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## **“I Feel I’m Important”: Successful Collaborative Teaching and Learning in a New Zealand Intermediate School**

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### **Abstract**

The investigation examined a collaborative teaching and learning house structure at a New Zealand intermediate (or middle) school. Using observations, questionnaires, and interviews, we explored the perceptions of staff, children, and parents about the educational value of such a model and whether it meets the principles of good education for the young adolescent age group. We found that a sizeable majority of the participants viewed this model positively and that it does reflect established principles of good education for young adolescent children, such as employing multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to young adolescents’ diversity and providing an organizational structure that supports meaningful relationships and learning (National Middle School Association, 2010). It corresponds particularly well with the principles of collaborative teaching and learning and the practice of keeping classes together for two years. Many parents wanted more information about this collaborative teaching and learning option prior to the current decision point at enrolment. We recommend continuing with this collaborative house structure at the school and suggest this school and other New Zealand intermediate schools explore ways to include more children in this form of education.

### **Introduction**

Intermediate schools, a form of middle school unique to New Zealand, have been in existence since the 1930s. They cater for pupils ages 11–13, in Years 7 and 8 of formal schooling. The New Zealand compulsory school system caters for children ages 6 to 16 enrolled in Years 1 to 13. Many children attend some form of preschooling, although this is not mandatory. There is no set time for a child to start attending primary school, but most start on or shortly after their fifth birthday, usually being classified as Year 0 until the beginning of the school year in which they turn six. They are then classified as Year 1. Years 7 and 8 in the New Zealand system correspond to Grades 6 and 7 in the American system. They replaced junior high schools, which had been established in the early 1920s, to allow children to begin their post-primary education at the age of 11 or 12, rather than the then common age of 14 years (Dowden, Bishop, & Nolan, 2009).

The new intermediate schools were more in the tradition of middle schools, in that they were intended to allow the identification and development of the special aptitudes of the pupils by means of exploratory courses (Beeby, 1938). Discussions about middle schools had begun, incredibly, in 1878 when New Zealand had been a British colony barely 40 years.

However, the proposal to establish middle schools as a link between primary and secondary schooling was rather premature, as the country had not yet achieved universal primary education, let alone universal secondary education, and nothing came of it (Watson, 1964). Even today, the intermediate school model is not used throughout the whole of New Zealand and, therefore, does not cater for all children in the 11- to 13-year-old age group. Many children in this age group attend full primary schools, which cater for Years 0 to 8. However, it is apparent that New Zealand intermediate schools, where they have been established, do cater for the needs of young adolescents very well (Bishop, 2008; National Middle School Association, 2010). For example, their focus on learning and teaching approaches responds to the diversity of young adolescents and their organizational structure supports meaningful relationships and learning.

There are differences between New Zealand intermediate schools and middle schools, most notably that they focus on Years 7 and 8 only, but they fit the tradition of the middle school philosophy, as it is known in the United States of America and elsewhere (New Zealand Education Review Office, 2000).

One of the strengths of intermediate schools is the opportunities they allow for team teaching (Stewart & Nolan, 1992, p. 54). Typically, these schools are organized into syndicates, or teams of three or more teachers, that each work with 25–30 children in a homeroom situation. These teachers also work together to teach subjects such as physical education (PE), science, and music, with each teacher taking responsibility for one of these. This is often referred to as a *semispecialized* program (Dinham & Rowe, 2009; Stewart & Nolan, 1992). Each syndicate has a strong identity within the school as a whole and is thus a form of the *school-within-a-school* model (Deweese, 1999). While not all intermediate schools follow this organization exactly, it is the model used in the school described in this article, with the syndicates being known as *houses*.

We will call the intermediate school in which this study took place Whakatītina, which means *to encourage or foster* in te reo Māori, the indigenous language of New Zealand. Whakatītina Normal Intermediate School is located in one of the largest centers in the South Island of New Zealand. It is state-run, with a roll of approximately 600 students ages 11 to 13 enrolled in Years 7 and 8 of the New Zealand school system. The school has a decile ranking of 9, indicating that it is situated in a high

socioeconomic area. The decile ranking a school is given relates to the economic and social factors of the community immediately surrounding it. There are 10 deciles, decile 1 through decile 10, with decile 10 indicating the highest socioeconomic grouping. It is a designated *normal school*, which means that it is attached to the local university's college of education and is expected to contribute to the initial teacher education program. One team of teachers in this school has devised a collaborative teaching and learning model, which became the object of this case study. For the purposes of this article, we will refer to it as the Hinonga House model, which means *enterprise or project* in te reo Māori.

