

# **Expectations and Experiences of Independent Learning in Two New Zealand Secondary Schools**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explored the expectations and experiences of students and staff that were involved in an independent learning programme in their school. In addition to these expectations and experiences, this research explored the implication of implementing an independent learning programme for school leadership.

A qualitative methodology was employed for this research, focusing on two New Zealand secondary schools. Across the two case study sites, 108 students responded to an online questionnaire, two focus groups were held with teachers involved in the independent learning programme and two semi-structured interviews were held with the Principals of each school.

The major findings from this study indicate that students and staff have very defined expectations with regard to the learning environment that an independent learning programme should create for students. Students value access to teachers, targeted learning resources, specialist spaces and ICT equipment and infrastructure in order to be able to learn independently. They long for the freedom to decide where to study and are also cognisant of the behaviour management role that teachers must play in order to maintain an appropriate learning environment. Staff want similar resource and building access as students but also desire a clear vision, professional development and clarity as to how an independent learning programme fits with the overall educational philosophy of the school.

The findings imply that school leaders must appropriately train their staff in the field of independent learning and provide them with the time they require to prepare units of work and resource material. Thought should be given to the physical infrastructure of the school and the cost to redevelop spaces for independent learning. Other fiscal costs to consider include ICT costs, and the cost to appoint staff to positions specific to an independent learning programme.

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## Contents

ABSTRACT .....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
LIST OF TABLES .....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	v
CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION .....	1
INTRODUCTION .....	1
RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	4
THESIS OUTLINE .....	4
CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW .....	6
INTRODUCTION .....	6
WHAT IS INDEPENDENT LEARNING?.....	6
THE BENEFITS OF INDEPENDENT LEARNING .....	15
ISSUES AND CONTRADICTIONS WITH INDEPENDENT LEARNING .....	19
THE IMPLICATIONS OF INDEPENDENT LEARNING FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP.....	23
THE NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM.....	24
LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING .....	28
CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY AND METHODS .....	33
INTRODUCTION .....	33
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....	33
RESEARCH METHODS.....	35
DATA ANALYSIS.....	41
RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY .....	41
ETHICAL ISSUES .....	43
CHAPTER FOUR – RESEARCH FINDINGS .....	45
INTRODUCTION .....	45

SELF-COMPLETION QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS .....	45
SCHOOL A FINDINGS .....	50
SCHOOL B FINDINGS .....	61
CONCLUSION .....	72
CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS .....	74
INTRODUCTION .....	74
SCHOOL VISION AND THE PERCEPTIONS OF STAKEHOLDERS .....	74
DEVELOPMENT .....	78
RESOURCING .....	85
SUMMARY .....	89
CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	92
INTRODUCTION .....	92
EXPECTATIONS .....	92
EXPERIENCES .....	95
IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP .....	96
LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY .....	100
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY .....	100
FINAL CONCLUSION .....	101
REFERENCES .....	103
APPENDICES .....	107
Appendix 1 - Self-Completion Questionnaire .....	107
Appendix 2 - Teacher Focus Group Schedule .....	110
Appendix 3 - Principal Interview Schedule .....	111
Appendix 4 - Teacher Focus Group Participant Information and Consent Form .....	112
Appendix 5 - Interview Participant Information and Consent Form .....	114
Appendix 6 - Organisational information letter and consent form .....	116

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1	The self-directed learner .....	12
Table 2.2	Determinants of independent learning .....	16
Table 2.3	Old and new forms of leadership.....	29
Table 2.4	Old and new forms of learning .....	29
Table 3.1	Analysis of levels for case study analysis .....	34

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.1	Student expectations of independent learning prior to involvement. ...	47
Figure 4.2	Student expectations of independent learning met or not met .....	48
Figure 4.3	Learning opportunities made available during independent learning ..	48
Figure 4.4	Suggested improvements to an independent learning programme .....	49

# CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

## ***INTRODUCTION***

“Fostering a culture of independent learning has become an educational buzzword...” (Gill & Halim, 2008, p. 1) and this in turn raises issues about the nature and effect of pedagogical decision-making in New Zealand schools.

In recent years in New Zealand, there has been a focus on effective pedagogy in secondary school teaching (Ministry of Education, 2007). One such pedagogical approach is that of independent learning and, anecdotally, a number of secondary schools have begun developing independent learning centres, independent learning facilitator roles and structures to support students and teachers as they immerse themselves in the world of independent learning. Additionally, regular offshore tours and professional development opportunities have arisen as schools in New Zealand begin to explore international best practice.

Independent learning has a number of different names including self-directed learning and inquiry learning and has its roots in constructivist theory. Independent learning requires that students use their initiative to identify their current learning needs (Highland Schools Virtual Library, 2009). For the purposes of my research, the term ‘independent learning’ will be used to represent the range of terms used synonymously with independent or self-direct learning.

Very little local research exists on the topic of independent learning in a New Zealand context and my research will help to illustrate the expectations, experiences and subsequent implications for leadership of independent learning in two New Zealand secondary schools. Additionally, this research will investigate links with independent learning literature and the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) as well as the recently published *School Leadership BES* Iteration (BES) (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009).

As the global knowledge economy evolves and education continues to search for pedagogical advances that create significantly improved learning outcomes for

students, Gill and Halim (2008) articulate that it is important to have a well-defined understanding of how independent learning works, how it can succeed, issues that can lead to barriers to improvement, and organisations can learn from the experience of others. As New Zealand moves into a new pedagogical era via the implementation of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) where it is stated that:

*...children learn best when teachers create a supportive learning environment; encourage reflective thought and action; enhance the relevance of new learning; facilitate shared learning; make connections to prior learning and experience; provided sufficient opportunities to learn and inquire into the teaching and learning relationship.* (Ministry of Education, 2007, pp. 34-35)

Anecdotally, it appears that a growing number of secondary schools in New Zealand are exploring the impact of independent learning on student outcomes. Considerable work has been carried out off shore in the area of independent learning, and of particular interest is the work carried out by The Independent Learning Centre Project (ILCP) at Concordia Lutheran College, Queensland. According to Carmichael (2008), this institution has instigated change that has enlivened the pedagogical practices of teachers and created improved learning outcomes for students. Other clusters of schools in Canada, the United Kingdom and Singapore have also undertaken pilot projects, studies, experiments and implemented practice changes to varying degrees.

In contrast Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006) have a slightly more negative view of the importance of independent learning. Their views are supported by those of (Mayer, 2004) and these arguments suggest that despite rhetoric and faddism, perhaps the outcomes for students are potentially lessened by a move towards independent learning.

Due to the tension that exists in the research between the possible benefits of an independent learning programme and harm that can come from it, I intend,

through asking the research questions below, to provide clarity around just what independent learning is and to help make the definition relevant in a New Zealand senior secondary schools context.

The *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) articulates the type of principles, values and key competencies that a modern curriculum must offer in order to help create learners that are “confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners” (p. 8). In dimension A of *The School Leadership BES* (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009), it is stated that for goal setting to be effective, school leadership must establish the importance of the goals, ensure that the goals are well-defined and develop staff commitment to the goals. Dimension B of the *School Leadership BES* states that when identifying and obtaining resources, school leadership should use clear criteria that are aligned to pedagogical and philosophical purposes and ensure sustained funding for pedagogical priorities.

When the revised *New Zealand Curriculum* is read alongside the *School Leadership BES*, a distinct link to independent learning can be made back to effective school leadership. The research questions that are used in this research aim to link experiences and expectations of stakeholders involved in independent learning programmes, with the implications for school leadership in terms of pedagogy and resourcing. For the purposes of this study, stakeholders are considered to be any combination of students, teachers, support staff, parents and community.

The purpose of my proposed study is to contribute to the body of knowledge that exists in relation to independent learning in secondary schools in New Zealand and to help inform pedagogical and curriculum decision makers of the implications of implementing an independent learning programme in their school. The aim is to compare student and school leadership expectations of independent learning and the experiences they encounter in independent learning with regard to the two New Zealand secondary schools studied. By undertaking this research I hope to provide some further clarity about effective independent learning practice for teachers and school leaders in order to assist them in any decisions they may need to make about independent learning programmes in their schools.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

My research questions seek to identify the similarities and differences that exist for stakeholders in an independent learning programme, between the expectations of what such a programme can provide and the outcomes that are experienced. The research questions used to guide this study are:

1. What are the expectations of an independent learning programme for senior students in two New Zealand secondary schools?
2. What is experienced by stakeholders involved in an independent learning programme for senior students in two New Zealand secondary schools?
3. What are the implications of an independent learning programme for school leadership in a New Zealand Secondary School context?

## **THESIS OUTLINE**

Chapter one provides an introduction my research as well as stating the three research questions that guided the study. Chapter one also provides an outline of the thesis. Chapter two introduces a wide range of literature that is relevant to this research. When reading this chapter, six important themes emerge and are critically discussed. These themes are:

- What is independent learning?
- The benefits of independent learning;
- The disadvantages of independent learning;
- The implications of independent learning for school leadership;
- The alignment between the *New Zealand Curriculum* and independent learning; and,
- Leadership for learning.

Chapter three explains my research methodology and research design. I explain my reasoning for utilising a qualitative research methodology and my qualitative epistemological position. The research instruments are discussed in terms of suitability for data gathering and details are provided on how participant sites,

students and teachers were selected. This chapter also examines the ethical issues involved in this research, and discusses issues of reliability and validity.

Chapter four details the research findings and then, in chapter five, this data is discussed in more detail with links to the literature that was introduced in chapter two. The themes of this chapter four centre on the analysis of the self-completion questionnaire, and then individual discussion from each of the case study site focus groups and interviews.

Chapter five focuses further discussion around the emerging themes of professional development, resourcing and the perceptions of stakeholders. This discussion also links back to the guiding research questions that are detailed above.

Chapter six provides a conclusion of the project, a brief review of the possible limitations of the research and final recommendations with regards to practice and further study.

## **CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***INTRODUCTION***

This chapter explores research that exists in relation to independent learning and the leadership of learning in a context of pedagogical change. It has been structured into six themes which outline the importance and pedagogical guidance that is afforded educational leaders by the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). It attempts to draw together a number of views to define what independent learning is and explains the rationale behind constructivist teaching theory. It also details how existing research supports the benefits to student learning that can exist through the implementation and maintenance of an independent learning programme and balances this with research that urges caution due to the potential barriers and harmful effects of an independent learning programme. Following this critique of the independent learning literature, I explore the importance of the leadership of learning and how pedagogical leadership is a vital component of any change designed to improve student learning outcomes. In the final section of this chapter I discuss the implications of the existence and/or implementation of an independent learning programme for school leadership and what research identifies as important.

### ***WHAT IS INDEPENDENT LEARNING?***

The promotion of independent learning has, in recent years, become an important educational goal in many educational organisations and jurisdictions. This goal requires teachers to adjust to a changing classroom role and move away from traditional methods of transmitting existing knowledge, and into a role of helping to activate a process and solution creating pedagogy (Bolhuis & Voeten, 2001).

Independent learning falls within the field of constructivist learning theory and this theory is based around the idea that people actively construct understanding/knowledge and, in so doing, draw upon prior knowledge and experiences, upon others that can add value to their learning, and draw upon the environment in a socio-cultural context (Council for Educational Change, 2004).

Little research exists in the field of constructivist teaching and learning for students not involved in tertiary education environments (Hmelo-Silver, 2004), and even less exists in a New Zealand context. Constructivist theory is, in essence, a theory about how people learn. Together constructivist theorists see learning as a function of constructing, inventing and creating knowledge. As a result of this individual construction of knowledge by learners, it is argued that there can be no identical conceptual understanding of any solution, understanding or interpretation, due to the individualised meaning created by the learner (Marlowe & Page, 2005). Marlow and Page go on to argue that learners create their own meaning from issues they face in the learning environment, and that a constructivist classroom focus should be based not upon the transmission of existing information, but on creating an environment whereby learners can question, hypothesise, and create solutions. The idea that a constructivist classroom is about thinking and metacognition aligns extremely well with the *New Zealand Curriculum*, in particular the key competency of thinking and the values of innovation, curiosity and inquiry.

Mayer (2004) writes similarly of constructivist theory but concedes that it can take many forms. The foundation of any constructivist classroom, writes Mayer, is that the learning taking place is “an active process” (p .14) in which students are engaged in the activity from the perspective of creating the sense and meaning from the activity. Mayer (2004) also states that a challenge exists in creating a teaching environment that enables the discovery activity to occur, rather than the group work or collaborative activity being the teaching target itself.

Windschitl (1999) approaches constructivism from the angle of culture rather than pedagogy. He argues that real constructivism will not exist by simply creating a set of teaching methods; it must be embedded in the culture and psyche of the students and teachers in the given learning environment. Windschitl goes on to warn that if constructivist learning is to occur, that care must be taken to ascertain if students actually possess the fundamental base knowledge upon which to build and make sense of any new learning opportunity.

Constructivists view learning and knowledge as something that flows from the unique perspectives of the learner and their unique ideological stand point. In essence, knowledge is “constructed by human beings in their interaction with the world” (Gordon, 2008, p. 324). From a constructivist point of view Gordon (2008) supports these principles explaining the exact nature of a constructivist programme (as cited in Marlowe & Page, 2005, pp. 7-9). They state that the constructivist learning process creates rather than receives knowledge, is not centred on recall but on application and understanding of knowledge. It does not require the learner to stockpile and memorise, but requires the learner to analyse and think about learning and is active in its progress rather than passive. A passive learner is described as a learner that sits back and awaits the arrival of knowledge as delivered by others.

Davis and Sumara (2003) have a contrary view of constructivism and would suggest that constructivism as a theory of its own does not exist, rather, that a range of pedagogical discourses have, through various writings, been clustered together under a common banner, more by coincidence than design. They do concede that this range of discourses have commonality around the three areas, of dynamics of learning, the learning body and the critique of traditional methods of knowledge creation.

Abdullah (2001) identifies six key points in determining what independent learning is. These points are;

- Learners are responsible for their own learning and self-management and monitoring are part of that learning responsibility;
- Learner motivation plays a key role in determining the effort made by a learner;
- As independent learning evolves in a given learning environment, control will slowly shift away from the teacher and toward the student;
- Learning is made visible and scaffolded onto prior learning and strategies for learning that have worked previously;
- Independent learning is collaborative; and,

- Independent learning creates ability within the learner, not only within the current field of endeavour, but enables knowledge and concept transfer to new learning situations.

In simple terms, independent learning occurs when the learner takes the lead in both the determination of learning needs and the pursuit of the content, resources and outcomes that they feel are appropriate for their current learning position. This ability to take the lead in the learning process is not an innate ability possessed by learners, but a process involving support and guidance from teachers. Knowles (1975) supports this statement and describes independent learning as a process in which students diagnose learning needs, formulate appropriate goals, gather support materials, be that human or material resources, assemble a set of learning goals, design strategies and evaluate learning outcomes. He warns, however, that one should be careful not to assume that such a description implies a state of isolation in the learning process. He suggests that the converse is in fact the case and that a great deal of interconnectivity and synergy is required between all manner of stakeholders for the learner to achieve appropriate learning outcomes. This notion of ownership and self-design is supported by Murdoch and Davies (1994) where they suggest that independent learning occurs when the learner is active in the role they play in the learning process. This activity is either in addition to, or a key part, of the course structure and content as a whole.

Gibbons (2002) has gone significantly further than earlier authors in a description of independent learning and writes that independent learning is any endeavour whereby skills, knowledge and personal growth are improved upon as a result of their own efforts. Gibbons (2002) states, rather strongly, that for a programme of study to be considered to be centred on independent learning it must be based upon five principles. The first principle is that independent learning programmes must be compatible with the suggestion that learning is a life-long endeavour and be cognisant of the individual learning style of the learner. Secondly, independent learning programmes must evolve and mature with the learner as the learner matures, develops and grows. This principle is in keeping with the research undertaken in Singapore by Gill and Halim (2008) which explores the idea of

personal maturation and societal participation. The third principle suggested by Gibbons (2002) is that independent learning programmes should be holistic in terms of the life of the learner and encompass not only academic learning but social, personal, physical and technical aspects of life. Principle four suggests that independent learning programmes should be authentic learning experiences that incorporate as much human capacity as possible. They should explore the intellectual and emotional aspects of the learner's being. The fifth and final principle suggested by Gibbons (2002) is that independent learning programmes and learning activities should take place in environments and situations that are appropriate, authentic and realistic. The traditional classroom may not always be suitable for an independent learning programme.

In addition to the principles above, Gibbons (2002) also states that for the learner to be functioning independently they will be involved in activities that comprise the following five elements:

1. Control – the learner maintains control of the learning situation and it shifts away from the traditional teacher controlled learning environment;
2. Development of skill – throughout the learning process, learners are developing skills that lead to and support productive endeavour;
3. Challenge – learners become adept at creating their own learning challenges;
4. Self-management – learners exercise self-control, responsibility, effective time and resource management. Through doing this, the learner becomes fully responsible for the progress that they make; and,
5. Motivation and assessment – learners create assessment measures through self-evaluation, performance targets and learning goals and are motivated in their pursuit of these goals.

Whilst Gibbons has gone further than a number of researchers in attempting to define the nature of independent learning, he is not at odds with his research colleagues. The detailed definition above is in keeping with that suggested by Hatcher (1997) who states that learners have responsibility for their learning and this responsibility includes diagnosis of learning needs, setting learning objectives,

designing the learning experiences and creating a framework for the evaluation of their learning.

Gill and Halim (2008) have a slightly more interactionist view than Gibbons (2002), and share the view of Candy (1991) in that independent learning is more involved than simply leaving a learner alone to find their way through content, resources and objectives. It is more a process whereby students are provided opportunities to explore individually, but the lead learner (teacher) scatters opportunities and feedback points throughout the process to enable the learner to further develop from feedback and guidance. However, Davis and Sumara (2003) express concern about the implications of such an approach and are wary of the 'gaps' in learning that can occur.

Candy (1991) involves himself in a detailed analysis in search of some clarity around the meaning of independent learning. Candy states that for many, self-direction is less about an approach to learning taken by the teacher or student, and more about an attribute or skill set that the learner possesses. He comments further, that given this skill set ideology, teachers should be able to create courses and adapt their behaviour in response to the need of the learner in a given situation. Additionally, he adds that the amount of independent learning ability that the learner possesses may not only vary between learners, but also between situations that learners might encounter. Candy also states that for independent learning to take place effectively there need not be a total disconnect between the teacher and the learner and clarifies that independent learning is more about who, between the learner and the teacher, determines learning direction, goals and activities undertaken. He summarises that independent learning is categorised by a learning process that exhibits a high degree of learner-control, particularly over the setting of learning objectives, the pace at which the learning occurs, learning outcomes and the assessment that occurs throughout the learning journey.

In an article written in just prior to that of Candy's (1991), Lowry (1989) writes that independent learning is dependent on who is in charge of the learning process. Lowry questions who is the person empowered to decide what is learned, who

should do the learning, how it will be learned in terms of resources and pedagogy, and how achievement and progress are to be measured? Independent learning occurs when such decisions are that of the learner.

It has been argued that independent learners are not learners that simply soak up knowledge that they are exposed to. Independent learners help to create and produce knowledge through the interactions that they have with that which is around them (Taylor, 1995). In the table below, Taylor (1995) illustrates the key skills, attitudes and characteristics of an independent learner that have been discussed above. Taylor (1995) also states that learners that possess these qualities do not appear to be the norm, and indeed stand out from the majority of students.

**Table 2.1 - The self-directed learner**

Attitudes	Characteristics	Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepts personal responsibility for learning</li> <li>• Views problems as challenges</li> <li>• Desire to change</li> <li>• Desire to learn</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivated</li> <li>• Exhibits initiative</li> <li>• Independent</li> <li>• Self-disciplined</li> <li>• Self-confident</li> <li>• Goal oriented</li> <li>• Enjoys learning</li> <li>• High level of curiosity</li> <li>• Persistent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good basic study skills</li> <li>• Established time-lines</li> <li>• Plans for closure</li> </ul>

(Taylor, 1995, p. 3)

In a piece of research from the United Kingdom that focussed on the transition of students from senior secondary school into a university course, Smith and Hopkins (2005) support the need to develop the lifelong learning skills, that are so fundamental to the *New Zealand Curriculum*, and found that students entering university directly following the completion of their senior secondary school years, found the biggest challenge to be adaptation to an independent learning environment. It was shown in this study that it can be difficult for first year university students to appropriately deal with university learning expectations when coming

from the more teacher-led senior secondary school environment. Lecturers at universities were aware of the problems that exist and spend a fair amount of time attempting to address the independent learning gap that is created. It was evident from this research that by equipping students with independent learning skills, perhaps earlier in their academic career via a senior secondary school setting, students could experience a much smoother transition to university and subsequently experience better post-secondary learning outcomes.

