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**Title:** Teacher transition between year levels: an argument for professional learning

**Key points:**

- Over 500 teachers participated in the study, with both qualitative and quantitative data being collected to explore the impact of teachers transitioning from one year level to another;
- Transition between year levels was shown to have a significant impact on teachers' professional learning and growth that enabled them to be more effective at meeting their students' needs;
- When teachers change year levels they can become adaptive experts as they reflect on their practice to find ways to modify their teaching techniques, adjust their expectations and learn new practices that are suitable in different contexts;
- School leaders have an important role to play to ensure teachers are encouraged and supported during transition, and that opportunities for professional growth from transition are optimised.

**Abstract:**

All teachers require professional learning throughout their careers to ensure they are effective practitioners. However, debate exists about the nature of professional learning for teachers and how and when it should occur. This article reports outcomes from a doctoral study that explored the impact that transitioning between year levels had on teachers' professional learning. While it is common for teachers to move within their school to teach at different levels, this is usually done for organisational reasons. The study was conducted in New Zealand and focussed specifically on teachers transitioning between year levels 1-8. It used a combination of survey and qualitative data methods to explore teachers' views relating to transition, and its impact on their professional learning. Findings suggest that transition can have a significant impact on teachers' professional learning and is an opportunity for effective professional growth through which teachers can strengthen their practice and pedagogy. However, findings also highlight that teachers are not always aware of the benefits of transition and many do not perceive transition as an opportunity for

learning. Thus it is important that school leaders look for opportunities for teachers to transition between year levels, and provide the learning and organisational supports to enable them to become effective practitioners in the new learning context. .

## **Introduction**

Although a teacher changing from teaching one year level to another is a regular occurrence in schools, the potential impact of transition on teachers' professional learning has traditionally been overlooked. Research suggests that transition often occurs in schools for administrative reasons, and other possible benefits are not always evident or acknowledged (Author, 2013, 2014). It also indicates transitions have the potential to result in positive outcomes for teachers and subsequently their students, by providing opportunities to strengthen teaching practice, pedagogy and professional identity as they engage in critical reflection (Bullough, 2008; Author, 2016; Elliott-Johns & Jarvis, 2013; Newell, Tallman, & Letcher, 2009). When teachers change from teaching one year level to another, they are required to adapt and adjust their practice to respond to the different learner needs at the new level. As teachers do this, they are required to reflect and find ways to reposition and reconstruct their current values and beliefs (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2008). They can also be required to adapt their teaching tools as well as construct new knowledge and ways of teaching.

Ideas about professional learning that improves teaching practice can be aligned with research on what comprises effective teaching (Alton-Lee, 2003). Bishop and Berryman (2009). suggest that developing effective teaching practice requires teachers to be given opportunities to work in different contexts, while also learning to become adaptive experts who can transfer teaching strategies from one context to another, and in doing so, engage in critical reflection about their own practice. The evidence that engaging in focussed critical reflection is the best way for teachers to make use of professional learning opportunities (Olsen, 2010) aligns well with the study because transition provides teachers with opportunities to examine their practice, at their own pace and within their own classroom.

The present study focussed on the transition that occurs when teachers change from teaching one year level to another in New Zealand primary schools, with specific emphasis on the nature of the professional learning that is generated for teachers from this transition. The study was part of doctoral research undertaken at [removed for review]. While the findings reported here focus on teachers' perceptions of transition and the outcomes that are generated from transition, the study also discovered more about how teachers negotiate transition, and the role of school leadership in teacher transition.

### **Research questions**

Data were gathered responding to these two research questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of transition between year levels?
2. What professional learning outcomes are generated for teachers and other stakeholders from teacher transition between year levels?

### **Research method**

#### **Methodology**

Case study was chosen because it allows for in-depth examination of the process of transitioning. Because all teachers are unique, it is conceivable that the way they think about and experience transition would be unique, therefore case studies allowed the researcher to "investigate and report the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationship and other factors in a unique sense" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 253). Mixed methods were used to gather both qualitative and quantitative data through an online survey and participant interviews. However, due to the large volume of data generated from both methods, the findings reported here concentrate only on data gathered from the online survey. The online survey comprised a range of questions, including multiple choice, rating scales, and short response questions. Items were designed to explore participants' views of the impact of transition on their teaching practice, and if and how they perceived the experience as beneficial for their professional learning and development.