Intermediate schools incorporate the middle school philosophy, as outlined by Stewart and Nolan (1992), and the principles of *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association, 2010). The principles outlined in these documents are derived from a body of research that identifies what makes a positive difference in student outcomes (George & Alexander, 1993; Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996; Juvonen, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2007; New Zealand Association of Intermediate and Middle Schooling, 2008; Stewart & Nolan, 1992). A report prepared by New Zealand's Education Review Office (2000) about Year 7 and 8 students in New Zealand schools suggests *collaboratively organized structures* is one of the principles of middle schooling that specifically addresses the learning needs of young adolescents. Barratt stated that this principle is applied when “teams of teachers build strong relationships with groups of students so that they know and understand them well and work together to plan learning events that will support and challenge these students” (as cited in New Zealand Education Review Office, 2000, p. 12). This principle was demonstrated by the teachers involved in our research.

Research shows that collaborative teaching and learning approaches are good for children's learning but that teachers rarely fully implement these for themselves and for the learners in their classes (Bauwens & Hourcade, 1991; Horn, 2008; Reed & Groth, 2009). One reason is that teaching has traditionally been viewed as an essentially individual and private occupation, with each classroom operating as a more or less private world (Horn, 2008; Little, 1990, 2003; Timperley & Robinson, 1997). It follows that collaborative structures work best when they are supported by the school and when like-minded colleagues work together (Thomson & Brown, 2000). This was definitely the case for the teachers involved in this study.

The three teachers of Hinonga House were grouped together as a teaching team. They developed a collaborative structure that allowed them to work together for all the students (approximately 100) in their respective classes. The classes retained their separate identities for administrative purposes, but otherwise were taught collaboratively. The teachers arranged their desks in one workspace, but each teacher also took responsibility for one classroom space (known as his or her home class). The common workspace facilitated collaborative planning, which was an integral part of the approach to teaching and learning of the Hinonga House model.

In accordance with usual intermediate school practice, each teacher had nominal responsibility for a particular group of children; but for teaching purposes, each child was assigned to a teacher on the basis of his or her academic and social needs. This approach was made possible by the ability of all the teachers on the team to teach all the required curriculum areas, as they were generalist teachers. This was done for each curriculum area and for each topic within the curriculum areas, and thus allowed for individual choice by children in particular curriculum areas. The groups were fluid, being reassessed and reassigned at the start of each unit or topic. Therefore, a child could be assigned to any level of work for basic subjects, according to individual strengths and areas needing development, and might work with all three teachers and most of the other children during a typical two-week period of study. In practice, this meant that each child's timetable differed from week to week as well as from session to session. No routine was routine!

The children in Hinonga House remained with the same three teachers for the full two years of their intermediate school education, a practice referred to in the literature as *looping* (Bracey, 1999; Chirichello & Chirichello, 2001; Elliott, 1998; Hitz, Somers, & Jenlink, 2007). The group of children involved in this study were in Year 7 and, therefore, in their first year in Hinonga House. The teachers had successfully implemented an organizational structure that allowed them to get to know the children, to use their individual teaching strengths, and to meet the diverse learning needs of their pupils. In addition, the program showed a commitment to collaborative learning, with the children and teachers forming a community of learners. This has been shown to be a powerful means of improving learning outcomes for children (Dinham & Rowe, 2009).

The questions that formed the basis of this study were “What were the perceptions of staff, children, and parents about the educational value of the Hinonga House model?” and “To what extent did the model match with principles of good education for this age-group?” To find the answers, we asked for and analyzed the views and opinions of the staff, parents, and children concerned.

## Literature Review

Because of organizational, philosophical, and cultural differences, international research does not always transfer well to the New Zealand situation. However, a review of recent literature allowed us to identify relevant trends and patterns in areas such as team teaching, teacher strengths, classroom climate, and community involvement and schooling for emerging adolescents.

### Team Teaching

Our review of New Zealand and international literature relating to team teaching instructional strategies showed only one model that was comparable to Hinonga House. This model used similar structures and systems, but with slightly older children (Years 9 and 10), in one of the few four-year middle schools in New Zealand (Potter, 2001). It also involved team members from different core academic disciplines, in contrast to the generalist teachers involved in the Hinonga House model. Most home-room classes in New Zealand Intermediate Schools are taught by generalist, usually primary-trained, teachers with some specialist teachers for areas such as art or music. However, the idea that cooperative learning is an effective means of maximizing children's learning is supported in other studies (Hattie, 2009; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Thomson & Brown, 2000).

The international literature described several team-based teaching models (Hattie, 2009; Perry & Stewart, 2005; Reed & Groth, 2009; Supovitz, 2002), but it was difficult to establish the degree to which any of these precisely matched the Hinonga House model. However, it is clear that models similar to Hinonga are used internationally and that these, too, match the principles of good education for young adolescents.