Gibbons (2002) also takes a 'globalisation' stance and argues that as students mature into adults, in order to survive in an expanding global economy, students must be able to learn every day in an adaptive, rapid fashion and with the ability to apply existing knowledge to new situations as they arise. In addition to this, he argues that students must be able to take the initiative when any external opportunities fail to materialise and suggest that independent learning can equip them with the skills and knowledge they will require to achieve this.

The focus of independent learning for seventeen to eighteen year old students, according to Gill and Halim (2008), is not so much about with whom they are learning (individually or with others) but acquisition of skills that allow the learner to be less teacher dependent. The notion of reducing teacher dependence is supported by Broad (2006) where he writes that the key element in any definition or explanation of an independent learning programme is that of learner responsibility. The teaching aim must be to empower students to learn for themselves, regardless of the context of the learning situation they are in. Marshall (2007) views learner responsibility as a basis of independent learning and adds that another key feature includes the role of the teacher in fostering an environment that is appropriate, and developing relationships with students that build confidence and collaboration.

This view is in slight contrast to that of Piskurich (1993) where he suggests that independent learning is a training pedagogy that requires trainees (or students) to master pre-packaged material, at their own pace and without the aid of a teacher. Whilst the nature of this research centred on adult education, it provides a slightly

differing and narrower view than the feedback/guidance view proposed by Gill and Halim (2008).

The need for human contact is also to be considered when weighing up the benefits of an independent learning programme. Baines and Stanley (2000) would argue that what students in twenty first century classrooms actually need, is a teacher that is fully aware of content, their learning needs as students, an understanding of ways in which knowledge can be applied to new situations and an ability to relate to students, to role model and to guide. They warn that a pure independent learning approach could lead to the isolation of a learner and the reduction of societally appropriate learning. In research that addressed pure discovery learning, Mayer (2004) wrote that students may not enjoy the benefits of an independent learning approach if they were left unguided and with too much academic freedom. He argued that they may not make the critical link that exists between the information they construct in the learning programme and the knowledge base of prior learning material that the new learning will need to become integrated with. This may leave students with a solved problem, but lacking in the ability to apply what they have learned in different or new situations, thus rendering the knowledge somewhat useless.

As mentioned in previous sections of this chapter, the use and development of prior knowledge in a modern learning environment is an important aspect of both the *New Zealand Curriculum* and a programme of independent learning. Bolhuis and Voeten (2001) suggest that a potential danger exists with regard to prior knowledge. They would argue that knowledge and capability gaps could exist in the learning tool kit of students and that these gaps could prevent students from being able to actively and effectively engage in an independent learning programme. This argument can also be applied to novice learners, who may lack the ability to assimilate new knowledge with prior learning that they have experienced (Moreno, 2004). It would be important in such circumstances for the teacher to have explicitly taught skills that would help close these gaps. This teaching could only occur if the teacher was aware of any shortcomings that existed in the skill set and knowledge base of each and every student in the class.

There is an argument that the skill set of the students, with regard to what is required to be an independent learner, is one that is best acquired through maturation, and if students are too young, an independent learning programme is not likely to provide positive learning outcomes (Gill & Halim, 2008). Bolhuis and Voeten also warn that such deficiencies would be more likely to exist in schools where the students come from predominantly low socio-economic backgrounds, and argue that independent learning might not be appropriate in such schools.

### ***THE BENEFITS OF INDEPENDENT LEARNING***

In considering the benefits on an independent learning approach, it is important to refer back to the seminal text by Knowles (1975) where he emphasises that, in general, people are very good receivers of teaching, indeed more so than they are people that have learnt how to learn. He argues that truly successful learners are proactive, take the initiative, seek new answers and thus progress far better than the passive learner that comfortably awaits their next instruction from the teacher. Knowles (1975) also suggests that independent learning is more in keeping with the human psychological condition, being that as we grow and develop as humans, our need to be independent and remove ourselves from the parental control of our developmental years, is a strong one. This independence, translated into the learning environment is, therefore, an essential part of the natural maturation process as students begin to take responsibility for their own lives.

Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, and Chin (2007) state that independent learning requires a degree of scaffolding and in turn this reduces cognitive loading and allows learners to explore far more complex learning domains and with more complex tasks than would otherwise have been the case. This in itself must lead to better learner outcomes. Hmelo-Silver (2004) suggest that scaffolding is an important pre-cursor to independent learning if the benefits of independent learning are to be maximised. In this piece of research, Hmelo-Silver (2004) states that the process of independent learning creates skills in students that they would not necessarily be exposed to, and that students will become more equipped for lifelong learning. This concept of

improved lifelong learning would suggest that this aspect of independent learning is well aligned with the outcomes desired in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007).

Gill and Halim (2008) support the three areas identified by Saskatchewan Education Curriculum and Instruction Branch (2007) that ‘create’ the need for independent learning. These three need areas are the needs of society, the needs of the individual and the needs of a modern curriculum. In a Canadian piece of research, Saskatchewan Education Curriculum and Instruction Branch (2007) states that democracy, social change and the responsibility of the individual citizen construct a societal need for independent learning. Individuals have a need for independent learning through the desire for self-responsibility; the need to be involved in their own learning; the process of maturation to adulthood (need for independence as a human); the need for self-awareness and confidence; the need for freedom and a personal motivation and desire to grow and evolve. Modern curricula support this need for independent learning due to the ‘regulated’ requirements to prepare students for a life of learning; to transition students to the learning environment that exists outside of secondary education and the need to increase the capabilities and skill set of each and every student.

Table 2.2 below from Gill and Halim (2008), illustrates these areas of need for independent learning and fits well with the argument suggested by Brown (1968) on the following page.

Table 2.2: Determinants of independent learning

Societal needs	Individual needs	Curriculum needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Democracy – social decision making and participation</li> <li>• Changing society – lifelong learning</li> <li>• Citizenship and responsibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learner takes responsibility for own learning</li> <li>• Learner participates actively in own learning</li> <li>• Maturation and development into adulthood</li> <li>• Responsibility, freedom, choice</li> <li>• Motivation and personal growth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparation for life post school</li> <li>• Reduction of dependence on teacher to learn</li> <li>• Increase in student capability and skill.</li> </ul>

(Gill & Halim, 2008, p. 2)

The ideas developed in Table 2.2 are supported by those of Brown (1968) where he writes that “the single most important contribution which a school or college can make to its students is to develop in them the capacity to continue learning throughout their lives” (p. 38). Brown (1968) provides the view that independent learning can assist in creating a course pathway for students that, for whatever reason, do not fit into a traditional teacher centred learning model. Again, the reasoning of lifelong learning and personal motivation are at the heart of the reasoning behind an independent learning model according to Brown (1968). He extends the idea of improving motivation of the learner into a need to imbed in students a willingness to take more responsibility for their own learning, coupled with metacognitive skills that allow them to learn how to learn.

Brown argues that, given a correctly constructed programme of independent learning, a learner will become more capable of meta-cognition and personal analysis of bias, will naturally become more reliant on resources they have created and will also be more likely to develop a set of acceptable personal standards. Brown argues that staffing an independent learning programme cannot be overlooked and suggests a structure that will potentially lead to success. This structure includes the appointment of personnel to key roles including a programme co-ordinator and a specialist teacher. Whilst this may have some cost burden for an organisation that might otherwise not be required, these roles are essential to the supervision and guidance an independent learner will require.

Gibbons (2002) provides an argument that provides a foundation for the post-secondary learners, identified by Smith and Hopkins (2005) as discussed earlier. Gibbons (2002) argues that independent learning forces students to adapt quickly to changing learning environments and circumstances and prepares them far more appropriately for a world that requires proactivity in its learners. Through equipping themselves with independent learning skills, they become more capable of playing a pilot role in their learning journey. Additionally, Gibbons (2002) would argue that independent learning forces students to find their passion, to work collaboratively

with peers and significant adults and to find a pathway to future learning by themselves. In addition to the need to find a pathway, Bentley (2000) suggests that for society to continue to progress, as students age, they must take more responsibility for their own learning. This must be achieved by the independent learner rather than traditional institutions due to the precise knowledge that students will need to be equipped with is becoming less certain and more complex. Therefore, Bentley (2000) argues that a skill set that creates, adapts and seeks out knowledge will be vital to a growing learning society.

In a book that is cited frequently by advocates of independent learning, Candy (1991) has detailed a number of positive implications associated with independent learning and explores counterarguments to each of the positive implications. Candy (1991) suggests that there are a number of positive implications to adopting an independent learning approach including:

- Learners assuming more control helps to address the inflexibility perceived to exist in traditional educational settings;
- Learner control is more accepting that, in essence, all learning is self-directed;
- Learner control will lead to improved motivation and therefore improved learner outcomes;
- Learner control is more democratic and reflective of modern societal interaction; and,
- Learner control fosters more activity, curiosity, inquiry and learning opportunities that are then expanded further than can be achieved more conventionally.

Approaching the issue of how independent learning can be of benefit from a slightly more resource oriented point of view, Hatcher (1997) would argue that as independent learning relies on, and builds upon, learner prior knowledge, there are opportunities to reduce the instruction time required of teachers. Hatcher (1997) does mitigate this argument, somewhat, by suggesting that this time saving may not be evident early on in the independent learning process, as students become used to the model.

## ***ISSUES AND CONTRADICTIONS WITH INDEPENDENT LEARNING***

It is evident from the research that in adopting an independent learning programme, there are implications for both students and teachers. It is also fair to say that not all research is in support of constructivist teaching models. Piskurich (1993) argues that independent learning is less resource efficient due to a higher need for one-to-one tuition and a lack of ability to cater for instruction situations en masse. However, Piskurich (1993) adds that independent learning does allow for learning to occur more directly at the time it is needed, in a way that is far less reliant upon the skill and availability of the teacher, and it can be directly applied to authentic learning situations such as work experience or work placement. Piskurich (1993) also acknowledges that independent learning programmes can have disadvantages. He argues that such programmes are often more expensive to develop in terms of resources and instructional materials and can lead to a loss of the social interaction that occurs when learning takes place in a more traditional teacher directed mainstream environment. He considers that there is a degree of wastage of quality learning time as learners orient themselves with the requirements of an independent learning programme. The view that wastage can occur through orientation is a view shared by Hatcher (1997) as discussed above.

As detailed earlier, Brown (1968) identifies a number of positive benefits that can be enjoyed by learners involved in an independent learning programme. However, he warns that an implication of an independent learning programme is that of parental reaction whereby parents may become anxious about learning environments where the learner is able to self-direct their learning. Brown warns that schools should be aware of this reaction, assist in providing answers and clarity for parents, but not let this reaction slow or halt the progress, or implementation, of the independent learning programme.

Davis and Sumara (2003) urge caution when discussing the implications of an independent learning programme due to the divergence and rapid, seemingly ad hoc, emergence of what independent learning is. Whilst they support the notion that learning is teacher dependent, they suggest that learning should not be entirely determined by the teacher. They warn that in commentating on constructivist

approaches, existing research seems to refer only to teacher activity and not to learner behaviour and responsibility. This then creates a gap between practical application of constructivist approaches and the seminal writings that exist on the matter of constructivism, such as Gordon (2008) and Windschitl (1999). This tension could find the teacher caught between their pedagogical belief in constructivist approaches and the reality of life in the classroom and need to perhaps employ more traditional methods of teaching.

Kirschner et al (2006) are less than supportive of what they call “minimally guided instruction” (p.75) and argue that given the current understanding of human cognitive make up, is likely to present less suitable learning outcomes. The heart of their cognitive argument is centred on long-term and short-term memory. They state that an understanding of how long-term and short-term memory functions for a human is enough in itself to render the use of independent learning ineffective, if the aim of education is to alter long-term memory in order to enable the learner to readily access ‘stored’ information. Subsequently, if a learning process does not alter the state of a person’s long-term memory, then Kirschner et al (2006) would argue that nothing has been learned. They support this stance through a description of working memory, and take the position that when engaged in minimally guided instruction, learners are operating heavily within the realms of the working memory. Thus, the information is transient, used to create solutions to the immediate problem or situation and due to it being ‘lost’ to the long term memory will not be stored and therefore not form part of a process of learning. Kirschner et al (2006) state that experiments almost consistently point to the need for explicit instruction and direction when learners are confronted with new information. They state that whilst teachers may endeavour to adopt an approach of minimal guidance, due to the very nature of the human cognitive condition, they tend to revert to type and provide significant guidance and tuition or stand-off leading to highly ineffective learner programmes. Kirschner et al support the research from Moreno (2004) that states students benefit far more from programmes constructed using a strongly guided, instructional approach when the learner is a novice in the content area.

The position taken by Kirschner et al (2006) is not supported by a subsequent article by Hmelo-Silver et al (2007). In this article criticism is levelled at Kirschner et al about the manner in which they grouped together instructional pedagogies and were misguided in their evaluations as a result. Hmelo-Silver et al (2007) state that the implications for the learner of a scaffolded, structured independent learning programme can produce situations where learners are able to access and engage with complex tasks that would otherwise not have been available to them. In so doing, this scaffolded inquiry creates learner outcomes that would otherwise have been outside of their reach. The implication of this research is that whilst the learning may well be independent, it is dependent on a well-structured, scaffolded approach by the teacher of the programme. Another question asked of the teacher by Hmelo-Silver et al (2007), is rather than a focus on whether or not independent learning models work or not, better outcomes could be experienced by learners if the questions asked by teachers are:

- Under what circumstances do these guided inquiry approaches work?
- What are the kinds of outcomes for which they are effective?
- What kinds of support and scaffolding are needed for different populations and learning goals?

Other barriers that can exist when attempting to maintain or implement an independent learning programme include that of resourcing. Gill and Halim (2008) go into some depth when detailing challenges that can be faced in this area. The first challenge they identify is that of time. They state that for independent learning to occur, it cannot be rushed or pushed through at a pace other than that of the learner. This can create a conflict when teachers are faced with the pressure of content coverage and external prescriptive examinations, as exist in many parts of the world. The issue of time to learn, time to teach and the constant strain this time is under from external drivers, will continue to cause tension in an independent learning environment.

Consistency of approach is another area of risk that is discussed by Gill and Halim (2008). Their research found that inconsistent application of an independent learning programme across different departments within a learning institution, lead to

students being confused and less likely to engage or succeed in an independent learning programme. The notion of school wide cohesion and culture must be considered in the design and implementation and on-going maintenance of independent learning in a school. This leads into the area of teacher competence in the delivery of independent learning. Gill and Halim (2008) write that teachers must have a defined skill set and ability to comfortably relinquish control of their lessons, whilst still maintaining an overall guiding and controlling hand in what is occurring in the classroom. Gill and Halim (2008) argue that unless these skills exist, independent learning will not occur. These additional pressures on the teacher are of concern to Windschitl (1999) who writes of increasing demand on teachers that exist in an independent learning environment. Windschitl (1999) states that for independent learning to work well, teachers must not only be expert in their subject area, but they must be fully cognisant of a wide range of ways in which those principles could be explored by students. He argues that teachers of independent learning need to be extremely “academically agile” (p. 753).

Candy (1991) also warns that for each of the positive implications of an independent learning programme, limitations can exist. Firstly, educational institutions and the courses they provide, due to culture and staff empowerment have tended to be flexible and responsive. Indeed a learner working in isolation without exposure to innovation, the benefit of shared discussion and new idea creation may become anxious, confused, more inflexible and potentially unable to pursue a particular avenue of learning. Additionally, learner control, particularly in those learners who have potentially less academic ability, can be disadvantaged by a process of independent learning. Learner control may allow for the differences in an individual’s learning style but will not compensate for those differences, or lack of aptitude, in a given area of learning. Whilst handing over control of learning may add to learner motivation in some cases, Candy (1991) argues that this does not relieve the teacher of their duties and obligations to the learner. Some subject matter may well be of a difficult or unpleasant nature and the teacher must then step in and apply effective strategies to re-invigorate the learner by helping them through the area they are having difficulty with. In addressing a counter argument to the above implications, Candy (1991) finally states that whilst the notion of equality and democracy is

important in any learning situation, equality may not always apply in the area of subject knowledge. He also argues that it would be imprudent of those experts in a field to stand back and deny their skills for the sake of a democratic idea. Additionally, he argues that it is inappropriate for a student in a learning institution to enrol in a course where the teacher simply stands aside and allows the learner to take full control of the process with little or no intervention from the teacher.

### **THE IMPLICATIONS OF INDEPENDENT LEARNING FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

In implementing or maintaining an independent learning programme, it is essential for school leaders to consider all factors outlined above and the potential risks, benefits and costs of such a programme. Whilst Gill and Halim (2008) identify the significance of independent learning they warn that such programmes can take longer to achieve learning outcomes, and can tend to absorb more resources than traditional teaching approaches. Gill and Halim (2008) also identify the need for a cross curricular and structured approach to independent learning, as opposed to isolated short courses across a school. This need for consistency of approach across a school, would be essential to help minimise the phenomenon that can exist, whereby students across a campus have differing expectations of, and views on, the purpose of independent learning (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). This clarity of purpose and consistency of approach is evident in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) where it is stated that clear statements detailing learning expectations as they apply across and between levels in a school, are important for both curriculum planning and lesson delivery.

Whilst advocating the benefits of an independent learning approach, Hmelo-Silver (2004) are also sure in identifying pitfalls and situations when independent learning might not be the best alternative. She suggests that an understanding of the ability of students to apply their prior knowledge is a key attribute required of teachers and that a realisation that a traditional, didactic approach may be required in independent learning environments in an effort to combat knowledge gaps that students cannot close themselves. Coupled with this would need to be an inherent sense of timing

from the teacher to know when best to pitch such a lesson, lecture or seminar so as to maximise learning benefits for students.

This sense of controlled freedom by independent learners is something identified by Mayer (2004) where he writes that evidence points towards constructivist approaches being most effective when teacher guidance exists (rather than pure discovery), and there is a clear curricular focus, rather than allowing learners to 'wander off' academically. Essentially, students need the freedom to discover and cognitively develop, whilst still being guided such that their discoveries can be applied and useful. Again, this need for teacher responsiveness is afforded value by Windschitl (1999). He writes that in order to be able to intervene as needed, whilst designing an instructional programme, it is important that teachers are acutely aware of the learning needs of students every step of the way.

The implications for school leadership, of the arguments discussed above, are that teachers and school leaders need to ensure that they are equipped with relevant and timely data about students' current learning needs, and that teachers are appropriately skilled and resourced to manage a class that may contain diverse learning needs in terms of direction and curriculum level.

### ***THE NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM***

In times gone by, knowledge and education may have been seen as something that happened to you as you moved through the education sector (Claxton, 2010). Knowledge was seen as reliable and eternal, the intrinsic worth that came with them was neither questioned, improved or checked for alternatives. This was simply a task that no-one was charged with (Claxton, 2010). This knowledge, Claxton argues, was seen as having been excavated and cleansed by a higher authority (universities) and passed down to the multitudes for their benefit. The role of the teacher in such a learning environment was simply to understand the material and explain it clearly, so that students could listen and remember what they have been told. That model may have been appropriate and served the learning needs of a past generation, argues Claxton (2010), but the demands of modern students and modern learning environments are vastly dissimilar.

The *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), through the vision statement, core values and key competencies, clearly identifies the expectations held by education policy direction in terms of the nature of the twenty first century learner in a New Zealand schooling context. It articulates a need for pedagogical change and innovation and makes well-defined statements about effective pedagogy and curriculum design and then empowers school leadership to draft a school curriculum and pedagogical culture that will help to nurture a student equipped for lifelong twenty first century learning. The key changes from the previous curriculum include the change in focus to the inquiry approach to teaching and learning and the key competencies that detail the skills, attitudes and values that learners need to possess as they move out of compulsory education and into further learning and employment.

Key elements of the *New Zealand Curriculum* that have links to constructivist theory and independent learning theory, include the vision and values statements of lifelong learning, learner empowerment, student engagement, learner and teacher innovation and a pedagogical focus on the need to draw upon prior knowledge of students, and for teachers to base practice upon the learning needs of their students.

In the context of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007), lifelong learners are identified as learners that possess a 'basket' of learner abilities. This 'basket' includes being literate and numerate; being creative and critical thinkers; seeking, using and creating knowledge and making informed decisions. Research conducted by Gill and Halim (2008) identifies independent learning as significant in developing learners who are able apply the learning skills they have gained to develop and grow as individuals, in settings and situations outside and after formal compulsory schooling settings. In so doing, students are equipped with skills that enable lifelong learning capacity. This view is supported by Hmelo-Silver (2004) where she states that due to the very nature of independent learning, and the need for students to manage their own learning goals and create strategies that address learning issues they are confronted with, they will "acquire the skills needed for lifelong learning" (p. 237).