## Participants

In total, 536 teachers in y1-8 schools voluntarily completed the survey. Teachers were categorized into the following two groups: Group A: 485 teachers who responded that they had taught more than one year level; and Group B: 51 teachers who responded that they had taught only one year level. A profile of these two groups including their gender and age is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. *Age and Gender of Participants in Groups A & B*

Age Group	20-25 years		26-30 years		31-40 years		41-50 years		51+ years	
Gender	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Group A (Taught more than one level)	10	3	37	4	98	18	122	26	143	24
Group B (Taught one level only)	13	4	5	2	14	1	9	1	2	0

## Data analysis & presenting findings

Handling, organisation and analysis of quantitative survey data was undertaken using a computer-based statistical analysis program. Data were checked for coding errors prior to organising into frequency tables for analysis. They were then examined and compared, and any significant patterns and trends identified. Qualitative data from the open-ended question in the survey were downloaded and printed onto hardcopy for analysis. These data were then analysed, coded and categorised into themes by using a coding regime (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Initial themes were developed by highlighting key words or phrases and examining them for similarities and differences during the open coding stage. Connections between the themes were made, resulting in some being combined and others being deleted. In the final stage all data were revisited, synthesised and integrated in order to refine, order and validate the themes in a coherent way, and give them conceptual detail.

## Findings

### Introduction

The themes that emerged were: insight and understanding of student learning; modifying established teaching methods and implementing new practice; and adjusting expectations

and creating positive learning environments. These themes indicate that teachers' perceptions of transition are generally favourable, and the outcomes generated from the experience may have significant worth in terms of contributing to more effective teaching practice and pedagogy.

Consistencies emerged between the two participant groups, such as 96% of teachers in Group A indicated that changing year levels had some impact on their learning, with 86% choosing either *a moderate amount or a great deal*. Interestingly, even though the teachers in Group B had not changed year levels, their responses show very similar results, with 94% indicating that they *thought* it might have the *potential* to impact on their learning, and 84% choosing either *a moderate amount or a great deal*. The following short response is indicative of others who shared the view that changing year levels impacts on teachers' learning:

*The more experience a teacher has at various levels the stronger their understanding of what a child can achieve and where they need to be extended or supported (TID434).*

Although for some of the teachers it was not their choice to transition, as the following examples illustrate, they acknowledged that they had benefitted from the experience:

*I never wanted to teach new entrants but it was the only job available. I now perceive the experience as invaluable and it gave a solid base to my teaching (TID419).*

*I have traditionally been a senior school teacher, but because of the personal circumstances of one of my colleagues, I was asked to go to the junior school. What an eye-opener! I fell in love with the littlies ... I am glad I was made to change levels. (TID593)*

Data indicates that there is general agreement that transition provides an opportunity for effective professional learning. The depth of this learning is highlighted and discussed in the following findings.

### **Insight and understanding of student learning**

Significant data highlighted that teachers can gain a much greater insight about, and understanding of, student learning and development, when they change year levels. For example, teachers believed transition had a positive impact on their ability to meet students' individual learning needs, and helped them form a more robust understanding of

learning progression and overall student development. This is illustrated in data that showed ninety two percent of teachers in Group A felt that changing year levels had some impact on them *meeting students' individual needs more effectively*. As teachers 145 and 570 commented:

*[Transition] enables us to have a greater understanding of where they [the students] have been and where they are heading in their learning.*

*Moving between levels was great for understanding the progression/stages students have to go through to acquire skills.*

Survey data also indicated that having a greater insight and understanding of student learning and development resulting from transitioning, helped teachers recognise where their students had come from, where they were progressing towards, and how to best help them to get there. For example:

*Well worth it in terms of gaining a deeper/wider understanding of the big picture of children's learning pathways and progressions in all the curriculum areas. This in turn helps with formative assessment when identifying where children are at in their learning and how to help them with their next learning step. (TID440)*

*[Transition] is a very positive thing to do and impacts on teaching in that it gives a better idea of where students have come from e.g., from what they learn in Year 1 to Year 3. Or where they are going and expectations – what do they need to know before going on? What can I do towards that? It also gives a broader understanding of the curriculum. In my personal opinion teachers should be made to move every 3 years or 4 years to become better ROUNDED teachers! (TID314)*

The teachers in Group B shared similar opinions:

*The impact is extremely wide ranging but in specific relation to teacher learning, I believe it is incredibly beneficial in providing insights into the differentiation of student learning. (TID520)*

Of particular note were 14 teachers who made specific reference to their experience of teaching in the junior school being of significant benefit to them. They commented that understanding the early stages of student learning and ensuring individual learners' needs are met, was valuable learning that they could transfer to other age groups. For example:

*Moving to the junior school challenged many of the assumptions I had made about ECE, readiness for school and progress, I had to really deepen my understanding of how children learn/pace of lessons and clarity – keeping ideas clear and succinct. (TID187)*