### Teacher Strengths

The Hinonga House model afforded opportunities to use each teacher's individual strengths—practice that is supported in the literature (George & Alexander, 1993; Stewart & Nolan, 1992). Using a teacher's individual strengths provides a more powerful

instructional environment for the learners, one in which they receive the benefits of a variety of skills, styles, and personalities in everyday classroom life (Bakken, Clark, & Thompson, 1998; Dinham & Rowe, 2009; Gorwood, 1994; Hourcade & Bauwens, 2001).

### ***Classroom Climate and Community Involvement***

Here, the literature showed that the sorts of classroom behaviors that underpin collaborative teaching and learning are very beneficial to students' learning, particularly for emerging adolescents, and even more so when associated with parental support and/or involvement (Baer, 1999; Bulach, Brown, & Potter, 1998; Grove & Fisher, 2006; McGee & Fraser, 2001).

### ***Schooling for Emerging Adolescents***

The middle school philosophy is well covered in the literature, both in New Zealand and overseas. Its principles (such as multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to the diversity of young adolescents and syndicates of two or three teachers working together with a common group of students) are particularly well explored and summarized in the booklet based on the work of David Stewart and Pat Nolan (1992). New Zealand intermediate schools generally follow the principles embodied in this work, although limited in some respects by the two-year duration of the intermediate school program. As the Education Review Office (ERO) of the New Zealand Ministry of Education points out, one would expect to find these elements reflected in the philosophy and organization of effective intermediate schools because they specifically cater for young adolescents (New Zealand Education Review Office, 2000).

## **Theoretical Framework**

Our underlying assumption when considering a theoretical framework for this research was that, while no one form of research is better than another per se, some forms of research are better for exploring and understanding a particular problem. Constructivism was identified as the underlying conceptual theory of this work, because "constructivism asserts that reality is socially constructed and can be understood only in context" (Willis, 2007, p. 54). Therefore, the theoretical framework selected should be compatible with this. Implications of the constructivist approach include a focus on identifying and constructing meaning. Qualitative theories and methodologies were most likely to give insights into the problem.

Qualitative research methodology is constantly evolving (Creswell, 2007; Willis, 2007). Willis

(2007) discusses two paradigms: critical theory and interpretivism. He identifies analysis of data through the lens of an ideology as a major focus of critical theory and relates interpretivism to two main ideas: (a) The experience of the senses is not always the best way to know something and (b) The reality we perceive is always conditioned by individual experiences and cultures. Since the issue explored in this study is heavily contextualized within a classroom, our preferred theoretical alignment was to interpretive research. Within the broad field of interpretive research, phenomenology has useful implications because, as Moustakas noted, it involves studying a small number of subjects to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (as cited in Creswell, 2007).

## **Methodology**

Phenomenology relates to research through strategies such as the case study approach, which is "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system ... some phenomenon, a program, a group, an institution, a community, or a specific policy" (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). We selected a descriptive case study because "the purpose of this type of research is to provide a rich detailed description of the case. There is no effort to begin with a theory or to develop theory as the case progresses" (Willis, 2007, p. 243). This approach can also be described as an intrinsic case study because, as Stake notes, it is not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases but because this case itself is of interest (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

We chose to do this study in the third term (of four) of the New Zealand primary and intermediate school year. This allowed the children time to settle into their new environment and be sufficiently familiar with Hinonga House systems to make useful comparisons with their previous schooling experiences.

We devised a questionnaire that asked students and parents their views about the collaborative model of teaching and learning as experienced in Hinonga House. The instrument used in this study was piloted in a second house within Whakatitina Intermediate, and the results were used to amend it. The piloting showed that very little development of the instrument was required to enhance validity and reliability.

The questionnaires completed by the children were coded to indicate gender and the order in which the completed forms were received. Thus, the code B13 indicates the form completed by the 13th boy to hand in his questionnaire. The parent questionnaires were



coded as P (for parent), followed by M or F to indicate gender, then a number to indicate the order in which they were received. The coding PF2 indicates the second female parent to return the questionnaire.

The data gathered through the questionnaire were supplemented by a number of semi-structured interviews. We chose these methods because questionnaires gather information about attitudes, behaviors, and activities, and semi-structured interviews allow for a rich and rewarding conversation between interviewer and interviewee within a series of set questions (Wisker, 2001).

We gave an information sheet and a parental consent form to all the children in Hinonga House. This material explained what would be involved in carrying out the study and gave parents an opportunity to clarify their rights and responsibilities in relation to the study, in accordance with standard ethical procedures. Only those children who returned a signed consent form were given the questionnaire, and it was from these children that we randomly selected our eight interviewees. We chose to limit our parent or guardian interviews to those of the children who had agreed to be interviewed to avoid expanding the data to an unmanageable extent. Five of the parents of this group of eight children were willing to participate and were also interviewed.