The *New Zealand Curriculum*, through statements around key competencies, values and the overall vision, states the importance of the empowerment of the learner in order to achieve improved learning outcomes. The significance of empowerment is echoed by Harris et al (2005) where it is stated that there is a rise in belief that leadership of learning is about empowerment and a shift away from the old style teaching and learning model (Claxton, 2010). According to Houser and Frymier (2009):

*Empowered learners are more motivated to perform classroom tasks, and they feel more competent in the classroom, find the required tasks more meaningful, and feel they have an impact on their learning process. (p. 1)*

Houser and Frymier (2009) go on to explain what being an empowered learner means. In their view, empowered learners possess a combination of being motivated to learn, finding learning tasks meaningful, a belief that they have the skills or competence to complete set tasks and a belief that the effort they put in will make a difference. According to Houser and Frymier (2009), empowerment occurs as a result of both the way in which a teacher communicates with their students and individual learning characteristics, such as temperament and the learning focus of the students being taught.

This view of learner empowerment is supported by Schrodtt et al (2008). Although Schrodtt et al (2008) argue aspects of the actual and perceived power relationship that exist between student and teacher have a significant bearing on learner empowerment. They claim that by empowering the learner, an intrinsic desire to learn is created.

Another significant component of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) is importance of “making connections to prior learning and experience” (p. 34). Gibbons (2002) claims that brain research indicates better learning occurs when students are able to link what they are currently learning to the things that they already know. If teachers connect the content of current lessons to this past experience and learning, better

learning outcomes for students eventuate. He goes on to add that student learning is best when students are able to “maximise their personal resources” (p. 6). Hmelo-Silver (2004) uses similar wording but in a slightly less specific fashion. She states that knowledge is applied and hypotheses evaluated in light of what has been learned previously and in the current teaching and learning environment.

A warning around the idea of prior knowledge is sounded by Claxton (2010) in a section of his book that discusses the transfer problem that can exist around prior knowledge and learning. Claxton (2010) warns that it cannot be assumed or expected that because learning has occurred in one context that it will be available and called upon automatically by the learner when required in another context. He goes on to detail that prior knowledge and learning is not automatically dismantled by the learner into bare bones of important pieces, that can be accessed and applied readily to new learning situations.

The key competencies are a central component of the *New Zealand Curriculum* and are based on wide ranging research and contain clear links to constructivist theory and research. One such link is evident in the article on independent learning written by Gibbons et al. (1980) where the authors identify a need for students to make decisions about learning for themselves and to question what is before them. In this research that identified characteristics of successful people in history, it was obvious that characteristics such as perseverance, self-discipline, confidence, curiosity, sensitivity to others and assertiveness were all commonplace in the personalities and skill set of the successful subjects studied. These very characteristics appear to be at the heart of the key competencies. These competencies want learners to be equipped to think, use and create knowledge, ask questions, challenge assumptions, be resourceful and resilient and relate to people widely.

Abdullah (2001) suggests that self-directed learners are managers of their own learning, and this suggestion aligns well with the key competency of managing self. Additionally there is strong alignment with the key competency of thinking when Abdullah (2001) writes of the need for learners to demonstrate a greater awareness of their learning responsibilities and involvement in learning decisions. This focus on

the thinking competencies of learners is evident in the argument of Gill and Halim (2008) where they state the importance of empowering students with the ability to think and find their own learning purpose.

The discussion above links current, New Zealand specific curriculum and pedagogical direction with some of the fundamental principles of constructivist teaching theory, thus justifying the potential use of independent learning in New Zealand classrooms.

### ***LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING***

Bentley (2000) claims that education is essentially about words, numbers, symbols, information technology and the vocabulary and skills to make the most of these things. He argues that as a society changes, often always rapidly, that the worth of qualifications held is decreased, hence education must focus on the ends, not the means. The three ends that Bentley describes need the attention of school leaders, are autonomy, responsibility and creativity. Learners require the ability to make rational choices, secure and allocate resources, act creatively through thinking, take responsibility for their family and community and to look after themselves. These comments align with the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) and the key competencies of thinking, using symbols and texts, managing self, relating to others and participating and contributing. Bentley (2000) challenges leaders to implement curriculum, pedagogical and systemic change, that allows for an environment where such learning ends can be met.

This argument is supported by Claxton (2010), where he writes that if schools leaders are to create learning environments that create meaningful learning experiences for students, then the programmes that they offer must “be designed to promote epistemological sophistication” (p. 76). Any effort to teach students that results in them thinking of knowledge as something that is absolute and set in stone, will lead only to the students being less capable.

In order to create a learning culture within a school that is current and able to equip students with the lifelong learning skills demanded of a 21<sup>st</sup> century learner,

Macbeath and Dempster (2009), write that a shift is required from old ways of viewing leadership and of viewing learning, to new ways of understanding what school leadership and classroom learning looks like. The tables below, from Macbeath and Dempster, (2009), help to illustrate this required shift:

Table 2.3: The old and new frames of leadership

<i>Leadership – the old frame</i>	<i>Leadership – the new frame</i>
Leadership as...	Leadership as activity...
The few leading the many	Influencing others
Larger than life individuals	Taking the initiative
High status	Offering a service
Appointed by elected roles	Taking decisions on behalf of others
Characterised by a special set of competencies	Modeling learning behaviour
Control	Making moral choices for the wider good
A few 'best practice' model approaches, applicable to all situations	Adapting to circumstance
	Sensitive to, and influencing context

(Macbeath & Dempster, 2009, p. 38)

Table 2.4: The old and new frames of learning

<i>Learning – the old frame</i>	<i>Learning – the new frame</i>
Learning as...	Learning as activity...
What happens in classrooms	Posing questions
Conducted by teachers	Analysing and understanding
Transfer of information from those who know to those who don't.	Testing ideas
Reproduced in tests and exams	Portraying thought and feeling
Compliance	Thinking about thinking
	Developing a learning identity
	Making moral decisions

Source: (Macbeath & Dempster, 2009, p. 39)

Macbeath and Dempster (2009) also state, that teachers must move from people that simply deliver curriculum, to professionals that critique, observe, enquire, read and remain current with regard to pedagogy and developments. This concept concurs with the essence of the pedagogy focus as detailed in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). Macbeath and Dempster (2009) go into some detail about the importance of teaching as inquiry as a means of advancing

pedagogical change, and whilst this is closely aligned with the *New Zealand Curriculum* it will not be explored in any detail in this piece of research.

Macbeath and Dempster (2009) claim that leadership for learning requires that the focus on learning is an activity which, to be effective is comprised of the following components:

- Everyone in the school context is a learner;
- Learning relies on the effective or social, emotional and cognitive processes;
- Learning is highly sensitive to context and learning styles;
- Leadership capacity is a function of learning experiences; and,
- Chances to exercise leadership improve learning.

In order to implement an independent learning programme, school leaders must embark on a leadership journey of pedagogical change in order to create better learning outcomes for students. Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd (2009) identify eight leadership dimensions that have shown to have a notable impact on student outcomes. Dimensions three, four, five and six have links to the pedagogical leadership that would be required for a school to operate/implement an independent learning programme. The complete set of leadership dimensions identified by the *School Leadership BES* are;

1. Establishing goals and expectations;
2. Resourcing strategically;
3. Planning, co-ordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum;
4. Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development;
5. Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment; and,
6. Creating educationally powerful connections;
7. Engaging in constructive problem talk;
8. Selecting, developing, and using smart tools.

What teachers do, affects the learning outcomes of students (Hattie, 2003), and the conditions that these teachers get to work within, are created by the leadership of a school. As a result of this symbiotic relationship, school leaders and the climate, culture and direction they take, have an indirect impact on the learning outcomes

experienced by students. In implementing pedagogical change, such as an independent learning programme, many factors can be considered to have influence over the ability to effectively alter teacher practice and bring about the intended change (Keamy, 2009). Such factors include:

- Existing workload;
- Accountability;
- Teacher inclusion;
- Teacher expertise in the area of change;
- Group think;
- Resource flexibility (both financial and human);
- Incentives;
- Change process employed; and,
- Parental inclusion and understanding.

In order to make effective pedagogical change, it is essential to engage parent and students as active stakeholders and participants in the process (Harris, et al., 2005), and to attempt, through training to expand the teaching and learning skill set possessed by students and teachers. They expand this further, by arguing that not only must the community be involved in any change, but that the intended change should clearly fit within the values boundary that the school and community have established over time. The mandate that school leaders have to implement change, is sourced from this shared values set, and it is therefore essential that this is used as a foundation for change.

Harris, et al (2005) suggest that research into successful pedagogy clearly identifies that the most effective way to improve student outcomes is to have them construct knowledge for themselves, to enquire into subject matter for themselves and apply thinking skills to new situations. The key warning offered, is that for any such approach to be productive, it must be fully integrated into the curriculum offered throughout the school and it cannot be “presented in isolation” (p. 61) or used as a lesson in study skills. Additionally, a key factor in improving students outcomes, and linked to the work of Hattie (2003), is the significant impact that the teacher-student relationship has significant influence on the learning outcomes students experience.

The better the student-teacher relationship, the more likely students are to engage, and experience meaningful learning outcomes.

There is growing awareness that as the nature of learning and knowledge evolve to meet the demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning there is a demand from the post compulsory schooling sector, for students to be well equipped in the area of independent learning. Bentley (2000) and Read (2001) both write of pedagogical changes that have occurred in the post-secondary sector, and the resultant need to expose students, during compulsory schooling, to the types of learning environments that they will be faced with upon leaving school. An independent learning programme is well suited to providing students with such exposure.

# **CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

## ***INTRODUCTION***

This chapter presents a justification and rationale for adopting an interpretive research paradigm for this study and consequently a qualitative methodological approach to data collection and analysis. An explanation of the sampling methods used is provided, together with descriptions of the three data collection methods used; questionnaire, focus groups and structured interviews. In conclusion, I explain the procedure of data analysis that was used to manage the data and issues regarding validity and ethics related to the study.

## ***RESEARCH METHODOLOGY***

In order to explain my epistemological position, I must first explain the meaning of the term. Davidson and Tolich (2003) define epistemology as “the philosophical theory of knowledge. The branch of philosophy that deals with how we know what we know” (p. 25). This definition has similarities to that of Bryman (2008) where epistemological issues are defined as those issues that concern the question of what is, or should be, regarded as acceptable knowledge in an area of endeavour. In order to attest to an epistemological position, it is vital to look back at the research questions posed previously and ascertain the underlying research paradigm that I will be engaging with in order to seek understandings to the research problem posed. In attempting to discover the expectations and experiences of students and staff involved in an independent learning programme in two New Zealand secondary schools, I adopted an interpretative approach to my research. Through data collection via stakeholders in the independent learning programme, I gained an understanding of how the expectations and experiences that stakeholders encounter are aligned (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). This helped to shape an understanding of the creation and implementation of an independent learning programme and identify areas where practice can be altered in order to improve outcomes for stakeholders.

I explored the expectations and experiences of students, teachers and senior leadership personnel with regard to independent learning programmes that exist in their school and engaged on a personal level with key stakeholders from two school sites and gauge views from a significant number of students.

Supporting the interpretative approach to this research project is the research of Bryman (2008), where he states that interpretivism “is predicted on the view that a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objects of the social sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social interaction” (p. 16). An interpretivist approach supports my research because in answering the three research questions, it is imperative that the variances that may exist between the levels are used as a basis for creating meaning from the data and used to inform further data collection and improved future practice. Table 3.1 below, details the organisational levels in each school that were engaged with during this research.

Table 3.1: Analysis sources for independent learning research study

Source	Approach
Students	Qualitative (with some quantification)
Teachers	Qualitative
Principals	Qualitative

Through detailed inquiry of students and staff involved in the independent learning programme, I was able to gain an understanding of how the expectations and experiences that stakeholders encountered were aligned (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). To achieve this objective a qualitative approach was used to appropriately gather data and analyse findings from the multi-level case study undertaken. Student feedback was gathered through a large sample using simple quantitative analysis and this information was used to inform the questions and direction taken in the focus groups and interviews.

My research approach came from a position of pragmatism and concurs with Creswell (2009) where he writes that “pragmatism as a worldview arises out of actions, situations and consequences rather than antecedent conditions” (p, 10) and that there is a concern with what works in seeking a solution to a problem. Creswell (2009) also states that researchers are afforded access to multiple methods, varied data collection methods and analysis tools when a research problem is approached pragmatically. In my research, I explored what works well with regard to

implementing independent learning programmes and used data gathered in the questionnaire to help guide supplementary questions at focus groups and interviews.

For my research I visited two self-selected schools. School A had an independent learning programme in place for some time, and School B had recently begun the implementation of their independent learning programme. Data was gathered from different levels of personnel within each school through the three data gathering methods that are detailed below. As I sought to answer questions that determined expectations, experiences and the subsequent variances that arise, I defined topics broadly, explored contextual conditions and triangulated data using multiple sources of evidence, thus a case study design was most appropriate (Yin, 2009).

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

The data gathering methods for this research involved the use of a self-completion questionnaire issued to students, one focus group of teachers per school and an interview with the Principal of each school. The sections below explore each of these data gathering methods, critique the key issues and explain the sample selection and the principles and practices of each method.

### *Questionnaire*

The first of the three methods use to gather data was a self-completion questionnaire. Hinds (2000) states that this type of data gathering instrument involves the researcher seeking information from a relatively large number of people that are spread over a relatively large geographical area.

Hinds (2000) states that questionnaires can be appropriate when information being sought is relatively simplistic and is information that is contained within the recent historical memory of the respondents. Additionally, Hinds (2000) recommends the use of a questionnaire when the researcher wishes to study particular groups of people and use the responses they provide for further development. This was the intent of the questionnaire used in this research and responses from the questionnaire were used to form supplementary questions at the focus group and interview stages.

Hinds (2000) also states that one of the key issues facing researchers that use a questionnaire is how thorough the researcher has been in the creation and design of the questionnaire. Factors to be considered include the following; What is the target population? How can receipt of the questionnaire be assured? How will the questions be structured? How will the returns be processed and the data analysed? and What can you do to improve or enhance the response rate?

Questionnaires can be difficult to construct so that they produce responses that actually answer the questions they were designed to answer (Bell, 2007). Bell (2007) states that questionnaires must be worded in ways that will be very clear to respondents and must also produce information that is measurable. Thinking that a questionnaire can be generated with relative ease comes with a warning to the researcher. Bell (2007) considers that the key issues to consider in questionnaire design are as follows: Researchers must avoid leading questions, must phrase questions such that they cover only one aspect of the topic, must draw upon knowledge or facts that are immediately accessible to the respondent and must be sequenced in a logical and sensible manner enabling the respondent to complete the questionnaire as quickly and effortlessly as possible. Bell (2007) states that, typically, a respondent will allow up to thirty minutes to be spent in responding to a questionnaire before losing interest or finding it too hard. A copy of the questionnaire used for this research can be found in appendix 1 (p. 107).

Compared to face to face interviews as a means of data collection, self-completion questionnaires are less expensive to administer, can be distributed quickly and cheaply and can be far more convenient for respondents to engage with (Bryman, 2008).

The disadvantages that exist in using a self-completion questionnaire include possible delays in response time, inability for researcher to probe further about issues that arise, questionnaires can be difficult for those with language difficulties and, as the questionnaire can be read as a whole by the respondent, it can be difficult to ask questions independently of each other (Bryman, 2008).

As I required information from a large number of students to establish exactly what they have experienced during independent learning at their school, selective sampling was used where a random sample of one hundred names were selected from the students that had sufficient involvement in the independent learning programme. The original list of eligible students was developed by each of the case study schools. I administered the self-completion questionnaire using the survey design and distribution website called [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com).

The practical use of the [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) web tool provided me with the ability to make the questionnaire widely and conveniently available to a large number of students very quickly. The questionnaire was piloted with a selected group of students prior to wider distribution. Consideration was given to those respondents that did not have home access to an internet connection and I sought permission from the participating schools to have respondents use school based internet access to complete the questionnaire.

Students were asked to participate in the questionnaire if they had been involved in a programme of independent learning for a period of ten weeks or more at either of the case study schools. The ten week period was chosen as it is representative of a school term (on average) and provides sufficient time for the independent learning programme to have had an impact on the student and their understanding of the programme.

Students were invited to complete by staff from each school, and the online survey contained information about the research and stated consent that was granted by completing the questionnaire. Students were informed that they were able to withdraw their responses at any time.

### *Focus groups*

The second type of data gathering tool used was focus groups. The questions brought to each focus group were a combination of questions derived from the data gathered in the questionnaire detailed above, and a set of questions established at

the outset of the research project. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) state that in qualitative research, a focus group is essentially a group interview that is structured to foster talk amongst the members of the focus group about key issues relevant to the research. This is a definition that is in keeping with the purpose of my research and is a definition supported by Kitzinger (1995) where she states that “focus groups are a form of interview that capitalises on communication between research participants in order to generate data” (p. 5).

One of the key issues that arise from this definition, and the subsequent use of a focus group to gather data, is that focus groups overtly seek group participation and create an environment where participants are actively encouraged to talk to each other. Through this conversation, and a series of open ended questions, the researcher can encourage participants to explore aspects of the research that appeal to them and, perhaps, assist in the setting of the research direction (Kitzinger, 1995). Kitzinger (1995) goes on to state that focus groups allow the researcher to access data and dimensions of understanding that would not be possible to access via other, more conventional, data gathering methods. It is for these reasons that I considered focus groups to be a valid method of gathering data from participants in the case study school of an independent learning programme.

The focus groups were held with a chosen group of teachers, identified as key personnel by each of the case study schools. Through this discussion I was able to gather richer insight into the expectations and experiences of each teacher participant with regard to the independent learning programme they were exposed to. The focus group generated discussion from a range of perspectives and I was able to gauge the range of views on my research topic (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

It is important to consider the potential pitfalls of conducting focus groups and be aware of these when planning and engaging in a focus group discussion. Whilst focus groups can be an opportunity for participants to expand, solidify or even generate a personal view of the research topic, Vicsek (2010) argues that this environment, group dynamic and composition can lead to participants being influenced in their opinion that might not have occurred given a different setting.

Additionally, Kitzinger (1995) warns that focus groups may silence lone voices of dissent and that if the group is conducted using two researchers, then confidentiality issues may arise. In this research, I was the only researcher involved in the focus group process. Bryman (2008) also states that whilst focus groups have considerable potential, they can lead to the researcher having less control over the comments and direction compared to an individual interview. Bryman (2008) also states that focus groups can be troublesome to organise and co-ordinate and the data can be very difficult to analyse. These difficulties arise due to the focus group being prone to inaudible, body language type elements, people talking over each other, or at the same time, and the potential for large amounts of data to be generated.

Kitzinger (1995) states that focus group studies select participants to “reflect a range of the total study population” (p. 5) or “to test particular hypotheses” (p. 5). This view is supported by Vicsek (2010), but with the added warning that whilst focus groups are usually compiled from “special people” (p. 124) it can lead to statistical generalisations being invalid if applied. I selected participants using recommendations from the case study schools, based upon the degree of involvement and expertise that each member had in the design, implementation, or participation in, the existing independent learning programme. I approached senior leadership at each of the two case study schools, and requested names of those staff they recommended as suitable participants for the focus groups.

Focus groups tend to have seven to ten participants (Hinds, 2000) and the researcher should be wary of including more than twelve participants due to the increased potential for the group to fragment or become dysfunctional. The focus groups I established were made up of three and six participants. I had hoped for larger focus groups, but was only able to access staff as arranged by the case study sites.

Once the participants were selected, I conducted the focus groups on site at each case study school. I held the focus groups during either a lunch break or at a time convenient to the participants. The exact time of day was determined by each case

study school dependant on a time most convenient to the participating staff members.

All focus group questions were trialled with a small sample of teachers to ensure that the questions were easily understood and solicited a response in keeping with the research problem. The trialists were not from either of the case study schools. A copy of the focus group schedule can be seen in appendix 2 (p. 110). The focus groups' conversations were recorded using a software application called 'Audacity' that ran from a laptop with an external microphone attached. This enabled me to focus on the flow and direction the focus group was taking rather than become bogged down with the taking of notes. This did create some transcription issues in terms of time to transcribe, but allowed for a far more accurate analysis of the verbal record of events.

#### *Semi-structured interviews*

For the purposes of this research study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the Principal from each case study school so as to allow a degree of flexibility when discussing independent learning with each of the interview participants. This allowed for exploration of further ideas that resulted from significant replies (Bryman, 2008). This approach was far more appropriate than a structured interview, due my intention to explore the experiences of participants and did not want to limit responses by not allowing for unexpected and useful conversational direction. This ability to benefit from developments within the interview situation is supported by Hinds (2000) as a useful mixture of the structured interview and unstructured interview. Hinds (2000) makes a numbers of statements around the construction of the interview environment and use of heat, light, furniture and body language to make participants feel comfortable and at ease. These aspects were all considered when the interviews were held. The interview schedule can be viewed in appendix 3 (p. 111).

