex and recursive (Graue & Walsh, 1998), something that was evident as the research team (teacher-researchers and university-researchers) sought deeper meanings and understanding of the situation being studied.

Action research changes the traditional role of researcher, from being removed from the subject to working alongside and with the participants in the research; listening, observing and reflecting on the data to influence teacher practice (Cardno, 2003). Kagan and Neuman (1998) believe that action research may help to “bridge the research-to-practice gap that exists in the field of transition” (p. 373). Reporting on three decades of research on transition, Kagan and Neuman (1998) proposed a multi-pronged approach to research on transition to promote action research using multiple data collection methods and perspectives. Our study reflected this approach, drawing on multiple methods and a range of perspectives. Data collection and data sources included:

- observations in the kindergarten and the new entrant classrooms
- interviews with new entrant teachers, deputy principals and principals
- focus group interviews with 5- and 6-year-olds at the school
- semi-structured interviews with nearly-5-year-olds at kindergarten



- focus group interviews with parents of children from each school after the children had made the transition
- case studies that exemplify specific aspects of border crossing
- children's portfolios at the kindergarten
- teaching stories and teacher journals in the kindergarten (during the project, teachers wrote teaching stories to contribute to the planning for emergent interests and projects, and recorded their reflections in journals).

Throughout the project there was an intention to continue the emerging relationship with children, families and schools as research partners. Fasoli (2003) discusses seeing children as competent in helping to construct “the joint enterprise” in her research with young children (p.11). We actively listened to the views of children in a range of ways using discussions of photographs, documents and artifacts of various kinds, including their portfolios. Children also contributed by selecting examples of photos to be included in their portfolios—dictating stories, building transition books and commenting on valued learning dispositions and key competencies from their point of view.

Parents contributed family stories and feedback on the work. Together with the teachers at the two schools, we were keen to explore how these key competencies could link to the learning dispositions aim in the early childhood curriculum, and how dispositions and competencies could be used and interpreted in complementary ways.

### Research questions

The research questions were framed around the analogy of crossing a border from one place to another, and one language to another, with the children's portfolios as a passport in the border crossing. We came to think of these portfolios as not only metaphorical passports but as ‘suitcases’ (Canevaro, 1988 cited in Brostrom, 2002), providing documentation and literacy artifacts that value the prior learning and experiences in their lives and that can continue to be used as they continue on their journey. Lenz Taguchi (2006) supports this notion of documentation as an ongoing living artifact:

From a pedagogical perspective, documentation is not simply to capture or make visible a memory from the past (retrospective), but rather to enable us to analyze and deconstruct, and to be able to make choices for possible learning processes tomorrow (prospective). (p. 260)

We saw the portfolios as having both a retrospective and a prospective role in both settings. We were also interested in how the portfolio books strengthen and support languages and literacies, and in the possibility of interweaving the dispositional approach to learning with the primary school focus on key competencies. To do this we addressed three main questions:

- I. Crossing borders between the kindergarten and the local school: how can these relationships be strengthened?

2. Crossing borders across languages and literacies: how can the portfolio books strengthen and support languages and literacies, especially for children for whom English is an additional language?
3. Crossing borders between *Te Whāriki* and the school curriculum: in what ways can we develop continuity from learning dispositions to key competencies?

Chapter 3 begins the investigation of these questions by considering the role of portfolios as tools for enhancing learning across the borders.