A total of 57 children and 37 parents completed the questionnaire, which asked either open-ended questions or made statements that participants could respond to on a five-point Likert scale that used the descriptors “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “neutral,” “agree,” or “strongly agree.” Face-to-face interviews were carried out with the selected children and parents, the school principal, and the three staff members teaching in Hinonga House. Both the questionnaire and the interviews, specifically aimed to gather data relating to the ease with which the children settled into the school, their response to working with three teachers rather than one, and the challenges and benefits they experienced as a result of their involvement with the collaborative teaching structure of Hinonga House.

The children who completed the questionnaires did so in one classroom, while non-participating children were involved in other curriculum activities in other areas. Parents filled in and returned the questionnaires within a two-week period. We interviewed the principal and teaching staff in their usual work areas,

the children in designated interview rooms, and the parents at their homes. All interviews were taped (with the permission of the participants) and later transcribed by a research assistant.

## Results

In this section, demographic data are reported first and then the findings from the questionnaire. The findings are arranged under headings that correspond to the questions asked. Then the findings of the 94 questionnaires we received from parents and children are reported against the information obtained from the 17 interviews. We examine the findings in relation to the study’s five specific research questions in the discussion.

### *Demographic Data*

The limited demographic data required for this study were primarily taken from Question 1 of the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they were a child, parent, or staff member and also to give their gender.

Fifty-six children responded, a figure that represents approximately one-third of the possible sample. Of these, 26 were boys and 30 were girls. This was reasonably representative of the distribution of boys and girls in Hinonga House. Thirty-seven parents (29 females and 8 males) also completed the questionnaire.

The study did not specifically seek out information relating to socioeconomic status and ethnicity. However, the children and parents who participated were, in line with the overall composition of the Whakatitina Intermediate school community, mainly from middle to upper class families. Most were of Pākehā/European descent, with the remainder from New Zealand Asian and Māori families.

### *Questionnaire Responses*

The responses to this questionnaire as reported below refer to each participant’s experience of Whakatitina Intermediate. Although the intermediate school environment was new to all the students, and some of the parents may not have attended this form of schooling in the past, all had experience with the New Zealand school system, as none of the participants in the study were recent immigrants from overseas countries. In the case of the students, this experience would have taken place in contributing schools, which cater for children from Year 1 to Year 6. All of the parents who participated in the study had received their schooling in the New Zealand system.

**Question/Statement 2:** *My/My child's experience at intermediate school has been positive so far.*

The students' and parents' responses to this statement revealed that most considered the experience at Whakaitina to be positive. It was interesting to note that, while more girls (83%) than boys (69%) were positive, more male parents (100%) than female parents (93%) were positive, although the parents, as a whole, were more positive than their children. As there was opportunity for respondents to mark a question as neutral, it must be noted that not all those who did not respond positively actually responded negatively. For example, only one boy (B23) indicated strong disagreement with Question 2, giving as a reason "because I don't really like this set up" (i.e., of intermediate schools in general). Three others indicated some disagreement.

Respondents were also asked to give reasons for their ratings. Not all of them made comments; of those who did, some made more than one. Overall, 130 individual comments were received. By far, the majority (125 comments) came from those who considered Hinonga House a positive experience. These included statements like "I've made lots of new friends, and I like changing classrooms for different subjects," or "I believe the provision of the three/four plus ability groupings in Hinonga House has allowed my child to receive curriculum subjects at different levels according to ability." Only five of the responses were negative, and most of these referred to problems such as more homework, a different way of working, the number of new people in classes, and angry teachers. Four of these negative comments came from Hinonga boys and appeared to be associated with adjusting to a new school as much as with adapting to the Hinonga House style.

**Question/Statement 3:** *What aspects did you/your child find difficult when adjusting to intermediate school life?*

Respondents were given a list and asked to identify things that had created difficulties while adjusting to intermediate school. The children and their parents found "adjusting to a different sort of school" to be the most difficult aspect initially, with "having to cope with new teachers" next on the list. Approximately 33% of respondents chose "making friends" and "the large numbers of new classes," though 19% of respondents indicated nothing had caused difficulty in adjusting to intermediate school.

Respondents were also asked to add any other things not listed in the questionnaire that they considered to have caused difficulties of adjustment. Very few comments were received, but they did include changing to different rooms (3 responses), remembering the way around the school (3 responses), "new outfit for PE" (1 response), "nowhere to keep my own gear" (1 response), and "difficulty of tracking my child's progress" (1 response).

The comments revealed that what some respondents saw as a negative, others believed was a positive. For example, moving around for different classes and the lack of little kids were cited both positively and negatively. Some items were seen only in a positive light, for example, the number of new friends and the ease and speed of making new friends. Things that were seen only in a negative light included tracking children's progress (parent only response) and having nowhere to keep personal belongings.