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The self-completion questionnaire data was analysed using a combination of the built in tools that form part of the [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) website, and Microsoft Excel for some minor statistical calculations. Open ended responses from the questionnaire were analysed using simple coding that is functionally built in to the [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) solution. This analysis allowed for a combination of qualitative analysis and some simple quantitative analysis of students responses. The questionnaire data was used to help inform the questions that would be asked at the focus group and interview stages of data gathering. The data gathered from the focus groups and interviews was analysed using the analysis approach suggested by Creswell (2009). This approach involved six steps as outlined below;

1. Transcribe interviews, scan records, type up notes, allow participants to check, edit or withdraw responses and generally arrange data;
2. Read through the sorted material to obtain a sense of the data gathered;
3. Begin the coding process whereby the text transcribed categorised and labelled using symbols or short phrases.
4. Utilise the coding from step three to generate descriptions of participants, venues and events. Also use the coding to generate themes from the data.
5. Relate the themes and descriptions together.
6. Make an interpretation of the data.

## **RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY**

Reliability in research is “concerned with the question of whether the results of a study are repeatable” (Bryman, 2008, p. 31). Mays and Pope (1995) write that the way for a qualitative researcher to ensure reliability of their data and analysis is to maintain detailed records of all interviews, meetings, conversations and documents utilised in gathering the data. They go on to explain that by arranging some degree of independent assessment of transcripts, by someone skilled in the area, and then comparing findings, qualitative researchers can improve the reliability of their analysis.

For the purposes of my research, I addressed the issues of reliability and validity using a process of triangulation whereby multiple sources of data are used to reach a conclusion Mays and Pope (1995). I was able to triangulate data by multi-level

triangulation across an individual site, through the data gathered from students, teachers and the school Principal. In addition to this, methodological triangulation was employed across the two case study sites to help establish validity and reliability of data. Three data gathering techniques were used, self-completion questionnaire, focus groups and structured interviews to explore the research questions. Additionally, I used a process of participant validation, whereby participants were able to check their transcripts and suggests changes if they wished, to help check the accuracy of findings made (Creswell, 2009).

The piloting of questionnaire and focus group questions, the member review of findings, maintaining detailed transcripts, triangulating the data across multi-levels and across each case study site helped to improve validity and reliability of the research project.

Validity is focused on the integrity of the conclusions that are produced from a piece of research. Therefore, it explores if a research study explains or measures that which is presented in the original objective. Four types of validity are typically defined. Measurement validity refers to whether a measure of a particular concept does reflect the concept, internal validity questions if a conclusion that suggests a causal relationship is valid, external validity asks if the results can be generalised outside of the study and ecological validity questions if findings are applicable to participants' everyday contexts (Bryman, 2008). These four key areas of validity are also supported by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007).

Three types of bias identified by Robinson and Lai (2006) are selection bias, sampling bias and confirmation bias. Selection bias can be avoided by ensuring a sample is not selected in order to draw favour to the answer you are aiming to get as a result of the research. Once the selection of participants has occurred, the sample from the total pool must be typical of the whole group and not representative of a minority or special interest portion of that larger pool. Should an atypical selection process occur, the research will be less valid due to sampling bias. The final aspect of bias to be aware of to help ensure validity is that of confirmation bias. Robinson and Lai (2006) suggest that the best manner in which to avoid this bias would be to

build procedures into a research study that force the research to seek out disconfirming information.

### ***ETHICAL ISSUES***

Bryman (2008) writes that there are four key ethical issues to be considered in any piece of research;

1. Minimisation of potential harm to participants;
2. Informed consent;
3. Invasion of privacy; and,
4. Deception.

The selection of the case study sites was important to consider and it should be noted that my own school was not included as a case study site, but was used to select participants to trial questions being designed for either the questionnaire or the focus groups. The case study schools were self-selecting, as I wished to research happenings at one site where an independent learning programme was reasonably well entrenched, and a second site beginning the journey of creating an independent learning programme. These sites needed to be geographically accessible to me and therefore needed to be within the Auckland area. These requirements naturally eliminated a vast number of schools and left few venues that I believed would be fit for purpose. The potential case study sites were known to me as a result of conversations with senior leaders from schools in the wider Auckland area in recent years.

#### *Minimisation of harm to participants*

Research can cause harm to participants in many forms, including physical harm, emotional harm, financial harm, stress, relational harm and embarrassment. Throughout the research project, I piloted questions, asked them in a manner that was neutral and inoffensive, checked with participants once transcripts have been created, and allowed participants the right to withdraw from participation at an appropriate time. Additionally, the member checking process enabled participants to gain a clear understanding of the direction the research will be taking and allowed them opportunity to restate their position, clarify points or withdraw if they chose to.

### *Informed consent*

All participants in a research study were fully informed of all aspects of the research including the purpose and nature of the research project, their right to participate free of duress or coercion and notification of how interviews and discussions were to be recorded. In my research a consent form was issued to all participants in the interviews and focus groups that contained explicit information on all aspects of the study (appendices 5 and 6, pp114-117). Participants in focus groups and interviews were asked to sign an informed consent form (appendices 4 and 5). Each case study school Principal was asked to approve participation prior to any contact with focus group participants (see appendix 6). Students that completed the questionnaire were approached with the schools permission, by teachers from the school, and instructions included a statement that by completing the anonymous questionnaire, each student was provided consent for their responses to be used in the research project.

### *Invasion of privacy*

Included in the informed consent process was information on how data was to be recorded, analysed, published and stored. For the purpose of this study, all interviews and focus groups were recorded using the 'Audacity' software solution, transcribed and stored using a password protected Microsoft Word file. No individual or organisation has been identified or referred to or identified in any way at any point in the research. Those wishing to alter or withdraw their contribution to the questionnaire or focus group were able to do so up to a predetermined time in the research process.

### *Deception*

I disclosed fully the purpose, duration and methodology of the review and clearly identified all aspects of the research origin. I provided focus group participants with a brief prior to participation to allow them time to process the purpose of the discussion.

# CHAPTER FOUR – RESEARCH FINDINGS

## ***INTRODUCTION***

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings from the questionnaire, focus groups and interviews that took place during the research, and this chapter is divided into four sections. The first section presents the findings from the self-completion questionnaire that was completed by students from both sites who had had sufficient involvement with an independent learning programme at their school. For the purposes of this research, sufficient involvement was considered to be at least ten weeks participation in the independent learning programme.

In the second and third sections I detail student, teacher and Principals' perspectives from each of the respective case study schools, school A in section two followed by school B in section three. School A had three participants in the focus group and school B had five. Sections two and three also draw upon the semi-structured interviews held with each of the Principals of the case study schools. The interviews were held after the focus groups and self-completion questionnaire so that these two data sources could be used to inform the interviews with the Principal. The fourth and final section distils the key findings with a brief conclusion.

## ***SELF-COMPLETION QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS***

It was intended that the survey be made available to up to 200 students across the two case study sites. Due to roll numbers at each of the contributing schools and the sufficiency of involvement criteria required to be eligible to take the survey, a maximum sample size of 172 was available to complete the survey. Total responses amounted to 108 students, which was a response rate of 63%. I was comfortable that this sample provided meaningful data for analysis because this number of responses represented a satisfactory cross section of student responses from which conclusions could be drawn. The survey was administered using the [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) website and students completed the online survey at home or school, using the link provided, to complete the survey. As I did not gather IP address information from [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) or ask the students to identify their school, I was not able to split survey responses dependant on the case study

site, and have therefore analysed student responses as a collective. The survey did contain a number of open ended questions for students to respond to, and I have been able to determine which site these responses stem from, due to the terminology they have used as each site has a slightly different name for independent learning and the spaces provided for learning. From these responses, I have been able to extract student perspective responses relevant to each site.

### *Demographics*

The percentage split between male and female respondents was 52.8% of respondents were male and 47.2% female. Additionally, due to the nature of the sufficiency criteria, 91.6% of students that responded were in year thirteen and the remaining 8.4% of respondents were in year twelve. The majority of students (66.7%) that responded to the questionnaire were studying at level three (L3) of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). A further 29.6% of students were studying at either level two (L2) or were engaged in a multi-level (L2 and L3) programme of NCEA. The remaining 3.7% of respondents were studying a combination of levels that included NCEA level 1 (L1). Of those that responded to the question, four were not studying at L2 or L3 of NCEA. 48.1% of respondents identified themselves as being New Zealand European in ethnicity. Of those that responded to this question, eight students identified themselves as Maori, and seven as Pacifica. This was not indicative of the population of the case study schools, both individually and collectively and is discussed later.

Only students that were suitably exposed to the independent learning programme at their school were asked to respond to the survey. 50.6% (39 of the 77 that responded to this question) of respondents had been involved with the independent learning programme at their school for more than one year. No students responded to the survey that had been in the independent learning programme for less than ten weeks.

### *Student expectations and experiences*

76.6% (59 of the 77) of students either agreed, or strongly agreed, that they use the time allocated to them in independent learning wisely for curriculum related work and

very rarely wasted independent learning time. Additionally, 88.1% (67 of the 76) of students enjoyed independent learning and believed it to be of benefit to their learning.

Students were asked to state what they expected from the independent learning programme prior to being involved in it. Figure 4.1, below, shows an analysis of the types of responses that were provided by the students and what they expected to be faced with during the independent learning programme.

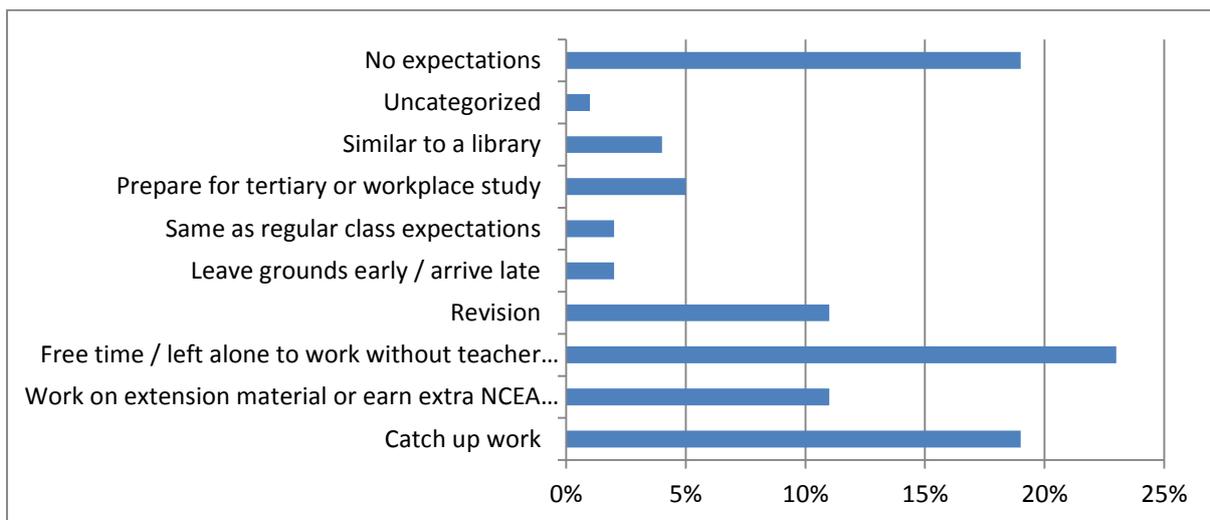


Figure 4.1 – Student expectations of independent learning prior to involvement.

This illustrates a lack of understanding as to the nature and purpose of independent learning. 23% (17 of 72) of respondents expected to have no teacher contact and to be left entirely to their own devices during independent learning time. Six students that responded that they expected to be left alone, elaborated further with reference to ‘free’ or ‘chill’ time which could be used more to rest and recuperate than to engage in active learning. Almost 50% (35) of students had an expectation that learning was required and that this would be in support of learning that took place within their regular classroom environments.

When asked if these expectations had eventuated, the vast majority of students were positive about their independent learning experiences. Figure 4.2 summarises the responses from students with regard to how expectation and reality match. 59% (40 of the 65) of respondents had expectations met or experienced better outcomes than they had anticipated prior to engaging with the independent learning programme.

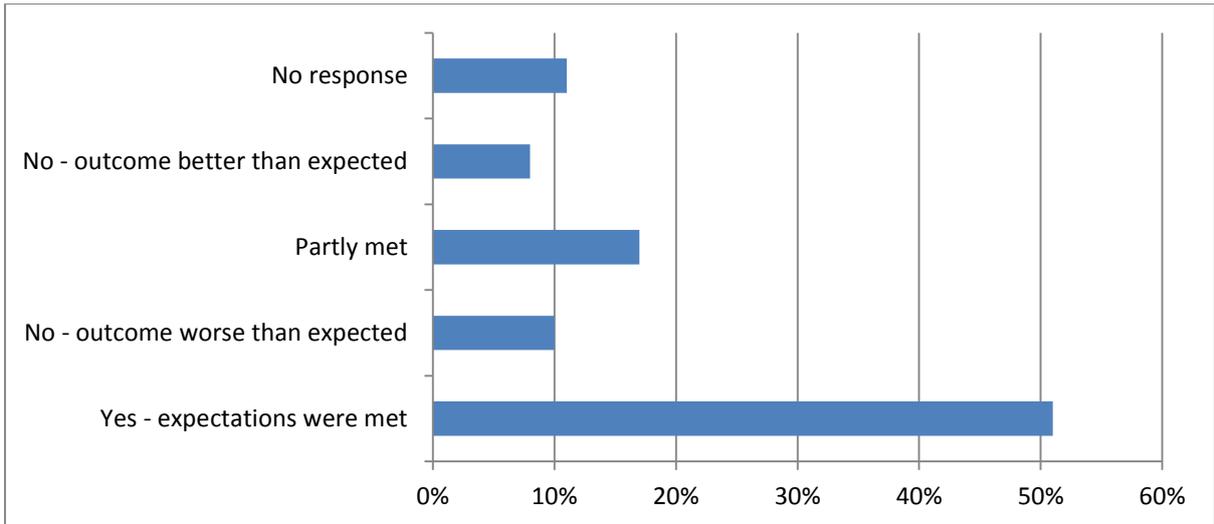


Figure 4.2 – Student expectations of independent learning met or not met.

What occurs in the independent learning environment becomes evident when I looked at how students were using the time allocated. Figure 4.3 displays how students were choosing to use independent learning time.

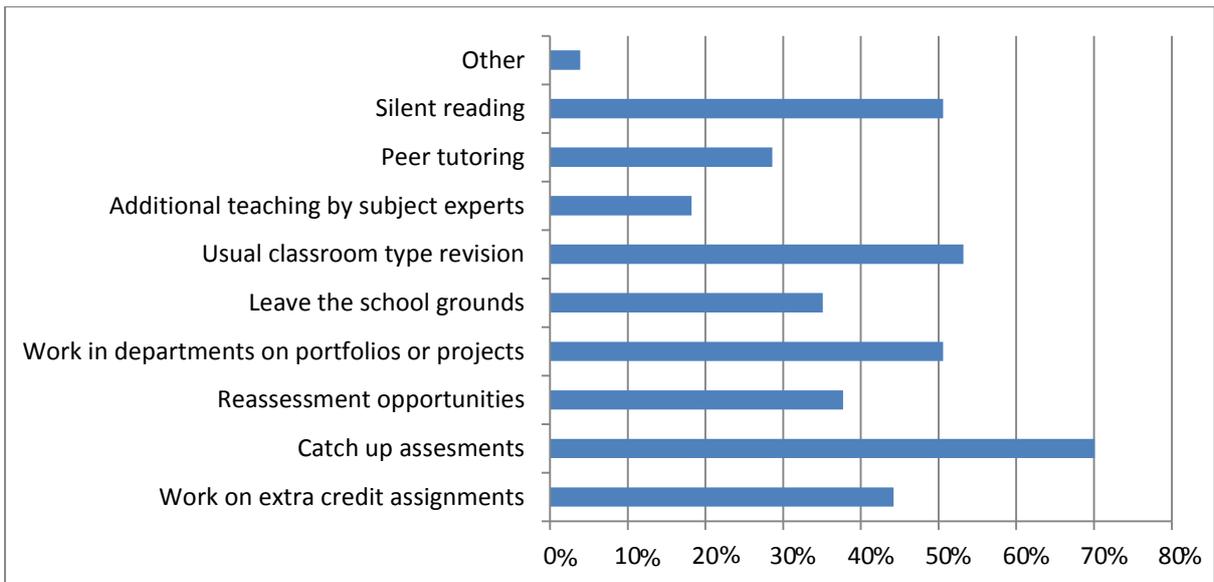


Figure 4.3 – Learning opportunities made available during independent learning

35% (27 of 77) of students stated that they left the school grounds during independent learning. Further exploration into what occurs when students are offsite revealed that although they were offsite, these students stated that they were engaged in the revision, catch up and portfolio type work that students who remained onsite were also doing.

47% (36 of 79) of students reported that independent learning programmes resulted in them being exposed to far less teacher contact than in regular timetabled classes. However, 51% (39 of 76) of students felt that the teacher contact they experienced in independent learning was the same, if not greater, than that which they experienced in regular subject classes.

Students appeared to have confidence in the impact on their learning provided by the independent learning programme. 88.3% (68 of 77) of students believed that the programme has had a positive impact on their learning. 55% of students believed that they were provided opportunity to give feedback to school staff and leadership as to the nature of the independent learning programme. 45% (35 of 77) of students felt that they were seldom, or never, offered an opportunity to provide feedback to staff. In taking up the opportunity to provide feedback on how the independent learning programme at their school could be improved, students came up with a range of responses, as illustrated below:

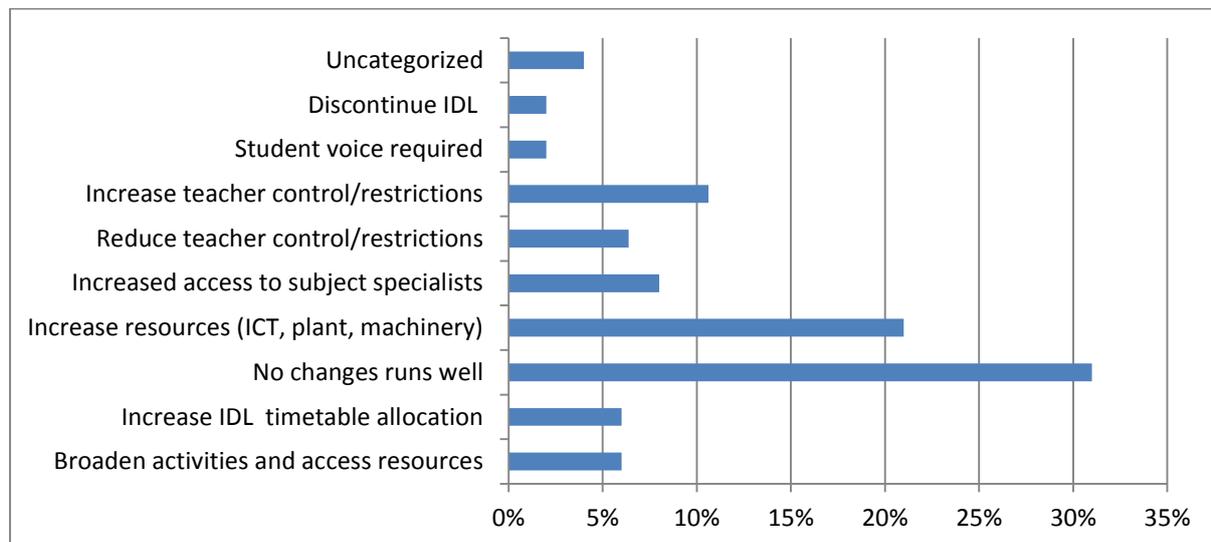


Figure 4.4 – Suggested improvements to an independent learning programme

Whilst 31% (15 of 47) of students suggested that no changes were required to the way the independent learning programme operated in their school, those that did have suggestions focussed those suggestions on the provision of, or access to, a wider set of resources. The resources they most wanted access to included access to subject specialists, physical machinery, plant, ICT equipment and space.

Students also suggested more allocated time and a greater range of entry criteria into an independent learning programme and restrictions on entry to ensure peers remained on task and did not create a disturbance to others.

## ***SCHOOL A FINDINGS***

### *Setting*

School A started its independent learning programme with a year 9 programme when the school first opened some 7 years ago. For the purposes of this case study, school A is considered to be an experienced independent learning school that has a well-established independent learning programme that has evolved through trial and error over recent years.

At school A only those students who showed independence and were in higher stream classes were involved in the programme when the independent learning programme was first created. It has since evolved a great deal and the school uses a pre-determined set of criteria, called independent learning qualities, to guide senior students through the independent learning programme.