*As I've gone up the school each time, knowing what has come before in the child's learning has had a HUGE impact on my teaching and relationships with students and parents. I often refer in my teaching to particular things the students have already learnt and the ways in which they have learnt them, in order to support my teaching, so that the students can see the "building block" progression they are going through. (TID744)*

Additionally, reference was made to the way in which these kinds of experiences provided a sound foundation for future leadership roles:

*My principal early in my career told me that I was going to teach juniors. I told him I didn't want to but he told me, correctly, that it was an important learning time for me. Since going onto principals positions later in my career- he was right, as I have some understanding of what is happening at all levels of the curriculum and class levels. (TID529)*

Findings show how a teacher can gain a broader and deeper view about *how* students learn and greater knowledge about the different stages and progressions of learning, from year level transition. Such valuable professional learning can give teachers a foundation that they may use to more effectively meet their students' learning needs.

### **Modifying established teaching methods and implementing new practice**

Data indicated teachers can learn to modify their established teaching methods and implement new practices when they transition, in order to meet the needs of different groups of learners. When teachers were asked about the level of impact that changing year levels had on four specific areas of their practice, from Group A 96% indicated that transition encouraged them to *apply a range of different teaching techniques and strategies more effectively*. For 401 (82%) of this group, the level of impact associated with transition bringing about this change was rated as either *a moderate amount* or *a great deal*. Likewise, 467 teachers (96%) indicated that when a teacher changes year levels it has some impact on their *willingness to try new ideas*, with 422 (87%) of this group choosing either *a moderate amount* or *a great deal* as the level of impact. As TID333 commented:



*We need to model flexibility and always be prepared to learn, relearn and unlearn*

Sixty-six percent of teachers in Group B indicated that teachers who transition are likely to be *more willing to try new ideas*. As one commented:

*It makes you more flexible in changing your practice, and makes you think of different ways to do things (TID155).*

In addition, 96% of Group A teachers indicated that changing year levels had impacted on them by having a *better understanding of the curriculum and how to implement it*, with 83% of this group choosing either *a moderate amount* or *a great deal* as the degree of impact. For these teachers it was important to have a better understanding of documents such as the *New Zealand Curriculum (NZC)*, as they could use them to help with their planning and teaching to ensure they were meeting all their students' needs. As two commented:

*I did need to lift my expectations for these students and get to know the higher levels of the curriculum in much more depth (TID114).*

*I must admit I was apprehensive about moving 'up' the school if only one level but as I came to grips with the level I really enjoyed the older children ... I did have to get the curriculum doc out to see where I was going, but that was good for me. (TID885)*

Other teachers mentioned how transitioning required them to modify their established teaching methods and to implement new ideas, particularly in literacy and numeracy.

*Dropping a level has helped improve my ability to use concrete materials to show number concepts immensely (TID294).*

*I now feel confident teaching all levels between years 0-6 and to alter teaching methods constantly to address the differences in age levels and their learning (TID291).*

By reflecting on some of their existing practices, teachers were able to adapt in their new class and gain new learning. Interestingly, the findings highlighted that for some teachers, but not all, this learning was made easier as they worked collaboratively with their colleagues from different teams:

*Was a great opportunity to develop relationships with other colleagues in a new level (TID331).*

*Much reflection going on and discussion with fellow teachers – more than when settled at a level (TID576).*

*Teachers could help each other more when they had had experience at different levels (TID734).*

Data show how teachers learnt to modify some of their established teaching techniques as well as develop new practices in order to meet the needs of learners from different year levels, when they transitioned. These practices included using resources in different ways, being more flexible, and feeling more confident to take risks with their teaching practice. Findings here align with much of the research that suggests professional learning should be specific to teachers and their particular context; build on prior experiences; and provide opportunities to reflect on practice, work with others, and become adaptive experts.

### **Adjusting expectations and creating positive learning environments**

Findings indicated that teachers can become more adept at adjusting expectations and creating positive learning environments when they transition. Ninety four percent of teachers in Group A considered that changing year levels had some impact on them *managing the learning environment more effectively*, with 76% of this group choosing to rate the level of impact as being either *a moderate amount* or *a great deal*. For these teachers, having the opportunity to work with students from different age groups helped to improve and refine their classroom management techniques. This is illustrated in the following responses:

*I learnt a lot and had to have good class management skills to engage the learners while I made adjustments to their learning programme to suit abilities in the class (TID425).*

*... different behavioural expectations and different ways of communicating with and engaging children depending on their age and stage (TID440).*

*Classroom management/behaviour of students is totally different at this age, and I think that's been the biggest leap for me is how to manage the class effectively for learning to occur (TID31).*