**Question/Statement 4:** *What do you think are the main benefits and/or challenges for children of the house setup in which you/your child are/is involved?*

For this question, respondents were asked simply to list their perceptions of benefits and challenges.

Most respondents saw the main benefits of Hinonga House as similar to the positive experiences they identified in relation to being at intermediate school. These included working with different teachers and different people, more variety in learning options, and making friends. Other benefits of the school's house system were a strong sense of house membership and preparation for high school. Benefits that appeared to be specific to Hinonga House included learning to be organized and independent, getting necessary help, and working at your ability level.

The pattern in regard to challenges was similar. Many of the difficulties, such as moving around a lot, making friends, and getting to know many different people, also showed up in relation to negative experiences at intermediate school. Challenges specific to Hinonga House included knowing what class to go to, organizing belongings and getting them from class to class, the lack of a personal desk space, being on time, and finding it hard at first to understand and follow the systems.

**Question/Statement 5** (answered by parents/caregivers only): (a) *Did you indicate on the enrolment form that you would be happy for your child to be in a cooperative teaching house?*  
(b) *Did you discuss this option with your child?*

In New Zealand, enrolment at an intermediate school occurs in the latter part of Year 6, usually when the children are 10 or 11 years old. This question related to information sought by Whakatītina at enrolment. Respondents were asked to give simple yes/no answers. We used this information to establish the degree to which parents and children were aware of the option they had selected. This question was augmented by data from Question 6. The majority of parents (34) did indicate on the school's enrolment form that they would be happy for their child to be in a cooperative teaching house, but less than half (15) discussed this option with their child.

**Question/Statement 6** (answered by parents/caregivers only): *What factors influenced your decision to indicate or not to indicate you would be happy for your child to be in a cooperative teaching house?*

This open-ended question allowed respondents to provide any answer they considered relevant. Previous positive experience with a collaborative style of teaching was a deciding factor for many parents when they selected this model of cooperative learning for their child. Some parents just selected the relevant box on the enrolment form. One parent indicated that the deciding factor was a desire to have twin siblings in separate classes. Three parents said they had not indicated they would be willing to have their child placed in Hinonga House but offered no further explanation.

**Question 7:** *Please add any other comments that you think are relevant to our investigation of a collaborative strategy in an intermediate school syndicate structure.*

Both the children and their parents were invited to answer this question, but less than half the respondents (55 versus 66 who did not comment) chose to. Those who did were, on the whole, positive about Hinonga House. Nine respondents described it as a successful experience; five people indicated that parents need to know in advance more details about the house structure; and four suggested all houses should operate like Hinonga, as they believed this model offered considerable benefits for both teachers and students. Other comments ranged from better life training with children seen as individuals (one response) to “I’d rather have my own class and teacher” (one response). Overall, the comments showed general satisfaction with the house structure, with a few specific suggestions for improvement. These included, “I want more

Technicraft,” “book storage is tricky,” and “teachers and students need to be carefully selected.”

### **Interviews**

We interviewed eight children (selected at random), five of their parents, the three Hinonga House staff members, and the principal of Whakatītina Normal Intermediate School.

All interviews were transcribed and coded to allow us easy access to comments relating to the themes and trends of the research. The child interviewees were identified in the interview transcripts by gender and a number that was assigned according to the order that the interviews were held. For example, the code Interviewee B5 indicates the fifth boy to be interviewed. Parent interviewees were identified by P, followed by a numeral to indicate the order in which the interviews were carried out. Interviewee P2 was the second parent to be interviewed. Staff interviewees were identified by the letter S followed by a numeral to indicate the order in which the interviews were carried out. Interviewee S3 was the third staff member to be interviewed.

We identified the following broad categories or themes and analyzed the positive and negative comments about each:

1. Generic to intermediate school (i.e., not specific to Whakatītina or Hinonga House)
2. People
  - a. Teachers
  - b. Students
3. House structure and organization
4. Academic atmosphere
  - a. Learning styles
  - b. Organization for curriculum subjects
5. Other miscellaneous comments

We will now discuss each of these categories and subcategories, in turn, using the numerals and letters as given above for each code.

**Comments generic to intermediate schools.** The data for this section were gathered from comments made throughout the interviews (i.e., not specific to Whakatītina or Hinonga House) but primarily from responses to Question 1: *Do you think it was very difficult for new pupils to adjust to a new school?*

The interviewees all made very similar comments relating to intermediates in general, as had been gathered from the questionnaires and, indeed, largely

confirmed the trends found in the questionnaire. These mainly related to the challenges and opportunities associated with going to a large new school. For instance, a number of interviewees mentioned both the pleasure and the difficulty of making new friends. The staff and principal were also aware of the challenges inherent in the move from one type of schooling to another.