In recent years the programme has focussed on year 12 and year 13 students with each student receiving either 100 minutes per week (if in year 12), or 200 minutes per week (if in year 13) timetabled independent learning time. When students are timetabled into independent learning, they report to a fully staffed independent learning centre to use the facilities provided. Students have the option of reporting to the staff and then, with permission for the head of department (HoD), moving off to work in departments. In some case, if certain criteria have been met, students are granted permission to work off site.

In order to become part of the independent learning programme at school A, students need to have gained 40 credits at NCEA L1 or they need to have displayed capacity in the independent learning qualities that are promoted and actively taught at the school. During their junior years (years 9, 10 and 11) students work on a programme designed to plainly evidence the development of the independent

qualities which will assist them in appropriately using their independent learning time in the senior school.

### *Student Perspectives*

Students at school A had a fairly well-defined view of what to expect from an independent learning programme. The students' questionnaire comments indicated that some understanding of the structure and requirements of an independent learning programme had become embedded through teaching and learning in previous years. A number of student comments revealed that they expected the programme to provide them space, both physically and emotionally, time and resources to complete work, prepare assignments and explore learning that may not have been an option in other timetabled classes. One student commented that "I expect independent learning to enable me to work at my own pace..." and another commented that they hoped the independent learning programme would enable them to "finish any incomplete home learning or class work". These comments were echoed by other students as well.

It appeared that the expectations of students that were surveyed at school A had been met to some degree. One student's comment was reflective of others and stated that their expectations of independent learning have been met as a result of:

*[Independent learning] time, in a sufficient workspace, and with access to the right resources and technology. Also, the freedom to study and complete class work and homework within a classroom environment (Student, school A).*

Students at school A were also aware of the limitations of the independent learning model that they experience, with some referencing particular student behaviours that are troublesome and also the need for particular resources and equipment to make things work. "Clear guidelines and milestones to help people stay on task" was articulated by a student from school A, and reinforcing this was the desire to "be given web site and book references, etc., that could be useful to us" (student, school A).

### *Teacher Perspectives*

When asked how they were inducted into the independent learning programme at their school, the staff involved in the independent learning programme at school A stated that they had all had very different forms of orientation into the independent learning programme. They felt this varied orientation was due to the evolution of the programme as the school had developed, refined and improved the independent learning programme in recent years. Initially the independent learning programme was staffed entirely with support staff, but this has since evolved into an independent learning centre that is fully staffed with registered teachers. The Head of the Department (HoD) was predominantly responsible for the establishment of the centre and therefore, was not actively involved in an induction, due to them being part of the establishment of the independent learning programme. A second teacher became involved in the programme when initially employed as a reliever. The practical, hands on, experience gained in that capacity, provided a sound base upon which to build current practice. For new staff entering the programme now, an induction programme and time with the HoD was provided.

The staff that ran the independent learning centre stated that they are provided with an opportunity, at the end of each school year, to draft recommendations and suggestions on how to improve the independent learning programme. These recommendations are then put to the senior leadership team by the HoD, to the school senior leadership team. Issues that are normally discussed tend to include matters around physical and human resource allocation and time allocation provided to students. The team of teachers prepare and internal critique of how they have operated as a team so as to identify ways to improve current practice. Negotiation also takes place with the other departments in the school to ascertain if the independent learning requirements of the subject areas are being met by the independent learning centre. The staff in the independent learning centre articulated that they felt supported, listened to and well represented by their HoD and that the HoD was an extremely good communicator. “[The HoD’s] views are highly respected, because of her expertise in the area of independent learning” (Staff member, school A).

Teachers in the independent learning centre were very aware that, whilst they were comfortable with making suggestions for improvements, the final decision about suggestions rested with the senior leadership team. They also added that they felt well supported by the senior leadership team. The way the independent learning programme has developed over time has meant that the senior leadership team are not as actively involved in the independent learning centre as in previous years. This is largely due to the centre operating effectively well, being well lead and the trust that the school leadership have in the independent learning staff.

Students who are involved in the independent learning programme at school A are provided with an opportunity to contribute to how the programme operates. Early each year teachers interview students and focus on changes students would like to see made to the independent learning programme. The main focus of these interviews is to establish what can be improved for students and to explore new student generated ideas on what they think about learning and what their needs are.

Staff that formed the focus group at school A expressed that there is an opportunity to develop a more suitable independent learning programme for less capable students that come to school with learning issues or requiring Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour (RTL) support. One teacher commented:

*I think there is room to develop more for our less able students, the ones that come from [supported learning environments] – we have some support in place but need to look further at doing it better.*

Staff involved in the independent learning programme at school A believed that the main objective of the programme was to instil in the students a greater independence and love of lifelong learning. When asked to articulate further, they added that they had the desire to see students leave with skills that enabled them to know how to access information prepared them for tertiary study and provided them with skills to manage their time effectively and independently.

Staff wanted students to be confident, to think beyond simply following other people and to have the ability to seek out solutions to problems when they were confronted with an unfamiliar situation. The essence of what the independent learning programme was trying to achieve was stated by one teacher as being:

*We want students to have greater independence and lifelong learning. This means that if a student was to leave, they would know how to access information, on how to monitor their time at university, prepare them for university, make sure they are using time wisely – it helps them to succeed, be confident, to think beyond following people. (Teacher, school A)*

An aim of the independent learning programme was to make sure students completed assignments, engaged in a whanau programme, allowed time for fitness training and allowed time for extra-curricular support to occur. In an example given, students were permitted to use independent learning time to prepare costumes and props for a school production, without that impacting on subject teaching time.

Staff at school A also stated that the programme helped to create a degree of school-life balance as far as work, social engagements, community work, religious and cultural commitments or other pursuits are concerned. By helping students to remain up to date with assessment and classwork, they hoped to lessen the pressure that students can experience as they fulfilled their many commitments. Another outcome that had developed from the independent learning programme that staff saw as important was that students realised the significance of positive relationships with key staff, and were comfortable and trusting enough to approach staff to request help, time and mentoring.

Staff that worked outside of the independent learning centre at school A contributed to the independent learning programme in a number of ways. They drafted referrals, supplied work to the students and independent learning centre staff and provided feedback or feed forward on particular students. Additionally, staff were a source of specific targeted support for students wishing to improve grades in certain subject

areas. Teachers within the independent learning centre felt that “without input from other teachers, we are redundant” (Teacher, school A).

The senior leadership team at school A provided positive and continued support to the independent learning programme and staff in the centre. The senior leadership team made certain they were up skilled in independent learning and regularly visited other independent learning schools internationally. Staff at school A felt very strongly about the positive support that was provided by the senior leadership team and were very confident in stating that the programme would struggle to gain meaningful traction and improve student outcomes without that senior leadership team support. One teacher stated “I couldn’t imagine doing this without help at the senior leadership level”. They also stated that, in some learning areas, appropriate amounts on independent learning material were not being sent through to the independent learning centre and that this needed to be explored through consultation with the heads of learning areas and professional development. Another challenge that was discussed, although all participants agreed it is a difficult one to address, was the issue of physical resources that were learning area specific and the ability of independent learning centre students to gain access to them. In particular, the physical machinery of the technology learning area and specialist spaces like darkrooms, music facilities and physical education spaces were mentioned.

The staff in the independent learning centre at school A have developed a strategy to attempt to address the issue, whereby teachers in the departments with physical resource constraints, indicate to the independent learning centre the learning material currently being covered, in an effort to manage the resources effectively. Independent learning centre staff endeavoured to maintain connections with teachers in learning areas that will enable students to relocate to department areas quickly during timetabled independent learning time:

*We try to make connections with teachers straight away – talk to the teacher and come to them [immediately] or other times when convenient. It is important for us to establish what challenges are coming up for the students. (Teacher, school A)*

When questioned about future improvement opportunities for the independent learning programme at school A, staff deliberated for some time. They appeared genuinely content and felt that things were evolving steadily and appropriately. The issue of appropriate ICT infrastructure was a concern to the school and the ability for students to bring their own ICT devices to school and access bandwidth and the school network was suggested by the independent learning team. Additionally, an increased staff-student ratio was mentioned, but in a manner that was respectful of the budgetary constraints faced by the Principal.

### *Principal's perspective*

The Principal of school A was able to explain, in almost the exact same way as the teaching staff involved in the focus group, the way the independent learning programme operated. The Principal stated that the independent learning programme was not explained to staff when it was implemented as the implementation occurred as part of the base line establishment of the school. In essence, independent learning has always been included in the way things were done at school A. Significance was given to the ten independent learning qualities that the school actively promoted, and teachers were all made aware of these as part of the employment and induction process. Some adjustments to the programme and the induction process were required as the student cohort 'grew' from only junior students to a traditional combination of junior and senior students.

The Principal explained that teachers who joined school A now were inducted into the teaching and learning programme, predominantly, via a head of learning area and received an induction pack that contained information and resources explaining the independent learning qualities.

A great deal of confidence was expressed about the current structure and the personnel that staffed the independent learning centre. The Principal felt that the centre was mature enough to operate with extremely little input from senior leadership team. The Principal stated that "it runs itself and it doesn't need me, because of the skill and experience of the staff". The Principal considered that their

role was most significant in the area resourcing, quality assurance, and communication and consultation with the wider community and parent body. The Principal stated that the independent learning programme needed senior leadership team input to “fly the flag and show that I believe in it”. The Principal also stated the importance of being physically present in the department to demonstrate this support, not only to the staff, but to the students. This presence showed that the school’s leadership was interested in their learning and was aware of what happened around the campus. A paradox existed in the responses from the Principal in this instance as it appears as if the Principal and the senior leadership team want to stand aside and let the independent learning centre function and develop, yet in practice they also get involved because they believe they are needed in order for the independent learning programme to succeed.

It was the view of the Principal that teachers contributed to the independent learning programme via the programmes of learning that they were each responsible for and the development and maintenance of learning guides for student use. Learning guides were used as a form of differentiation and were intended to allow students to work on new material where they were not dependant on the presence of their teacher.

The Principal had a great deal of confidence in the head of the independent learning centre and commented on the system that had been put in place to solicit work from subject teachers. Outside of this stimulus, teachers were free to contribute as much, or as little, as they believe is appropriate for their students, given that the collective aim was to ensure that teachers could have as much or as little input as they liked. The aim was to get all students to be learning independently, acknowledging that the degree of independence will vary from student to student.

The Principal acknowledged that, whilst students were provided the opportunity to feedback to staff about the structure of the independent learning programme via an end of year survey tool, that they had not been afforded as much opportunity to provide input into the design of the independent learning programme as they could have. The Principal acknowledged that this had been unintentional and had been a

function of time, rather than any deliberate avoidance of student voice. Students got the opportunity to complete self-reflections that allowed them to judge the success of their own independent learning programme and provide them the chance to get a clear understanding of where they were placed with their learning. Feedback has also been received, in anecdotal form, from past students of the school and these students regularly articulated how much increased structure and supervision would have benefited them in the past.

With regard to the implementation and the on-going operation of the independent learning programme at school A, the Principal stated that the most challenging issue has always been the recruitment of skilled personnel to staff the independent learning centre. Whilst it was obvious to the Principal that the current staff were performing well, finding and recruiting them was a challenge. Creating an infrastructure that enabled staff to be as aware as possible of the individual learning needs of each of the six hundred students that eventually would pass through the independent learning centre, has been difficult to achieve.

*The biggest issue is getting skilled personnel to run the independent learning centre and be aware of the individual needs of up to 600 kids assigned to them at any one time. You really need to have top notch staff (Principal, school A).*

As a result of being engaged with the independent learning programme at school A, students were sometimes at liberty to move around the campus to access resources, personnel or spaces that they required to continue with the work they were currently undertaking. According to the Principal this has resulted in unexpected issues that have required on-going attention from the senior leadership team and staff working in the independent learning centre. Staff and other adults in the community at large, have been quick to label any student not engaged in learning and either leaving the grounds, or wandering the campus, as evidence that students were disengaging from the independent learning programme, when, in fact they are often not linked to independent learning at the time. The Principal believed that “the Principal’s role is to ensure that the community and parents know what it [independent learning] is all about. Trust that it is about learning”. Coupled with this was the need to remind the

community at large, that some students may have been permitted to study offsite, and that they were not necessarily truanting or engaging in anti-social behaviour if they were walking to or from school at an unusual time of the day.

Another issue faced by the leadership was that of how the independent learning programme has evolved, and a measure of how it looks now in relation to the original intent and direction. The Principal explained that as a result of the school moving from a newly established school, to one with a full range of year levels, they were beginning to identify that some students were ill prepared for independent learning and some way of scaffolding the essential skills from earlier levels was required. According to the Principal, this may require in class learning or the development of an independent learning centre that meets the scaffolding needs of the year nine and ten students.

When the independent learning programme was first established at school A, the Principal stated that “at first we were a bit naïve in the way in which students were trusted “hands off”. It was assumed that they knew what to do and would use the time wisely. The focus at that time was an independent learning programme that provided breadth of subject coverage in that students could seek out new things to do, rather than exploring further depth in the courses they were presently studying. This focus has changed over time and the independent learning programme now tries to equip students so that they “know what they need to do if they don’t know what to do”. This evolution of the independent learning programme has resulted in more structure around the programme and a focussed effort to create depth in student learning, whilst still allowing for breadth if students need it. The Principal explained that through this process of reflection and change came the idea of equipping students with the skills they need to have to help them create solutions to new problems, and the identification of the importance of learning guides for independent learning students.

School A appeared to be experiencing the outcomes that they desired, but the Principal conceded that these outcomes could be improved. This process of tightening up the structures and personnel, achieved by moving from the support

staffing model to staffing the independent learning centre with trained teachers, has been central to the improved outcomes for students in the view of the Principal. In essence, the expected learning outcomes for students involved in the independent learning programme are the ten learning qualities that are at the heart of the learning philosophy of the school. School A wants students to manage and evaluate their own learning and possess the skills, when they move out of the secondary education sector, to manage their time well and understand the transition into a tertiary learning environment.

It was the view of the Principal of school A that their role was to support the independent learning programme and to continually ensure that the philosophy of the independent learning programme was appropriately aligned with the philosophy of the school. The Principal warned that failing to ensure this alignment “could lead to an independent learning programme becoming little more than a study centre or glorified library”.

Additionally, the Principal argued that the need to ensure that the community and parents knew what the independent learning programme was about, and importantly, how it operated and what that meant in terms of attendance at school, students working in the community whether it be at home, public spaces or workplaces, and parents and community trusting that learning can be taking place even if a student is not on campus. Added to that, was the need to communicate to students and parents, that an independent learning programme did not mean that students were working alone. This can have cultural implications and the Principal stated that this point was significant and a key communication point for their community.

Opportunities existed at school A to make improvements to the independent learning programme. In particular, both the focus group participants and the Principal expressed a need to explore the development of a junior independent learning centre to help scaffold skills that students will need as they graduate up the year levels and become fully participative in the independent learning programme offered at the senior school.

Additionally, the Principal would like to provide learning opportunities for classroom teachers that provide them with a greater depth of understanding of the philosophy and requirements of a high functioning independent learning programme. Hand in hand with this is a need to develop the manner in which the school reporting processes reflect the outcomes achieved by students involved in the independent learning programme, and the way students articulate their ownership of the learning process through the parent interview process.

In developing and implementing an independent learning programme in school A, the Principal believed that success was a function of four key factors; trust in the staff running and contributing to the independent learning programme, continual alignment of the independent learning programme with the learning philosophy of the school, communication with all stakeholders with regard to the nature and scope of the independent learning programme and the ability and willingness of staff to take risks in the development of new learning initiatives and approaches.

## ***SCHOOL B FINDINGS***

### *Setting*

School B is considered to be new to the independent learning environment and has recently implemented a small scale independent learning programme. School B is a co-educational state school in the greater Auckland area. At school B the independent learning programme runs primarily through departments and they are asked to include at least one independent learning unit of work into their scheme for the year. The units of work are designed to target students in year 11-13. Year 13 students are allocated independent learning time through a timetabled, unsupervised, independent learning option. During the independent learning time some students are able to engage with subjects that, due to timetabling constraints, they would not have been able to study. When year 13 students are timetabled into independent learning, they can utilise study cubicles that have been constructed for them in a space previously designated as a year 13 common room. This space has been divided up to accommodate some of the learning needs of the independent learner.

The independent learning programme was explained to staff at school B after a member of the senior leadership team had been on an overseas visit to a number of independent learning schools. Staff at school B were presented with an overview of the trip, showed video footage and provided with a package of resources. At this point, the senior leadership team then detailed the vision for the independent learning programme and how they thought it could operate effectively at the school. As the school had not been involved in independent learning prior to this year, there was no internal expertise that could be called upon directly. As a result, experts from a nearby school were asked to present to the staff at school B and this presentation detailed an independent learning trial that the presenters had been involved in. The presenters offered advice and guidance and were able to supply staff with another packet of resources to help with implementation.

### *Student Perspectives*

In addition to the information within section one of this chapter, students at school B had similar expectations of the independent learning programme to those of school A. There was a significant sense that students would be able to “complete extra assignments and school work” (student, school B), or that they would be “left alone to do any unfinished work from other classes” (student, school B). The students did expect to be able to access whatever learning resources that they required, be that people, space or equipment. One student stated that their expectation of independent learning was that it “was a free period where I would get to study wherever I wanted and have all the resources that I would need”.

Some students found that the expectations they had of the independent learning programme, essentially, matched their experiences. These students found engagement in the initiative to be straightforward and that the independent learning programme had “helped to get me up to date” (student school B), and “provided me with time to do my own work and ask questions when I needed to” (student school B). Other students found engagement more of a challenge. One student stated that in terms of progress in independent learning they hadn’t made any as it was “hard to focus in that class” (student school B). Additionally, many shared the sentiment that “I didn’t have access to a computer and that would have helped a lot” (student school

B). Students also stated a need for access to specialised teachers, to teaching and learning spaces and written resources to assist them in their learning.

### *Teacher Perspectives*

Staff at school B were introduced to independent learning via a full staff presentation from guest presenters and members of the senior leadership team. Following the presentations, staff discussed independent learning at the department level. At this point, heads of departments engaged their teams in discussions and ideas for departmental implementation were shared within each department. Staff involved in the focus group stated that at these discussions they took resources and talked through what they thought might work in their school setting. Individual teachers were then empowered to implement their own ideas in the classroom. At the time of the focus group, no further staff wide follow up discussion or supplementary sharing or critique of ideas had taken place.

It appeared from the focus group, that at this stage of the independent learning implementation process, students had not yet had input into the design and structure of the independent learning programme at school B. Members of the focus group stated that they were uncertain if students were even aware that an independent learning programme formally existed within their school. One teacher stated, in a view shared by the other participants, “I don’t even think the kids are aware of it [independent learning]. They don’t really understand the concept”. Additional comments were made about a possible lack of understanding from the students as to the conceptual basis and purpose of an independent learning programme.

The most significant implementation issues that school B was facing were issues of resource accessibility and function. This was voiced in terms of ICT equipment and appropriate workspaces or rooms to allow for independent learning to occur. Staff stated that the access to computers had been challenging during the implementation process and that there were significant bandwidth issues that exacerbated the problem, should access to computers be gained. “When the kids can get access to computers, it will make a big difference with independent learning” (Teacher school

B). Staff did go on to state that the newly refurbished library and the subsequent increase in computer access was likely to help alleviate this issue in the future.

Physical space had also been an issue and spaces that were big enough to accommodate independent learning had, up until now, been primarily, teacher focussed spaces. The library had always been rather small and, exacerbating the issue faced by students, the library had undergone significant redevelopment during the course of the year, making access even more difficult for all. Teachers agreed that the redeveloped space was much larger and more accommodating of an independent learning programme, but had not yet been able to enjoy the benefits of the space.

Members of the focus group explained that they had not afforded independent learning the time in their own subject areas that the programme deserved. Independent learning units had not really been planned, although they had intended to do so and saw the value of independent learning. One of the major barriers to unit development was teacher workload and the implementation of the independent learning programme coincided with the implementation of the recently revised *New Zealand Curriculum* as well as the demands on staff to implement the newly aligned NZQA achievement standards into their courses.

Staff also stated that whilst the implementation of an independent learning programme in the senior school was a good idea, they claimed that school B was missing an important step in the learning process by not including in the independent learning programme, an aspect of teaching the skills that students will need as they become more involved with independent learning. Staff explained that the current situation simply expected students to possess the required skills and attributes and have an inherent ability to apply those skills and attributes without guidance. In essence, they questioned whether the students currently involved in the independent learning programme were ready for it. Coupled to this, was the issue of teacher professional development and ensuring that the teaching staff were equipped with the ability to actively teach the independent learning skills that students need.