*Had to completely reshape personal teaching pedagogy particular regarding classroom management and behaviour. Moving from senior school to junior area a huge eye opener as expectations are different completely different to how I had preconceived teaching the level would be. (TID331)*

Some findings suggested that teachers can have unrealistic expectations of students from year levels that they have not taught, when they transition. As TID906 with 21 years teaching experience explained: *I did not know the ‘language’ needed to work with older kids.* Although this teacher was experienced at teaching junior year levels, she described initially feeling *aghast* at the suggestion of transitioning to a senior year level. However, she went on to explain that she quickly learnt to adjust her expectations and behaviour management strategies to ensure the learning environment was a positive one. This perspective is supported by other teachers, who commented:

*When moving down a level I needed to take care with instructions by keeping things simple and by breaking down the steps for learning (TID734).*

*Moving from senior children down though meant I had high expectations – some were too high in terms of independence, to complete a task, but others had children doing things that had previously never been attempted (TID187).*

While most data indicated teachers considered transitioning had improved their classroom management, it is important to note that 6% suggested that changing year levels had *no* impact on them managing the learning environment more effectively. Although there were very few written responses elaborating on this, TID314 commented that *changing class levels usually has no effect on how you manage students – i.e., you manage them appropriately at whatever level you teach and meet whatever needs are necessary.*

## **Conclusion and implications for professional practice**

Findings indicate that transitioning between year levels can have a significant impact on teachers’ professional learning as they learn to teach in different classroom contexts. The experiences of the teachers in this study align with the suggestion that transitioning to a new year level can provide teachers with a “fresh outlook on teaching” (Author & Other, 2013, p. 73). The impact on the teachers’ professional learning was shown to be significant and evident in their practice and pedagogy. Additionally, by having opportunities such as reflecting on their practice and pedagogy and working with different groups of colleagues, the teachers reported that they gained a much greater understanding of *how* students learn at different stages. It could be speculated from this that teachers who transition show heightened awareness of their professional responsibility to ensure the best possible

outcomes for all students, and that they view transition as a valuable means of achieving this.

Even though data showed that some teachers had not considered a change in year level, or were even reluctant to do so, when they were encouraged to transition this transpired to be a positive experience. Findings consistently illustrate how the outcomes generated from transition enabled the teachers to cater for students from a wider range of year levels than those they might otherwise be able to. In particular, attention was drawn to the value of teaching in junior classes and how this provided teachers with a sound understanding of early stages of student learning which could be transferred to other age groups.

Furthermore, they illustrated how transition provided the opportunity for effective teacher professional learning which acknowledges its individual nature, and the different contexts in which teachers work. This professional learning can occur incidentally and informally as teachers learn to find ways to adapt, adjust and replace their existing practices in light of new ideas that are suitable for their new class.

These findings highlight that while professional learning does not occur in a vacuum, it does occur differently for each teacher and aspects such as engaging in critical reflection and learning alongside, and from, others to find ways to adapt and succeed in different year levels are important to acknowledge. It also confirms that in reality, teaching experience alone is insufficient for teacher learning, and to ensure they are effective practitioners all teachers need to have “different opportunities and ways to access, experience and make sense of new knowledge and information” (Livingston, 2012, p. 162).

These results show the impact of transition between year levels on teacher learning is seen by teachers to be very significant. They present a sound argument for transition to be considered more frequently as an effective form of professional learning. However, for this to occur it is essential that greater attention be given to the reasons why some teachers do not consider a change in year level, and/or are reluctant to do so. Despite the generally positive findings from the study, the benefits of transition are not always understood and/or acknowledged, and teachers frequently change year levels solely for administrative or organisational reasons. As such, the following messages are important to convey to both

teachers and school leaders to ensure transition is recognised as a valuable opportunity for teacher professional learning.

### **Messages for teachers:**

- Look for opportunities to experience different year levels as they are a valuable opportunity for professional learning. Understand and take responsibility for your own professional learning needs;
- Advocate for opportunities that promote critical reflection on practice and that engage other staff collaboratively.

### **Messages for principals:**

- Consider professional learning and development needs when making decisions about staff placement within the school. Broaden the basis of decision-making to include more than pragmatic or managerial considerations;
- Engage affected staff fully in the transition from the outset, and ensure there is sufficient time and support to successfully plan and manage the process;
- Value the role others not directly affected can play in helping other teachers negotiate transition. Collegial support and collaboration is critical to successful transition.

In closing, the authors consider the following opportunities for further research have emerged from this study: exploring how school leaders can ensure the value of teaching junior classes is acknowledged and benefits fully optimised; and better understanding the components of school culture that support teachers to successfully transition between year levels.

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