**People.** Most of these comments came from Question 3: *How do you feel about not having one teacher just for your class?* These comments were supplemented by the probing question *Do you think the three teachers know you as well as one teacher would?* We obtained some further data from responses to Question 1.

Two aspects of adjusting to new people were mentioned: teachers and students. In relation to adjusting to teachers, the comments included closeness to students, focus on individuals and achievement, and teaching to strengths. Staff members commented on the opportunities available for using teacher strengths and the benefits of having three teachers for children to relate to. No comments, either positive or negative, were made regarding teachers as role models, although this aspect did appear in the questionnaires. Very few negative comments relating to adjusting to teachers were made, except in relation to having three teachers to adjust to instead of one.

Only boys made any comments about adjusting to teachers, and these were more positive than negative. For example: “Well, they all have different personalities, so, you know, when you go into a different class you expect different things” (Interviewee B5). The interviewer probed to find out how long Interviewee B5 took to “work that one out,” and the response was “Well, probably in Term 2.” (The New Zealand school year begins in January, and Term 2 runs from April to July). In the context of how well he thought the three teachers knew him, one interviewee made the following negative comment:

My [last] teacher would have spent more time with you, 'cause she would have had less [*sic*] children, and at the interviews they just had that one teacher, and there might have been a little bit more time 'cause there'd be less children. (Interviewee B9)

Overall, however, there were twice as many positive comments as negative. The number of positive comments made about the closeness of the teachers to the students was even across all four groups, as was the number of negative comments. There were nearly

twice as many positive as negative comments. Many children pointed to the fact that the teachers knew them by name as evidence that they were known by that teacher. Parents tended to comment that, as they could see their children were happy and confident, they assumed there was no awkwardness and that the teachers must be getting on well with their children. Another common comment was that if a child did not get on with one teacher, then there was always another one available. A typical comment came from one of the parents:

Another good thing, I suppose, would be that because there's three teachers there, if the child sparks nicely with one rather than two, and ... not necessarily in this case, but, I mean the potential [is] there that you've at least got a chance of getting on with a third of the teachers rather than nothing if you didn't get on with your own class teacher. (Interviewee P2)

Another aspect mentioned favorably by the staff was the teachers' ability to focus on individual children and their learning needs: “The groupings are working really well with the three ability groups, and we're able to target individual needs better when we haven't got a wide range of abilities in one group” (Interviewee S3). Parents did not disagree, but one expressed concern about the ability of the teachers to meet all the needs of the children in a larger group: “There is the homeroom teacher, but that one teacher doesn't seem to have the overall pastoral care to the point that they're [*sic*] aware of all the needs of individual students” (Interviewee F2).

All respondents were positive about the opportunities the Hinonga House model offered to use individual teacher strengths. Interviewee B5 expressed this well: “We get to have a different teacher for different subjects. So if they're [*sic*] good at that, then they [*sic*] teach you that, and you get the person who knows most.” No negative comments were made about this.

The interview data relating to the number of students and making friends largely confirmed the responses obtained in the questionnaire. As in the questionnaire, negative comments tended to reflect problems associated with changing to a new and larger school. Positive comments far outweighed the negative in both the interviews and on the questionnaire. The children commented that the large number of new children, together with the Hinonga House structure, allowed more opportunities for making friends but that this process was initially hampered by the large number of names to learn.



**House structure and organization.** The interviewees' thoughts on this topic were explored through Question 2: *What do you think are the best and most difficult things about the way the house is organized?*

Comments relating to this complex area were further broken down into nine separate categories. These were:

1. Moving around.
2. Self-organization required.
3. Place to keep own things/tracking progress.
4. Sense of belonging to the house.
5. Sense of belonging to a class.
6. Doing PE in the mornings.
7. Students finding their way around.
8. Adjusting to the school/house.
9. Preparation for high school.

Of these, the most significant were self-organization, a place to keep things, moving around, and adjusting to the school/house. Children and parents alike commented on problems associated with keeping track of belongings, particularly in relation to moving around. For example, interviewee B18 said that the most difficult thing about the way the house was organized was “not having your own desk, cause you have to lug all your stuff around. That’s quite annoying.” The researcher asked, “What do you have instead of a desk to keep all your stuff in?” The response was “A chair bag, which, once you get to the right place, you put it on your chair.” A parent commented that her daughter “would [still] like a desk. That’s a big bugbear—they don’t have desks. The chair bag’s still a bit, well, hopeless” (Interviewee P1). Staff members were also aware of these difficulties. As one commented, “We have, in the past, tried having a desk for [children] who really wanted a place for themselves, [but those children] then didn’t really want that; they wanted to be the same as everyone else” (Interviewee S3).