Some discussion and decisions have taken place in an effort to address some of the implementation issues detailed above. Taking place concurrently to the library redevelopment, school B had also just completed a significant network infrastructure upgrade and relocated their server room to allow for increased network capacity, bandwidth and functionality. Both of these developments were in the final stages at the time this research took place. Students and staff had not yet been able to enjoy the benefits of the developments as they were not yet functioning to capacity. It was intended that the network upgrade and development of the school's wireless network infrastructure would lead to the proliferation of student owned devices being used to access bandwidth and the school network. According to the teachers, this could ease the burden of the already stretched, computer resources in the school.

Staff in the focus group at school B were able to articulate a need for independence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner, although they were not able to clearly define what that meant for their students. It appeared that the staff were very familiar with the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning needs for students as detailed in the *New Zealand Curriculum*, but had more difficulty in linking the modern learner to the independent learning programme operating at their school. Comments were made that stressed the importance of possessing particular skills such as IT skills, research skills and questioning skills, but they were not able to articulate a shared school wide approach or understanding of the purpose of the independent learning programme. One idea that was widely supported by the group was the idea of initiative and students taking the lead and knowing what to do next, without having to rely on the teacher to make all the learning decisions on behalf of students.

Staff were clear that an effective independent learning programme would lead to improved student outcomes and believed that a well-established programme would improve student confidence in learning and help them to be able to analyse information, justify responses, and apply prior knowledge at all levels. Staff were hopeful that such outcomes would take precedence in student behaviour over current practice they observe, where students appear to sit back and simply wait for answers to be delivered to them. Staff also hoped that as a result of an effective

independent learning programme, students would be able to make learning relevant to them, in whatever learning environment that they may find themselves.

Staff at school B argued that they have a significant role to play in the independent learning programme and in the learning lives of the students in their care. They explained how teachers could be used as a sounding board for ideas and theories, as a catalyst for new directions of study and thought, as providers of a learning framework for students and as a source of inspiration that could spark interest in new learning opportunities. They also explained how teachers should act as academic counsellors and continually liaise with students about their current direction and learning needs.

The role of the senior leadership team was seen as vital in the successful implementation of an independent learning programme. Staff at school B were of the opinion that the concept needed to be fully supported, and fully understood, by the senior leadership team and that resultant administrative support was required. The administrative tasks referred to included creating lists, printouts, attendance and timetabling. It was stated that the senior leadership team need also play a lead role in the creation of a shared vision of what independent learning is for the school. Alongside the shared vision, the senior leadership team were also expected to enable the development of shared language and shared strategies, so that the independent learning programme was consistent in design and application across the school. One teacher stated:

*We have [the Principal's] vision and we have our own vision, but we need a shared vision, language and strategies. We are all exploring it ourselves and kids don't recognise that it is the same thing we are talking about. Professional development is vital so that we have the same terminology, follow the same pattern.*

Staff were supportive of the independent learning programme and believed that it will work. They would like to see the appointment of a lead teacher that is given a time allocation and would be able to lead professional development, help gather, create

and distribute resources and facilitate interschool discussion and cross-curricular links. Additionally they argued that it was important to develop a teaching programme in the junior years that helped to equip students with the skills and competencies that they will require in their senior school years, as they became involved in the independent learning programme. To do this, further staff wide discussion was suggested in order to get a clear picture of how independent learning fitted into what was already happening at school B. There was also a belief that for an independent learning programme to be implemented well, it might need to be done at a time when significant change, such as the implementation of the *New Zealand Curriculum* and the NZQA standards alignment process, was not already taking place.

### *Principal's Perspectives*

The Principal of school B articulated that in the implementation of their independent learning programme, HoDs had been encouraged to build and incorporate into their current schemes, either entire units of work which allowed independent learning, or smaller aspects of independent learning to incorporate into units of work. Additionally, HoDs and teachers had been empowered to allow students to work in spaces such as art rooms and technology spaces, outside of regular timetabled time and to let students work on their own and provide advice on alternative venues for their learning. The Principal stated that:

*We have given HoDs and teachers permission to not always have students in the rooms with them when they are timetabled to be there, but to let students work on their own, and give alternative venues for learning their learning."*

At the time of this research school B has not changed the timetable structure, but had asked HoDs and staff to build elements of independent learning into what they did each day.

According to the Principals, students at school B did not currently have designated rooms or staff, and in the past they had been permitted to leave school when they had timetabled study periods. They were now required to be within the school during

timetabled independent learning time. A senior common room had been slightly modified with independent learning spaces created within it. The library had been modernised and parts of the new extensions spaces were available for students to use. The Art department had been very proactive and attempted to embrace the philosophy of independent learning and darkrooms had been turned into IT suites to accommodate students' needs. This idea had been shared and discussed at the HOD level and feedback was being sought from other departments on ways they could develop other areas for an independent learning purpose.

The independent learning programme was explained to teachers at school B following a trip taken by the Principal to a group of self-directed learning schools in Canada. On that tour the Principal saw various examples of independent learning in practice and of how independent learning could operate in a traditional school infrastructure. Following the trip, the Principal prepared a report for the Board of Trustees and promoted the initiative to the staff, via staff meetings, and created opportunity for staff to follow up and discuss the initiative in department, HoD and senior leadership team meetings.

The Principal drove the implementation of the independent learning programme from the beginning and encouraged and empowered teachers to take the initiative in a direction that suited them, their plans for the year and the department they were part of. Additionally, the Principal provided finance for some infrastructural changes and set up resource requirements.

Teacher input into the independent learning programme had to this point been via the content expectations that had been tabled in departments with regard to their departmental handbooks and schemes of work. These schemes needed to visibly contain independent learning goals for students taking the course. Aside from the departmental input, teachers had no significant input in the structure and content of independent learning at school B. Students were afforded the opportunity to co-construct content with teachers and their independent learning needs, but had no opportunity to contribute to the structure of the independent learning programme.

The implementation of the independent learning programme had seen some issues develop. In particular, the Principal noted that not all senior students had taken responsibility for their independent learning time or use the time allocated efficiently. The school had an expectation that students would use their time allocation in a common room, library or approved classroom space, however, there had been some challenges faced maintaining student focus and getting students to utilise allocated independent learning time. Another issue faced by school B was one of facilities and space. With the independent learning programme still in its infancy, spaces had not yet been created or modified to the extent that all students' needs were satisfied. Additionally, there had been some frustration with the ICT infrastructure and the intermittent outages that had occurred during a significant network upgrade project that had taken place concurrently with the implementation of the independent learning programme.

The Principal was aware of the implementation issues as staff seemed to be very comfortable stating what the issues were. In order to overcome these issues, the Principal expressed an intention to conduct follow up meetings, presentations and professional development sessions with deans, HoDs and teams of staff. At these meetings the current situation was to be explored more fully and the expectations that the Principal had of the structure and content of the independent learning programme was to be redefined. Over time, Ministry of Education property maintenance funding would be used to create further spaces and to better equip them with ICT infrastructure, to enable better student engagement in the independent learning programme.

“The de-privatisation of spaces by adding glass, putting in technology, making them observable for teachers in junior areas” (Principal school B), was seen as an essential next step if independent learning was to grow and create a culture that embraced the independent learning philosophy. It was hoped that this de-privatisation would be particularly effective when used to scaffold learning expectations in the junior school, thus creating a culture of independent learning that students were aware of, comfortable with and able to exploit in the latter years of their secondary schooling. At the time of this research, no structure existed in the

junior school to teach the independent learning skills that the Principal stated were required.

As a result of engaging with the independent learning programme, the Principal hoped that students would enjoy academic success as they were able to complete work at a higher level, improve existing grades, greater personal independence, time management and ownership of their learning. According to the Principal, the independent learning programme was starting to create an environment where students were thinking about post school options and over time, a culture of using spaces after school to catch up and obtain career information was evolving.

This culture of achievement, study outside of the classroom and school hours was espoused as beginning to bear fruit. The Principal said that “we are seeing an improved NCEA level 3 pass rate so far this year, but we are not sure if this is because of independent learning”. The impression the Principal got from conversations with students was that the independent learning programme had played a part in this success. Whilst no data had been collected to confirm, or negate this view, the Principal of school B seemed confident of this link and aimed to explore this further.

The Principal at school B argued that it was vital to the success of an independent learning programme that the Principal had first-hand knowledge of what independent learning could do for students and how it worked in practice. The Principal also explained that the senior leadership team needed to continually provide access to up to date information and professional learning opportunities, encourage sharing of resources and approaches within the school and support those teachers that began to take risks in the exploration of independent learning in their classrooms.

The Principal of school B had a view on the progress the independent learning programme was making at the school and commented that:

*I don't think we are making the progress we had first hoped for.*

*The limitations of physical structure, timetable structure and*

*how the school is organised. Successful independent learning schools have re-engineered themselves and start from scratch.*

In the view of the Principal, successful independent learning schools have fundamentally re-engineered themselves and started from scratch in terms of programmes and educational philosophy. Without the ability to make drastic change, resistance from teachers to changes could be difficult to overcome. The Principal also stated that an advantage that newly built schools enjoy is the ability to create a culture and philosophy from the very beginning, train staff at the outset and develop an ownership of structure in the minds of the teaching staff.

According to the Principal, School B had experienced some resistance to change within its staff, and this has been compounded by a 40 – 50% turnover of staff. Whilst this turnover might bring fresh ideas and approaches into the staffroom, the Principal of school B noted that in most cases, the new staff were coming from environments where traditional teaching occurred and independent learning was not fully understood or developed. In order to be effective in the implementation of an independent learning programme, the Principal of school B stated that the rate of change he expected at the beginning was too high. The Principal reflected upon a need to move slower, with smaller targets and ensuring staff buy in is overt along the way. The use of learning guides was one initiative the Principal mentioned and realised that the timeline for this was too short and that they took a great deal of time to write. One of the biggest issues faced by the senior leadership team had been the building of the skills and attitudes students required in order to be independent in their learning.

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter has explored the students', teachers' and Principals' responses to issues around independent learning in each of their schools. It was obvious from the evidence that the implementation and maintenance of a successful independent learning programme contains three key elements. Each element will be discussed fully in chapter five. The three elements are:

- Shared vision and the perceptions of stakeholders
- Development
- Resourcing

### *Shared vision and the perceptions of stakeholders*

The views of staff, students and the wider community appear to have a significant impact on the effectiveness and engagement with an independent learning programme. If any of the stakeholders are unclear as to the purpose, design and outcomes of an independent learning programme, then the success of it can be significantly hampered.

### *Development*

In developing an independent learning programme there was evidence that both the students and the staff needed a degree of training, scaffolding and support in order to be able to fully engage with the programme and enjoy the best possible educational outcomes. It was important to a number of the stakeholders involved in the focus groups and interviews, that the school's educational philosophy and vision are overtly aligned with the development of an independent learning programme and that this vision and philosophy are shared/understood by all stakeholders at the school.

### *Resourcing*

One of the key issues identified from all the research instruments and both case study sites, was the issue of effectively resourcing an independent learning programme from the beginning. Resourcing issues that were identified included human resources, in terms of both quantity of staff and the expertise possessed by them, the allocation and design of appropriate learning spaces/classrooms, the access to bandwidth and ICT equipment, the access to specialist learning spaces

such as darkrooms, workshops and laboratories and the development of learning guides by departments to help direct students when they are engaging with independent learning.

It is also apparent that the stage of implementation that a school is currently at, is not permitted to detract from the significance of each of these three key factors and the eventual success of the independent learning programme in a school. This point, and the three keys themes above, will be discussed in chapter five.

## **CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

### ***INTRODUCTION***

The purpose of this chapter is to elaborate on the concluding statements made in chapter four, and discuss the findings that this research has uncovered, in relation to the literature introduced in chapter two. This chapter is broken into four sections. The first section will further explore the developmental requirements of students and staff and the subsequent alignment of the independent learning programme with the school philosophy. Section two will discuss the issue of resourcing an independent learning programme and section three will identify the significance of managing perceptions of key stakeholders when implementing and maintaining an independent learning programme. The chapter concludes with a summary section.

### ***SCHOOL VISION AND THE PERCEPTIONS OF STAKEHOLDERS***

#### *School vision*

In chapter four, I detailed that the view of the Principal of school A, was that their role was to support the independent learning programme and to continually ensure that the philosophy of the independent learning programme was appropriately aligned with the philosophy of the school. In addition to this need to align the pedagogical approaches to the school vision and philosophy, the Principal of school A also warned that failing to ensure this alignment could lead to an independent learning programme becoming little more than a study centre or glorified library. It is evident that the Principal of school A placed a great deal of importance on this alignment if an independent learning programme is to operate effectively within a school. This view was supported by the teaching staff involved in the focus group at school A and was made clear through the importance both the teaching staff and Principal placed upon the independent learning qualities that were embedded within the school pedagogical approach, and the role that these qualities played in the independent learning programme.

The Principal of school B was aware of the implementation issues that have been experienced during 2011, and the importance of a shared vision for independent learning programme, in relation to the philosophy and purpose of an independent learning programme. The Principal of school B expressed an intention to conduct

follow up meetings, presentations and professional development sessions with deans, HoDs and teams of staff to fully explore the current situation and to redefine the expectations that the Principal had of the structure and content of the independent learning programme. The purpose of this approach would be to ensure there is alignment with the school's independent learning approach the philosophy of the school, the school values and strategic plan.

In order to achieve this alignment goal and shared vision, it will be important to include students, parents and the wider school community as stakeholders in the independent learning programme and pedagogical direction of the school. Harris, et al (2005) write that it is essential to engage parents and students as active stakeholders and participants in the process in order for effective pedagogical change to occur. They also state a need to attempt, through training, to expand the teaching and learning skill set possessed by students and teachers. Harris, et al. (2005) support the need for the wider community to be involved in any instructional process change and they also argue that not only must the community be involved in any change, but that change should clearly fit within the values set boundary that the school and community have established over time. The mandate that school leaders have to implement change is sourced from this shared values set, and it is therefore essential that this is used as a foundation for change.

### *Outcomes*

In addition to the issue of alignment discussed above, it is important that a school creates clarity around the purpose and benefits of an independent learning programme in order to create an environment that maximises improvements in student outcomes. The Principal of school A went as far as to state that the independent learning programme needed the senior leadership team to overtly support the initiative. Teachers and the Principal at school A were very certain in defining the purpose of the independent learning programme at their school and they stated that they felt that the main objective of the programmes was to instil in the students a greater independence and love of lifelong learning. An independent learning programme aims for students to know how to access information and how to prepare for and monitor their time at university and employment.

The Principal at school B explained that it was vital to the success of an independent learning programme that the Principal has first-hand knowledge of what independent learning can do for students and how it works in practice. The Principal also felt that the senior leadership team needs to continually provide access to up to date information and professional learning opportunities, encourage sharing of resources and approaches within the school and support those teachers that begin to take risks in the exploration of independent learning in their classrooms. The teachers at school B shared this view, but were less able to articulate benefits of an independent learning programme in a context that was relevant to their school. They felt that a professional development strategy was required to assist the wider staff in gaining clarity or purpose and a common understanding of exactly what was required of them and the outcomes they could hope to experience as a result of engaging with the independent learning programme.

The outcomes that an independent learning programme will hopefully generate for students must also be made clear to all stakeholders in the independent learning programme if the initiative is to continue to operate effectively. As discussed in chapter two, research on the benefits of independent learning is plentiful, but some key points are important to represent as I apply this research to the schools involved in this research.

Hmelo-Silver (2004) states that the process of independent learning creates skills in students that they would not, necessarily, be exposed to and that they will become more equipped for lifelong learning. The concept of improved lifelong learning would suggest that independent learning is well aligned to the outcomes desired in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007). Brown (1968) writes that, given a correctly constructed programme of independent learning, a learner will become more capable of meta-cognition and personal analysis of bias. He further reinforces the idea that students will naturally become more reliant on resources they have created and will also be more likely to develop a set of acceptable personal standards. Gibbons (2002) argues that independent learning forces students to adapt quickly to changing

learning environments and circumstances and prepare them far more appropriately for a world that requires proactivity in its learners.

These key pieces of research align well with the schools' intentions in setting up their independent learning programme and also with some of the outcomes that were experienced by students in the case study schools. Whilst the Principal of school B stated that they were experiencing improved results at NCEA level three since the independent learning programme was introduced, there was not yet data to support the two are linked, though the Principal of school B had been provided anecdotal feedback from past students that suggests the independent learning programme operating there had been some benefit to them. Support does exist for this claim from the feedback gained from students that responded to the questionnaire, 59% (40 of the 65) of respondents had their expectations met or experienced better outcomes than they had anticipated prior to engaging with the independent learning programme.

### *Community*

The Principal of school A stated that "the Principal's role is to ensure that the community and parents know what it [independent learning] is all about. Trust that it is about learning". Coupled with this was the need to remind the community at large, that some students may have been permitted to study offsite, and that they were not necessarily truanting or engaging in anti-social behaviour if they were walking to or from school at an unusual time of the day. Brown (1968) warns that one potentially negative implication of an independent learning programme is that of parental reaction. He states that parents become anxious about learning environments whereby the learner is able to decide direction and warns that schools should be aware of this reaction, assist in providing answers and clarity for parents, but not let this reaction slow or halt the progress or implementation of the independent learning programme. Both the Principals interviewed expressed a need to continually reinforce, with the parent community, the purpose, design and outcomes expected from an independent learning programme and to help move them from a traditional education model to a model that was more aligned with the *New Zealand Curriculum*.

From a student perspective, it is also important that they are acutely aware of the requirements and expectations that the school has of them with regard to their participation in the independent learning programme. Not only must explicit information on attendance, access outcomes be provided to students, but an awareness of the role students need to play in their own learning is vital.

Key to the success of any independent learning programme is the perception held of the programme by the staff. If staff do not have an informed view of the independent learning programme, or they are lacking in their support of it, then successful implementation and on-going improvements will be difficult to achieve. Staff will be forced to engage in a paradigm shift if the essence of constructivist teaching is new to them. This will bring change management issues as staff evolve pedagogically. Gill and Halim (2008) identify the challenge of time and they state that for independent learning to be done properly, it cannot afford to be rushed or pushed through at a pace any other to that of the learner. This can create a conflict when teachers are faced with the pressure of content coverage and external prescriptive examinations. The issue of time to learn and time to teach and the constant strain this time is under from external drivers may create tension in an independent learning environment.

## ***DEVELOPMENT***

### *Student support*

It is evident from the findings that students, on the whole, valued the time allocated in independent learning and have used the time throughout the year to enable them to prepare assessment material that would impact positively on their credits in NCEA. A significant majority utilise the time to catch up on assessment tasks, work on extra credit and help create portfolios and projects. This ability to make informed decisions about their educational needs at the time appears to align very well to the key competencies and intent of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). In addition, the conduct of students with regard to their assessment practice and their desire to catch up on work and create of their own goals and learning

strategies supports Hmelo-Silver's (2004) argument that independent learning enables students to develop a skill set that better equips them for life-long learning.

Knowles (1975), stated that the successful learner is one that is proactive and takes responsibility for their own learning. This statement is supported by the finding from the questionnaire where 44.2% of respondents (34 of the 77 students that answered this question) stated that they utilise independent learning time to work on extra credit assignments. This indicates some level of motivation and desire in the students, all characteristics of a modern and lifelong learner as identified in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). This sense of motivation that is evident in both case study schools reinforces the statement made by Houser and Frymier (2009) about empowered learners and how their motivation and competence can affect the learning outcomes they experience. Harris et al (2005) also suggest that research into successful pedagogy identifies that the most effective way to improve student outcomes is to have them construct knowledge for themselves, to enquire into subject matter for themselves and apply thinking skills to new situations.

It was the view of both the focus group participants and by the Principal of school A that, in order for independent learning to be effective, there needed to exist a degree of scaffolded learning. This scaffolding is not only subject and content specific, but also is related to students knowing how to use the skills learned effectively. This scaffolding requirement for independent learning links back to the work of Hmelo-Silver et al (2007) where they state that independent learning requires a degree of scaffolding, in turn reducing cognitive load and allowing learners to explore more complex domains and tasks that would otherwise be possible. Teachers at both case study sites clearly articulated a need to provide students with a prior understanding of the purpose of an independent learning programme. They also highlighted the need to orientate students in advance, with a teaching and learning programme that would enable them to make best use of the independent learning time in their later years. It was apparent from the responses from staff in school A, that allowing students to engage in an independent learning programme in years nine and ten at secondary school may be fruitful.

There appeared to be some alignment between the views of teachers and students with regard to their academic support during independent learning. Students articulated a need for access to ICT resources and teacher prepared material in the form of web links, book references and learning guides. This need aligned with needs expressed by teachers and the requirements of Principals, in terms of staff creating units of work for the independent learning programme, and writing learning guides to help scaffold the learning of students as they worked through an independent learning unit or work. Teachers accepted the need for broad ICT access and the creation of, or access to, appropriate workspace or specialist rooms, for students to access and be engaged in their learning.

Whilst 24% (17 of 72) of students expressed an expectation that independent learning would see them left alone to work without teacher contact, Candy (1991) and Windschitl (1999) similarly argue that an independent learning programme does not relieve a teacher of their duties and obligations to the learner and therefore should remain in touch with the learning needs of the students. This argument is reinforced by Mayer (2004) where he states that constructivist approaches are most effective when a clear curricular focus exists and learners are not left in learning isolation. Therefore, it appears that the requirement for teachers to prepare learning guides, assimilate independent learning into units of work and have a means of monitoring students' progress and learning needs is a significant requirement if success is to be enjoyed. This is mirrored by the voice of students when 19% (9 of the 47) of students indicated that the independent learning programme that they experience could be improved if teacher control of independent learning was increased or there was more access to subject specialists during independent learning time.

There was also a need to develop strategies to ensure student behaviour is effectively managed during independent learning time. Comments from students included the need for increased control from teachers and entry or exit criteria for underperforming students so that they are not empowered to disrupt the learning of others. Again, this concept is supported by Mayer (2004) and Windschitl (1999) where

they express that students need cognitive freedom, but in a way that is guided and allows applicable and useful discovery, with teacher intervention as needed.

### *Staff support*

The concept of a shared vision and the need for an independent learning programme needed to be aligned with the school-wide educational philosophy. This is a message that came through strongly from both the focus groups and the interviews with Principals. The *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) makes a clear statement detailing that learning expectations are important at the planning and implementation stage of curriculum delivery. This is supported by Gill and Halim (2008) where they write that a cross-curricular structured approach to independent learning is essential. Further to the need for structure in the planning stage of curriculum delivery, Hmelo-Silver (2004) claims that in order to minimise differing views and expectations of students across a campus, a consistency of approach and language would be essential to the success of an independent learning programme.

This shared vision, direction and approach can be developed through an appropriate professional development programme, both prior to implementation and, once an independent learning programme is in place. Prior to the commencement of an independent learning programme, it is important that a clear understanding of what independent learning means is shared by staff and that they are aware of any potential benefits and drawback of the proposed programme.

As mentioned in chapter four, staff at both schools identified a need for a shared understanding of the meaning and purpose of an independent learning programme as it operated in each school. Staff at school B were eager for common language and descriptions to be developed to assist students to grasp the purpose of the independent learning programme. In school A, this acclimatisation to the independent learning environment occurred when staff were involved in the start of year orientation and department meetings. In identifying what independent learning means to a school, discussion in departments and as a whole staff is essential in creating a shared understanding. In particular, Gibbons (2002) provides an explanation of independent learning, as any endeavour whereby skills, knowledge

and personal growth are improved upon as a result of a student's own efforts. Candy (1991) reasons that for independent learning to take place effectively, there need not be a total disconnect between the teacher and the learner and clarifies that independent learning is more about who, between the learner and the teacher, determines learning direction, goals and activities undertaken. This student control, with timely teacher guidance aspect of independent learning, links back to the needs identified by students, whereby they expressed a genuine desire to have access to specialist teachers to assist them with their independent learning needs. This aligns well with Marshall (2007) where he contends that learner responsibility is the basis of independent learning and adds that the role of the teacher is in fostering an environment that is appropriate, and developing relationships with students that build confidence and collaboration.

Staff in school B were clear that they felt a need for more explanation of the benefits that an independent learning programme could provide their students. This would help to create clarity of purpose, and potentially increase the motivation of staff to create the resources and units of work required to generate more momentum in the independent learning programme. It is important to identify to all stakeholders, prior to implementation of an independent learning programme the nature of any benefits that could be expected from its implementation. Gibbons (2002) argues that independent learning forces students to adapt quickly to changing learning environments and circumstances and prepares them far more appropriately for a world that requires proactivity in its learners. Through equipping themselves with independent learning skills, they become more capable of playing a pilot role in their learning journey. Gibbons (2002) also states that independent learning forces students to find their passion, to work collaboratively with peers and significant adults and to find a pathway to future learning by themselves. From the feedback received from students at school A, they were beginning to utilise independent learning time to work on additional material, as well as catch up work, and this additional material could be driven by the passion for learning stimulated by involvement in the independent learning programme, though more data from students would be required to confirm this. This is reinforced by Saskatchewan Education Curriculum and Instruction Branch (2007) where it is stated that democracy, social change and

the responsibility of the individual citizen construct a societal need for independent learning. Individuals have a need for independent learning through the desire for self-responsibility; the need to be involved in their own learning; the process of maturation to adulthood (need for independence as a human); the need for self-awareness and confidence; the need for freedom and a personal motivation and desire to grow and evolve. The revised *New Zealand Curriculum* supports this need for independent learning due to the 'regulated' requirements to prepare students for a life of learning; to transition students to the learning environment that exists outside of secondary education and the need to increase the capabilities and skill set of each and every student. This Canadian research aligns with the purpose of the independent learning programme as stated by the staff at school A, whereby they expressed desire for students to be prepared for post-secondary learning in the best possible manner.

As well as being aware of the potential benefits of an independent learning programme, stakeholders also needed be made aware of the potential draw backs that could exist. Staff at both sites were acutely aware of a need for resource material to be prepared to support and guide the learning of students. They also required on-going updates and information from departments to be regularly shared, so that any supervising teacher was aware of upcoming topics, assessments and requirements. This has resourcing implications in terms of professional development time allocation, course costs and copying requirements. Of particular relevance to this piece of research are the possible disadvantages as detailed by Piskurich (1993) where he states that such programmes are often more expensive to develop in terms of resources and instructional materials, can lead to a loss of the social interaction that occurs when learning takes place in a more traditional teacher directed mainstream environment. He considers that there is a degree of wastage of quality learning time as learners orient themselves with the requirements of an independent learning programme.

The teachers in each of the focus groups, and the Principal of school A, raised a similar concern that related to a need to teach a range of required skills prior to an independent learning programme being embarked upon. Bolhuis and Voeten (2001)

suggest that a potential danger exists with regard to the dependence on prior knowledge, when adopting an independent learning approach. They would argue that there could be knowledge and capability gaps could exist in the learning tool kit of students and that these gaps could prevent students from being able to actively and effectively engage in an independent learning programme. This argument can also be applied to novice learners, who may lack the ability to assimilate new knowledge with prior learning that they have experienced (Moreno, 2004). It would be important in such circumstances for teachers to have the skills that would help address the needs of novice learners.

Baines and Stanley (2000) would argue that what students in a learning environment need, is a teacher that is fully aware of content, their learning needs as students, an understanding of ways in which knowledge can be applied to new situations and an ability to relate to students, to role model and to guide. They warn that a pure independent learning approach could lead to isolation of a learner and the reduction of societally appropriate learning. Though independent learning was functioning in both schools, the focus group feedback suggests that on-going feedback, critique and dialogue between the staff involved in the programme, and the students engaged in it, was the most effective way to ensure the independent learning programme was meeting the needs of each student. School A provided an annual opportunity for staff to discuss and update the programme, but accepted that students' feedback should be solicited more frequently, with regard to the function and structure of the programme. School B staff expressed desire to move the independent learning programme onward, and to do so would require open dialogue and a critique of how things were operating at the present time. Both students and teachers at school A and school B expressed that learning guides for students needed to be developed and maintained in each subject area. The need to seek direction from classroom teachers, provide independent learning staff with a well-defined direction for a subject and what to expect in terms of workload and coming assessment events in an area of study appeared to impact on the success of the independent learning programme in both schools.

The Principal of school A and the teachers in the focus group at school B collectively indicated that it was important to them to have a sense of philosophical alignment with the independent learning programme and the overall pedagogical direction and philosophy of the school. This is supported by Harris et al (2005) where they state that the key warning offered, is that for an independent learning approach to be productive, it must be fully integrated into the curriculum offered throughout the school, it cannot be “presented in isolation” (p. 61) or used as a lesson in study skills. This would require a consistent approach, not only within departments, but throughout the school. This clarity of purpose and consistency of approach is evident in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) where it is stated that clear statements detailing learning expectations as they apply across and between levels in a school, are important for both curriculum planning and lesson delivery.

## **RESOURCING**

### *Staffing*

One of the key resources required for a high functioning independent learning programme is the recruitment, retention and training of quality staff. The Principal of school A reflected that one of the most challenging issues was the acquisition of skilled personnel to run the independent learning centre and be aware of the individual needs of up to 600 students assigned to them at any one time. Baines and Stanley (2000) would argue that what students in a classroom need, is a teacher that is fully aware of content, their learning needs as students, an understanding of ways in which knowledge can be applied to new situations and an ability to relate to students, to role model and to guide. This need for engaged, aware staffing is also supported by Windschitl (1999), where he writes that whilst designing an instructional programme is important, teachers must be acutely aware of the learning needs of students every step of the way, in order to be able to intervene as needed.

Brown (1968) reasons that appropriately staffing an independent learning programme cannot be overlooked and suggests a structure that will, potentially, lead to some success. The structure Brown (1968) supports involves appointment of personnel to specific roles including Programme Co-ordinator and a Specialist Teacher and whilst this may have some cost burden for an organisation that might

otherwise not be required, these roles are essential to the supervision and guidance the independent learner will require. It is evident that this is the approach that has been taken by school A, and that some success has been enjoyed as a result of the staff appointments made to the independent learning programme. In comparison, School B had initially adopted an unsupervised model for the independent learning programme, and was yet to gather data that could identify how this had benefitted the students.

In both case study schools, students supported the need for quality staff and stated that they also felt it appropriate for staff to be active in their behaviour management of students so as to assist each student to maintain focus. This indicated a desire to have peers working constructively and in a manner that did not disrupt the learning of other students. In order to achieve this in an independent learning environment, staff must have excellent behaviour management skills and a personalised understanding of the current learning needs of each student (Baines & Stanley, 2000). As mentioned previously, students also stated a need to be able to access staff when required. This can be fraught with some difficulty, as the teachers' other regular timetabled classes may prevent students from being able to access the teachers they require to assist them on an 'as-needed' basis.

### *Learning resources*

Students and staff stated that learning resources were an essential aspect of an independent learning programme that was running well. In student responses some representative comments about appropriate resourcing included comments relating to provision of appropriate website and book references and clear guidelines and milestones that would assist students to stay on task. In school A teachers were encouraged to create learning guides for students and in school B staff were encouraged to include independent learning units of work within existing schemes. The discussion with teachers around guidance and direction, coupled with the call from students to have access to resources that helped guide them through key pieces of work, suggest that a learning guide could play a major role in the successful operation of an independent learning programme. These comments from students and staff align well with those of Baines and Stanley (2000) where they suggest that for independent learning to be effective, teachers must be acutely

aware of where students are up to, and their learning needs to progress to the next step in their learning journey. Additionally, Knowles (1975) writes that independent learning requires students to be active in the gathering of support materials from the teachers they are being guided by.

The next factor to consider is what is the most appropriate way to provide students with this content? Whilst traditionally, students have been provided with resources in hard copy, via hand-outs, workbooks, texts and library issued publications, students articulated a desire to have digital material that they could access at any time. Students typically wanted more unrestricted access to the internet and a wider range of digital media to access as a means of supporting their learning. Gibbons (2002) has argued that twenty first century students must be able to respond rapidly and source new information that can be quickly applied to new learning environments. This access to internet bandwidth will form an important role in students being able to respond as rapidly as Gibbons (2002) would insist. A combination of digital resources and traditional hard copy resources may well be the most appropriate option as this would eliminate the inequity that could exist, in lower socio-economic areas, with regard to internet access. It is important to note the warning of Candy (1991) which states that an independent learning programme should not create a total disconnect from the teacher and the student. To be successful, meaningful contact must be maintained. The dependence on ICT forms of learning can create the conditions for this disconnect and schools must be cognitive of this when developing and maintaining an independent learning programme.

The issue of access to appropriate ICT infrastructure was also an aspect of an independent learning programme that appeared to be integral in the view of students and staff. Students signalled that to make the most of any independent learning opportunity, they needed to have access to ICT hardware and space. Student from both sites stated a need for more computers for them to access but in addition to the physical hardware, students wished to have bandwidth access to the internet that enabled them to use their own devices to access data via each school's wireless network infrastructure.

Staff from both sites referred to ICT facilities and agreed that they were important to the success of the independent learning programme. The schools were both at different stages in their ICT infrastructure development, with school A enjoying access to a high number of computers for independent learning students to access and school B having had ICT access significantly restricted due to the construction work in the library and redevelopment of the school network via the Schools Network Upgrade Project (SNUP). It was clear from the student and staff responses that they perceive improved ICT infrastructure and access was of material importance to an effective independent learning programme.

There was significant alignment between this call for improved infrastructure and the recent directions mandated by the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). The vision for what is wanted for the twenty first century learning in this document includes reference through the vision for learning, to a connected learner who can effectively use communication tools. Additionally the *New Zealand Curriculum* suggests that effective pedagogy requires that students are provided sufficient opportunities to learn, and this could include ICT opportunities. By far the most significant reference to ICT learning for the twenty first century learner exists in the e-learning section of the *New Zealand Curriculum*. Schools are encouraged to explore how ICT can supplement traditional learning environments, as well as to explore new ways to empower ICT learning.

### *Teaching spaces*

The teaching space available for the use of students engaged in independent learning was also of importance to the programmes. Students and staff from both sites expressed the need for appropriate spaces to accommodate the diverse learning needs of the students. School A had a dedicated independent learning centre and school B had redeveloped an old senior common room space with cubicles and group study rooms. These spaces were generally deprivatised and could be passively supervised by staff in adjoining rooms or offices. Gill and Halim (2008) claim that the development of an independent learning programme can be expensive in terms of the space required to allow students the flexibility they require. School A, through trial and error, created a dedicated space that fitted the needs of

students, and was beginning to operate at capacity. School B had less freedom with their space as it attempted to modernise a campus designed some fifty years ago. The learning environment that an independent learning programme requires has, subsequently, been a challenge to incorporate into existing buildings and construction footprint.

Over and above the need for students to have access to dedicated independent learning spaces, students also required access to specialist, and often occupied, teaching spaces and resource areas. Typically these spaces existed within subjects that had a practical or design component such as visual arts, technology, music, physical education and drama learning areas. Access to these spaces allowed students the opportunity to work on portfolios, rehearse, compose, record, construct, print and paint. Students who made suggestions on how to improve the quality of the independent learning programme at their school focussed those suggestions on the provision of, or access to, a wider set of resources, be those resources human in terms of access to subject specialist, physical in terms of machinery, plant, ICT equipment or space or digital resources.

Students expressed a desire to be able to access these spaces in order to catch up on work, complete portfolios or engage in activities that could earn extra credits. Students responded that they used independent learning time to catch up on assessments, work on extra credit type assignments and activities and that they would work in departments on portfolios or project based tasks. This access to specialist space would be complimentary to the access they had to specialist teachers including artists, mechanics and food technologists, in order to get maximum support for the learning.

## **SUMMARY**

In this chapter I have explored the three areas that my research found to be significant in developing or maintaining an independent learning programme in a New Zealand secondary school. These three areas were the school vision and the perceptions of stakeholders, development of students and staff and resourcing.

In order to operate effectively, all stakeholders in the school must have an understanding of the nature and purpose of the independent learning programme and what this means in terms of attendance, timetable and where learning can take place. The school must actively align the independent learning programme with the schools vision and philosophy and be certain on the intended outcomes to be achieved through the implementation and development of an independent learning programme.

Through the discussion above, it is evident that to successfully operate an independent learning programme, a school needs to ensure there is clarity of purpose, consistency of programme design, and that alignment exists between the independent learning programme and the school values and pedagogical philosophy. Students require support as they embark on their independent learning journey as well as support in establishing a scaffolded essential skill set prior to being involved with independent learning. Students enjoy the opportunity to catch-up with work missed, to better prepare for assessments and to gain further NCEA credits in situations outside of their regular timetabled teacher contact.

Staff also require support as they embark on an independent learning journey. It is essential that professional development opportunities exist that create clarity for staff around the nature and purpose of an independent learning programme, and also outlining exactly what is expected from the in terms of time, resource creation and off timetable assistance to students. It would be prudent to identify the drawback that an independent learning programme can have, so that staff are very certain about the programme they are contributing to.

Resourcing is also an area that is significant to a successful independent learning programme. Thought needs to go into the creation of spaces for students to use on a drop in basis and access to network infrastructure significantly enhances the engagement and learning opportunities for students. Students want to be able to access specialist classroom spaces, again, on a drop in, as needed basis. This may create conflict with teaching staff having other timetable classes in, or around, the specialist spaces, so care consideration of this matter is required.

These three key areas have significant implications for the school leadership, staff and students for a school that is maintaining or planning to implement an independent learning programme. The expectations and experiences that have been detailed in chapters four and five create a set of implications for school leadership, and collectively reflect the basis of the research questions that were first introduced in chapter one:

1. What are the expectations of an independent learning programme for senior students in two New Zealand secondary schools?
2. What is experienced by stakeholders involved in an independent learning programme for senior students in two New Zealand secondary schools?
3. What are the implications of an independent learning programme for school leadership in a New Zealand Secondary School context?

In chapter six, I will further answer these questions and offer conclusions and recommendations with a particular focus on the implications for school leadership.

## CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### **INTRODUCTION**

I have organised this chapter around my research questions that were identified in chapter one. The research questions used to guide this study are:

1. What are the expectations of an independent learning programme for senior students in two New Zealand secondary schools?
2. What is experienced by stakeholders involved in an independent learning programme for senior students in two New Zealand secondary schools?
3. What are the implications of an independent learning programme for school leadership in a New Zealand Secondary School context?

In addition, I will detail the limitations of this research and make recommendations for the direction that any future piece of research may take.

### **EXPECTATIONS**

#### *Student expectations of an independent learning programme*

Students had very defined expectations of the independent learning programme at each of the schools studied. This expectation was clear despite that on one site, they had not received any prior learning about the purpose and nature of the independent learning programme they would be engaged in.

Students expect an independent learning programme to afford them freedom to move around learning areas and environments as they need to. They want to be able to work from home if appropriate, enter and exit the school campus as and when their timetable and learning needs permit and to account primarily to themselves for the independent learning time they have allocated. Whilst this expectation may seem reasonable, it is not supported by the research (Candy, 1991; Gibbons, 2002; Mayer, 2004; Windschitl, 2009) where clear messages arise around the need for independent learning to be an environment where teachers are acutely aware of the learning needs of each individual student, are available and actively

involved in the learning process and that no disconnect between the student and the teacher is fostered as a result of the independent learning programme.

In addition to being 'left alone', students also expected to be able to access specialist teachers and specialist rooms when they need to. Students want to be able to freely communicate with teachers when they need to access advice and guidance, and can experience frustration when this is not possible due to teaching commitments of specialist teachers concerned. This expectation is linked to the research of Hmelo-Silver (2004) where she writes that independent learning programmes can provide space for just-in-time direct instruction to take place. This issue of access to specialist teaching spaces is one that can lead to similar scheduling conflicts, given that these teaching spaces will be used to support regular timetable learning classes, as well as to support students involved in the independent learning programme. This expectation is one that finds support in the literature, as per the authors listed above, but can create scheduling issues for the school. This is explored further in the implications for leadership section of this chapter.

Students at both case study sites articulated strongly that they expected to be able to access ICT infrastructure as and when needed. Whilst the physical access to machines varied across the two sites, due mainly to the significant network upgrade that school B was engaged with, students were far more vociferous about an increasing expectation to be able to access bandwidth via whatever device they happen to have on them at the time. Students were becoming increasingly mobile with their data and internet needs and wanted to be able to use their own portable devices to access the internet and school network. This desire expressed by students is one that is well supported by the revised *New Zealand Curriculum*, particularly the e-learning requirements detailed with it and the connectedness of a learner as stated in the values of the revised *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007).

In a slight contradiction to the students' desire to be left alone to engage in the independent learning programme, students also stated that they wished to work in an environment where students behaviour was appropriately monitored and those

that were disrupting the learning of others would have appropriate sanctions issued to them. Again, this aligns well with existing research (Candy, 1991; Gill & Halim, 2008; Knowles, 1975) and the need for staff to remain actively engaged with an independent learning programme if it is going to succeed and create meaningful learning outcomes for students.

#### *Staff expectations of an independent learning programme*

One of the most significant expectations articulated by staff was that of professional development in the area of independent learning, a need for clarity around terminology and purpose and time in their teaching schedule to prepare learning support material and assist students. In essence, staff felt strongly about the existence of an up to date shared vision for an independent learning programme that aligned clearly with the educational philosophy of the school. Staff were acutely aware that this clarity would help to alleviate situations where student requirements might differ across the school and confusion could be created in the eyes of the students. This need for shared purpose and vision is supported in the literature by Gill and Halim (2008) and Hmelo-Silver (2004) where reference to cross school coherence is made in order to ensure an effectively functioning independent learning programme.