Adjusting to the school or the house was seen as a separate issue, although some elements, such as moving around, were mentioned in this context. For example, Interviewee B5 said, “It’s different to my old school, cause my old school you’d just stay in one room, and at Whakatūtina you move around.” However, it did not appear to be a major issue, possibly because of the number and intensity of the efforts reported by staff to help children settle in.

A significant issue for parents was preparing their children for the transition to high school; secondary schools in the New Zealand system that cater for

Years 9–13. Most felt that the way Hinonga House was organized would facilitate this process. “It’s a good introduction to high school. The changing around, going from class to class, is a good introduction to high school” (Interviewee F1). This comment was echoed by several of the parents who were interviewed.

**Academic atmosphere.** Learning styles were explored through responses to Question 4: *Do you think most children would like to learn by being taught in a collaborative system like the one at Hinonga House?*

Parents, children, and staff recognized and valued the way in which Hinonga House caters for different learning styles:

I had children who were isolated and wouldn’t work with others, and others didn’t want to work with them. They came into the whole ninety-odd House situation, and they found other children who had sort of different personalities, like they did, and they all got along ... and in a wee while their self-esteem just went up, and they were a lot happier. (Interviewee S3)

Linked with this is the opportunity to develop and follow individual interests within the curriculum. Interviewee G17 discussed this point:

They [asked] us whether we wanted to do Masai or geology. And before that we could choose from science or—what was it?—astronomy or leadership ... and if you’re on leadership you wind up with both of them. And I chose Masai and geology, and then astronomy.

Parents were also generally positive about this aspect, especially one parent who felt the child’s social and emotional needs were being met through the Hinonga House academic model:

He won’t read, and he’s had problems with his reading. And so we had him assessed at [firm] recently, and he’s been getting some extra help. But he doesn’t feel that he’s slow or thick in Hinonga because the kids move from group to group. (Interviewee P3)

On the other hand, at least one parent felt a child was disadvantaged by the model, as it was perceived: “When he clicked that he was in the bottom of the three [houses] at Hinonga, his confidence plummeted. His perception of himself plummeted” (Interviewee P5).

Children, parents, and staff are all aware that the Hinonga House model allows for a wide variety of

subjects to be taught by teachers with strengths in particular areas: “We get to have different teachers for different subjects. So if they’re good at that, then they teach you that, and you get the person who knows most” (Interviewee B5). Parents agreed. In response to a researcher’s question concerning the best things about the way the house is organized, one parent responded, “The children get the strengths, the teacher strengths ... the three teachers are quite different, really, and I think that’s a good thing” (Interviewee P1).

The children were also taught according to their ability in any one topic in the core subjects of math and literacy as well as in music. The children were aware of and appreciated this: “Well, you’re put into the group level that you should be in. Not just [a] large class with mixed abilities] ... I got pulled out of one group because I was finding it too easy and put into a higher group” (Interviewee G17). Parents were also generally supportive, but were sometimes unsure of the process involved:

I like the idea of the ability grouping,. We are aware that there are different groupings going on, but it’s not clear how one gets from one group to the other. (PF2)

**Miscellaneous comments.** Parents reported they knew very little about the structure and philosophy of Hinonga House at the time of enrolment, when they were required to make a decision. “I/We just ticked the box” was a very common statement. Staff members are aware of this and commented that most decisions to opt in to Hinonga House had probably been made by word of mouth, rather than an informed choice.

Most of the children reported they were not consulted about their possible enrolment in a collaborative structure, although some were asked if they wanted to be in such a system. Many did not understand the concept prior to starting at the school, but others commented they knew about it because they’d had an older sibling go through Hinonga House, and some had been involved in similar schemes at their previous schools.

## Discussion

We found the systems and structures of Hinonga House were a very good match with the principles of good education for children in Years 7 and 8.

When setting up Hinonga House, the teachers called upon their extensive experience of what works for this

age group as well as their professional knowledge of requirements for teaching at this level. The result was a model based on sound pedagogy and educational needs, as applied to emerging adolescents. This study’s findings support the retention or, indeed, expansion of the Hinonga House model within Whakatitina Normal Intermediate School.

The Hinonga House model was not common, but anecdotal evidence suggests that a similar form of teaching and learning has been used in other New Zealand schools. A school in Invercargill, a city in the far south of the South Island of New Zealand, has used a similar system described as the Hoahoa model for its Year 9 and 10, pupils ages 13 and 14 years (Potter, 2001), although the Hinonga House model carried some aspects, such as flexible grouping, much further. Planning was another area in which the models differed. The Hoahoa model gave responsibility for planning a particular curriculum area to one teacher who then provided the planning for all members of the team. The Hinonga House model involved one teacher being responsible for the planning and implementation of curriculum areas based on his or her teaching strengths. Typically, one teacher delivered a curriculum area to all students. If all three teachers were involved in one area, for example PE, then they were all involved in planning for that subject. Other aspects of collaborative teaching, such as looping, were used in a similar way in the two models.

There were many benefits for both the children and the adults involved in this collaborative teaching and learning model, especially making full use of each teacher’s strengths and teaching styles. The provision of flexible groupings according to academic and social/emotional needs, the pool of children available as potential friends, and the increased independence and confidence of the children were other benefits. These all led to an easier transition to high school.

Some negative comments, such as changing to different rooms or being unable to keep track of progress, appeared to be driven by a lack of knowledge of the Hinonga House model on the part of the respondents concerned. Other issues, such as finding the way around the school and moving from room to room, seemed to relate to the fact that the respondents were both first-year students in the intermediate school and first-year members of Hinonga House. Overall, there were very few negative comments, and these were more than offset by the positive nature of the majority of the responses.

The staff reported several benefits, many of them similar to positive aspects identified by the children and their parents. An interesting point made by one staff member was the positive effect on her professional knowledge and understanding through teaching the full range of children, including very able students. The teachers also reported they were learning from each other.

Some issues (for example, funding, organization, and communication systems) were raised. For a number of reasons, organization and communication were cited as issues for both parents and children. Initially, children were bewildered as they adjusted to the complexity of the systems of both the school and the house. These issues tended to become less significant as the year progressed. Parents, however, felt that some aspects of accessing information regarding their children and the Hinonga House model still required further clarification. Both parents and children remained concerned about storage and protection of personal belongings. The chair bags were seen as an improvement among those parents who had had other children attend Hinonga House previously, but the problem was not completely resolved yet.

Parents also felt the need for more communication and understanding of the collaborative teaching option to be able to make a more informed decision about a schooling style for their children. This information was particularly important prior to ticking the box on the enrolment form. The most informed parents were those who had had an older child in some form of collaborative teaching structure. These parents were also some of the most positive supporters of the Hinonga House model.

The extent to which all parties involved consistently reported similar benefits and issues. We believe this consistency highlights the value of this form of collaborative teaching and learning for the intermediate age group, particularly in New Zealand intermediate schools. It seems likely that, as parents become better informed about the advantages of a collaborative teaching and learning environment, more will wish their children to be involved. A related issue for the school to consider is whether to extend this collaborative approach to another three-class syndicate, to allow this option to be offered to a new intake of students every year. This would be something to consider when appointing or replacing staff. It would require careful planning, as was the case for the creation of the Hinonga House team. A compatible teaching team is essential for success.

Teacher, parent and student support for the concepts and strategies implemented in the Hinonga House model were evidenced in the findings. Some elements pose administrative challenges, largely related to the use and storage of resources, the initial difficulty of becoming familiar with a large number of children, and the associated necessary routines.

The Hinonga House model, as designed and implemented by these three teachers at Whakatitina Normal Intermediate School, directly relates to several of the 16 characteristics for successful schools for young adolescents outlined in *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (NMSA, 2010). In addition to setting up an “organizational structure that supports meaningful relationships and learning,” they employ “multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to (young adolescents’) diversity.” They also benefit from “courageous, collaborative leadership” as they work with the principal to make their ideas reality.

## Conclusion

Our research shows the Hinonga House model delivers positive benefits to both teachers and learners. Continuing with and possibly expanding this structure within Whakatitina Intermediate can only enhance the school’s reputation as an innovative institution that values sound learning outcomes for all its pupils.

This study concentrated on an exploration of the educational value of the Hinonga House model in relation to the principles of good education for young adolescents. Further research could investigate other possible academic benefits of this model, for example, the benefits for learners from looping and the longevity of innovative teaming models. Sociocultural issues such as the concept of culturally-responsive pedagogies (Macfarlane, Christensen, & Mataiti, 2010), relating to educational models as practiced in Hinonga House, also merit further research.

The small-scale evaluative nature of this study limits its applicability to wider school settings, although the findings do indicate there could be some merit to extending the model both within Whakatitina and in other schools catering for the preadolescent age group. We believe the decision to ask for only very limited demographic data also had an impact on our findings. For example, the views of the children and their parents in relation to their ethnicity would have been interesting to explore but would have made the study more complex than time allowed. This is perhaps something that could be pursued in another study.

This study discusses the experience of one intake of Hinonga House students, their parents, and the teachers. In the New Zealand school system, children disperse to a range of high schools at the end of primary or intermediate school. We chose not to attempt to trace and interview previous cohorts of Hinonga House students. However, we believe that doing so in a future study could offer further insight into the collaborative teaching and learning experience.

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