Staff appreciated opportunities to feedback to HoDs and the senior leadership team, about the effectiveness of the independent learning programme, the structure of the programme and ways in which it could be modified to better suit the changing learning needs of students. The *New Zealand Curriculum* articulates the need for teachers to operate in a teaching as inquiry model, and this feedback loop is an essential part of such a requirement (Ministry of Education, 2007). Macbeath and Dempster (2009) also detail the importance of teaching as inquiry as a means of advancing pedagogical change and student outcomes.

Staff at both sites were also able to clearly explain the importance of the ICT infrastructure as mentioned above. For school B the ICT upgrade and resultant lack of access to bandwidth and hardware created a significant barrier to effective implementation and the planned improved access in 2012 and beyond was seen as

welcome relief. The expectations at school A have evolved in recent years, where staff confidently expected the equipment to be available and the bandwidth access to be functional. Staff at neither site expressed any expectation with regard to wireless connectivity for students, but both agreed that it is a worthwhile future initiative.

## **EXPERIENCES**

### *Student experiences of the independent learning programme*

Students on both sites experienced some frustration with access to rooms and teachers when they need it. They also experienced a small number of negative interactions with adults within the community, with regard to accounting for their whereabouts when they were participating in the independent learning programme. There was a misconception that any student that had disengaged and was found wandering around the campus, or around surrounding streets, must have disengaged from the independent learning programme.

The ICT frustrations that students have experienced have been well detailed in chapter four, and students stated that the independent learning programme would provide better outcomes for them if these issues were addressed.

Students at both sites enjoyed the ability to access specialised independent learning facilities in terms of a dedicated study or support space. School A had the benefit of being a new school and incorporated into its building infrastructure was a dedicated independent learning centre. School B used Ministry of Education provided property funding to update existing rooms to better accommodate the needs of students engaged in the independent learning programme. In both cases, students experienced benefits from the use of the spaces provided, and although there was now data to support improved outcomes, students enjoyed having a space they could go to, feel comfortable in, and was conducive to independent learning.

### *Staff experiences of the independent learning programme*

Staff experiences differed somewhat across the two case study sites. The staff at school A had the benefit of a number of years in which they had been able to adapt and modify their current practice. There was a culture around the campus that

focused on the independent learning qualities that they wished students to possess, and these were reinforced by the specialist independent learning programme staff. Staff at school A had a well-defined vision for independent learning and were able to provide feedback and contribute to both independent learning content and the structure of the programme overall.

Staff at school B were able to reflect that the introduction they had to the independent learning programme was lacking in some clarity and in shared vision or purpose. Departments were asked to prepare units of work that explored independent learning, but some had difficulty in creating what was required. They articulated a need for shared language, clarity around exactly what was required of them, acknowledgement of the time that would be required to prepare materials and a need for follow up professional development to support future work.

Staff at both case study sites were beginning to experience increase demand for ICT resources and the desire for student to be connected at all times. Complimenting this, was the shared experience of staff that demonstrated a need for ICT hardware and rooms to be available for student use. Staff at both sites experienced some frustration in terms of access to specialist teaching spaces, and specialist teachers, and acknowledged that the timetable infrastructure and the teaching load of staff could become a barrier to students engaging in independent learning insofar as they are unable to connect with specialist teachers when required.

## ***IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP***

### *Resourcing*

The appropriate resourcing of an independent learning programme will play a significant part in the ultimate success of such a programme. Gill and Halim (2008) warn that an independent learning programme can require a significantly greater amount of resources in order to function effectively. The findings in this study indicate that an independent learning programme does require significant investment in a range of resources in order to operate effectively. As detailed in chapters four and five, the issue of ICT funding and access was significant to both students and staff. School leaders need to be aware that an appropriate ICT infrastructure needs

to be in place for the independent learning programme to meet student and staff expectation. This infrastructure needs to include network capacity, physical machines and bandwidth access that enables students to gain connectivity anywhere on campus. This need for physical ICT infrastructure may impact upon the rooming allocations that school leaders need to consider each year. The allocation of rooms to an independent learning programme will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

In addition to the physical infrastructure, the expectation of improved bandwidth access for students is becoming increasingly important to students. Students are keen to bring their own portable devices to school, and use them to access the internet via the school network. This will bring with it security issues such as liability for loss, acceptable use by students and the overall security infrastructure of the school network, but these issues are outside of the scope of this research.

In addition to these safety issues, this potential proliferation of student owned wireless capable devices has implications for teachers that may well extend beyond the boundaries of their classrooms. Students may become increasingly active in the virtual environment and request assistance from their classroom teachers in digital forums, and at times of the day, that are unusual in a non-digital learning environment. Teaching staff may well experience an increase in just-in-time learning requests whereby students engage with teachers only when a learning gap exists, and in a way that is time critical to the learning they are engaging in at that moment.

The allocation of teaching spaces that are dedicated to the operation of an independent learning programme is something that school leadership must consider when establishing a programme. Evidence from this research suggests that students will, inevitably, require a space to work that is not simply taking a seat in a library or free classroom at the time. School A operated a dedicated space that could accommodate a significant number of students and found that the space was becoming increasingly well occupied by students who relied upon access to the independent learning centre. School leadership must also be cognisant of the need students have to be able to have access to specialist teaching spaces such as

darkrooms, science laboratories, technical workshops and other such specialist spaces and specialist teachers. The timetable implications of this are potentially significant, as are the demands that may be placed upon teachers as they attempt to engage their scheduled learning class, whilst simultaneously trying to meet the needs of the students that require their support through the independent learning programme.

The recruitment, retention and on-going professional development of staff to work within the independent learning programme is another significant implication for school leadership. School A evolved the independent learning programme that they established some years ago, from one that was staffed by support staff, to the model that now existed with full time, registered teachers staffing the independent learning centre. The acquisition of skilled staff was seen as essential to the successful operation of the centre. Staff employed must have a pedagogical understanding of independent learning and how it aligns with the school education philosophy and have the ability to identify and assist in filling and gaps that student may have in their understanding of any content (Candy, 1991; Gibbons, 2002; Gill & Halim, 2008).

In school B the staffing of the independent learning programme had yet to be considered and students were left to work without the direct supervision of staff, although indirect supervision occurred as a result of the de-privatisation of some key rooms and teaching spaces. Consequently, school leadership must consider the staffing requirements of an independent learning programme prior to embarking on the journey. There is support in the literature discussed in chapter two, for the appointment of specialist teachers to oversee and monitor an independent learning programme, and to ensure that a disconnect between the students and the teachers is not created by the programme if that programme is to succeed (Brown, 1968; Candy, 1991) .

Twenty first century teaching will require a foundation of teaching as enquiry and teachers that are able to empower learners in a manner that is engaging and assists students to develop a skill set that enables lifelong learning (Macbeath & Dempster, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2007; Schrodt, et al., 2008). Staff that are asked to

engage with students in an independent learning environment will need to be increasingly skilled in all these teaching dimensions. To be able to achieve this, school leaders will need to invest time in their staff, allow them time to prepare resource materials, such as learning guides, to support independent learning and invest in professional development to improve the quality of programmes and teachers (Claxton, 2010). Fundamentally, an ability to engage learners whilst still empowering them to take the lead in terms of the direction they are taking with their learning will be the primary task of the teacher of independent learning (Bentley, 2000; Houser & Frymier, 2009).

Efforts should be made by school leadership to create an environment whereby independent learning skills are scaffolded in the students from an early age. Support from the staff from both study sites strongly supports the notion that independent learning will function more effectively when skills are scaffolded during the junior secondary school years, in preparation for engagement with an independent learning programme as the student moves into the senior secondary school.

### *Purpose*

In order to successfully implement and maintain an independent learning programme in their school, school leadership should engage with staff and other key stakeholders such as parents and community leaders, to establish a shared purpose for the independent learning programme. At the same time, the independent learning programme must have alignment with the core educational values of school (Harris, et al., 2005) for it to gain traction and, subsequently contribute to improved learning outcomes for students.

The leadership of an independent learning school must work to continually ensure that this purpose is understood by the wider community and that parents and caregivers are aware of the operation of the independent learning programme. School leadership must create an environment whereby students have clear expectations expressed to them regularly and must be willing to take action to alter the behaviour of students that disrupt the learning of others.

### ***LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY***

The ability of the research project to fulfill its objective and to answer the research questions confirms that the research methodology and methods outlined in chapter three were appropriate for this study. However, the most apparent limitations of this study are the restraints of time, resources, funding, geographic access and that only one researcher was involved with the project. These factors constrained the study to two case study sites, a limited sample size and to within a particular geographical area. With greater funding, resources and time, a larger number of case study sites could have been invited to take part in the study, which may have led to better opportunities for generalisation of the findings.

Another factor that created limitations to the study was that the questionnaire that was completed using the online [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) tool was not constructed such that a distinction could be drawn between student responses from each of the case study sites. Whilst it was possible to differentiate some open ended responses due to the nature of the terminology that the students used, simple responses needed to be pooled to create cross site generalisations. In addition to this a more comprehensive interview process that was able to gather the views of a wider selection of staff may have been able to improve the quality of the feedback that this research has been able to provide.

### ***RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY***

As was previously discussed in chapter four, students appeared to have confidence in the impact the independent learning programme had had on their learning with the majority of students responding that the independent learning programme had a positive impact. Further study on the nature of that impact, perhaps by measuring links between an independent learning programme and effects on students National Certificate of Educational Achievement results, would be recommended.

Further study on the impact of an independent learning programme on those students that have special needs or are receiving significant learning support could also be of benefit to students.

In chapter four 48.1% of those that responded identified themselves as being New Zealand European in ethnicity, 7.4% students identified themselves as Maori, and 6.5% as Pacifica. This is not representative of the population of the case study schools, both individually and collectively, and the question of cultural appropriateness of the survey tool administered or independent learning programme may not have been appropriate for all students. The notion of cultural appropriateness of an independent learning programme would be grounds for further study.

To study independent learning across a wider geographical area and across a wider range of school types would provide greater insight into the effectiveness of an independent learning pedagogical approach, and form the basis of another recommendation for further study. This could be expanded to include a study of the appropriateness of independent learning for students studying at years nine and ten.

### ***FINAL CONCLUSION***

Students involved in this study have an evolving sense of what they require in order to engage with an independent learning programme. Students are very certain about the ICT infrastructure that would work best for them and allow them scope to access the school network using their personal devices. They were also very certain that access to teachers, support resources and teaching spaces is important to them, as well as an independent learning programme that allows them flexibility to study off campus if appropriate.

Teachers desired a plainly stated vision and purpose for an independent learning programme and expressed a need for there to be a school wide shared language and structure around an independent learning programme if it is to be a success. The allocation of specialist staff to run an independent learning programme is supported in both the literature and through the discussions held with staff. Teachers need access to professional development and time to prepare learning guides, units of work and other support materials in order to provide the appropriate level of support to an independent learning programme.

School leadership teams need to carefully consider the financial implications of engaging with an independent learning programme as to be as effective as possible, rooms need to be allocated to the programme and these rooms may need to be renovated to accommodate the current learning needs of the students. Additionally, the financial implication of teacher allocation, professional development, time allocation and provision of appropriate ICT infrastructure may have significant costs attached to them.

School leadership must also be very clear as the educational philosophy of the school, the purpose behind the implementation of the independent learning programme and how the philosophy and purpose will align. An independent learning programme will struggle to succeed without the specific an on-going support of school leadership, coupled with a determination by staff to ensure that the programme operates with the students learning needs in the forefront of each decision made.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1 - Self-Completion Questionnaire



(.pdf export from [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com))

Completion of this questionnaire is voluntary. The information that you provide is anonymous and will only be seen by the single researcher involved. Individual schools, students and teachers will not be identifiable anywhere in the research study and you are not required to provide your name on the questionnaire.

This questionnaire is an opportunity for you to provide information about your expectations and experiences with your involvement in the independent learning programme being run at your school. I will use the information to help guide Principals and Teachers so that the independent learning programmes in schools are making it easier for you to learn. The questionnaire is being carried out as part of a Masters Thesis study, being completed by a post graduate student at Unitec, New Zealand. By completing the questionnaire, you are giving your consent to take part in this research project and you are acknowledging that you understand the objectives of the research. It is expected that the survey will take you about 15-20 minutes.

Survey Monkey will be set so that you can withdraw or change your response provided you use the same computer (seek assistance from the schools IT department to you in returning to the same machine if required) so make sure you take note of the computer you use to complete this survey (write it down in your student diary, create a note on your cellphone, etc). Please complete the questionnaire by selecting the appropriate response and clicking submit. Surveymonkey will guide you through the process.

Many thanks for your time.

#### PART A DEMOGRAPHICS

1. Please indicate your gender

- Male
- Female

2. Please indicate your year level at school

- Year 11
- Year 12
- Year 13

3. What level of NCEA are you studying this year?

- Level 1
- Multi-Level 1&2
- Level 2
- Multi-Level 2&3
- Level 3
- Multi-Level 1&2&3
- Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is your ethnicity?

- Maori
- NZ European
- Pacifica
- Indian
- Asian
- Other (please specify)

**PART B INDEPENDENT LEARNING**

1. Do you take part in the independent learning programme at your school?

- Yes
- No

2. How long have you been involved in the independent learning programme at your school?

- 1 term or less
- 2 terms or less
- 3 terms or less
- 4 terms or less
- More than one year

3. From the statements below, indicate which best applies to you:

*I use the time wisely for curriculum related work and very rarely waste time in independent learning.*

- Strongly agree    Agree    Partially agree    Partially Disagree    Disagree    Strongly disagree
- 

*I enjoy independent learning*

- Strongly agree    Agree    Partially agree    Partially Disagree    Disagree    Strongly disagree
- 

4. What did you expect from your independent learning programme before you were involved in it?


5. How have these expectations come true in reality?


6. What types of learning opportunities are made available to you in independent learning that may not occur in regular timetabled classes? Select as many as you need to

- Work on extra credit assignments
- Catch up assessments
- Reassessment opportunities
- Work in departments on portfolios or projects
- Leave school grounds
- Usual classroom type revision
- Additional teaching by subject teacher/specialist
- Peer tutoring
- Silent reading
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

7. How would you describe the teacher interaction in your independent learning programme?

- Less teacher contact than other classes
- Same teacher contact as any other class
- More teacher contact than any other class
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

8. On the scale below identify how your learning has benefited from being part of the independent learning programme at your school?

*My learning has been helped greatly*

- Strongly agree    Agree    Partially agree    Partially Disagree    Disagree    Strongly disagree
- 

9. What opportunities do you get to provide feedback about your school independent learning programme?

*I am regularly asked for feedback*

- Always                      Sometime                      Seldom                      Never
- 

10. What suggestions can you offer to help improve the independent learning programme in your school?


**Thank you very much for your co-operation.**

UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2011-1157

This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from April 2011 to April 2012. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

## **Appendix 2 - Teacher Focus Group Schedule**

- How does the independent learning programme operate in your school?
- How was the independent learning programme explained to you as a teacher prior to its implementation?
- What input do/did you have into the structure of the independent learning programme?
- What input do students have into the structure of the independent learning programme?
- What implementation issues did/are you experiencing with the independent learning programme?
- How did you overcome/are you addressing the implementation issues?
- What are the expected outcomes from the independent learning programme?
- How do you think student outcomes are improved by the independent learning programme?
- What role do/should teachers play in supporting independent learning?
- What role do/should school leaders (SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM ) play in supporting independent learning?
- What future improvements could be made to the independent learning programme?

### ***Appendix 3 - Principal Interview Schedule***

- How does the independent learning programme operate in your school?
- How was the independent learning programme explained to your teachers prior to its implementation?
- What input do/did you have into the structure of the independent learning programme?
- What input do/did teachers have into the structure of the independent learning programme?
- What input do students have into the structure of the independent learning programme?
- What implementation issues did/are you experiencing with the independent learning programme?
- How did you overcome/are you addressing the implementation issues?
- What are the expected outcomes from the independent learning programme?
- How do you think student outcomes are improved by the independent learning programme?
- What role can/do/should Principals play in supporting independent learning?
- What future improvements could be made to the independent learning programme?
- What implications are there for school leadership in implementing an independent learning programme (or pedagogical change such as independent learning).

## Appendix 4 - Teacher Focus Group Participant Information and Consent Form



<date>

### FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT INFORMATION and CONSENT FORM

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Vaughan Couillault. I am the Associate Principal at Papatoetoe High School in Papatoetoe and I am currently enrolled in the Master of Educational Leadership and Management course in the School of Education at Unitec New Zealand. I am requesting your help in the collection of data as part of a thesis course which forms a part of this Masters programme.

The aim of my research project is to examine Expectations and experiences of Independent Learning (IDL) in two New Zealand secondary schools. I would like you to take part in a focus group discussion for about 40 minutes to discuss:

- Your expectations of the independent learning at your school.
- Your experiences of the independent learning programme at your school.

The discussion will be recorded, transcribed and then securely stored. Throughout the research neither you nor your organisation will be identified and you are free to request that I do not use any of the information that you have given. Focus group participants can edit or withdraw their participation contribution up to one week after receiving their copy of the transcript.

I hope that you will agree to take part and that you will find the experience valuable. If you have any queries about the research, you may contact my principal supervisor at Unitec New Zealand. My supervisor is Howard Youngs, phone 09 8154321 ext. 8411 or email [hyoungs@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:hyoungs@unitec.ac.nz).

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'V Couillault', written over a white background.

Vaughan Couillault

#### UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2011-1157

This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from April 2011 to April 2012. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.



<date>

**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUP**

**TO:**  
**FROM:** Vaughan Couillault. **DATE:**

**RE: Master of Educational Leadership and Management**

I have had the research project explained to me and I have had an opportunity to have my questions answered. I understand that everything I say is confidential and none of the information that I give will identify me or my organisation. I am aware that focus group participants can edit or withdraw their participation contribution up to one week after receiving their copy of the transcript.

**I agree to take part in this project.**

**Signed:** .....

**Name:** .....

**Date:** .....

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2011-1157**

This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from April 2011 to April 2012. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

## Appendix 5 - Interview Participant Information and Consent Form



2011>

<date

### INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT INFORMATION and CONSENT FORM

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Vaughan Couillault. I am the Associate Principal at Papatoetoe High School in Papatoetoe and I am currently enrolled in the Master of Educational Leadership and Management course in the School of Education at Unitec New Zealand. I am requesting your help in the collection of data as part of a thesis course which forms a part of this Masters programme.

The aim of my research project is to examine expectations and experiences of Independent Learning (IDL) in two New Zealand secondary schools.

I would like to interview you for about 40 minutes to discuss:

- Your expectations of the independent learning programme in your school
- Your experiences with the independent learning programme in your school, specifically;
  - Implementation issues you may have experienced / be experiencing
  - Resourcing implications of your independent learning programme (both physical and human).
- The desired outcomes of your independent learning programme and how are they measured?

The interview will be recorded, transcribed and then securely stored. Throughout the research neither you nor your organisation will be identified and you are free to request that I do not use any of the information that you have given. Interview participants are advised that it may be difficult to guarantee anonymity due to some of the demographic data contained in the research and the possibility that readers will be able to discern a possible location through interpreting this demographic data (eg decile, size, in Auckland, etc) Interview participants can edit or withdraw their participation contribution up to one week after receiving their transcript.

I hope that you will agree to take part and that you will find the experience valuable. If you have any queries about the research, you may contact my principal supervisor at Unitec New Zealand. My supervisor is Howard Youngs, phone 09 8154321 ext. 8411 or email [hyoungs@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:hyoungs@unitec.ac.nz).

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Vaughan Couillault'.

Vaughan Couillault

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2011-1157**

This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from April 2011 to April 2012. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.



<date>

**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM FOR THE INTERVIEW**

**TO:**  
**FROM:** Vaughan Couillault. 9 Aldon Lane, The Gardens, Manurewa.  
**DATE:**

**RE: Master of Educational Leadership and Management**

I have had the research project explained to me and I have had an opportunity to have my questions answered. I understand that everything I say is confidential and none of the information that I give will identify me or my organisation. I am aware that I have the right to edit or withdraw my participation contribution up to one week after receiving my transcript or the interview.

**I agree to take part in this project.**

**Signed:** .....

**Name:** .....

**Date:** .....

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2011-1157**

**This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from April 2011 to April 2012. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.**

**Appendix 6 - Organisational information letter and consent form**



**ORGANISATION INFORMATION LETTER and CONSENT FORM**

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Vaughan Couillault. I am the Associate Principal at Papatoetoe High School in Papatoetoe and I am currently enrolled in the Master of Educational Leadership and Management course in the School of Education at Unitec New Zealand. The aim of my research project is to examine Expectations and experiences of Independent Learning (IDL) in two New Zealand secondary schools.

I am asking for your assistance to carry out part of this study at your organisation. I would like to survey a sample of students and staff (using anonymous selecting sampling and an online survey tool), interview the Principal for 30 minutes and conduct a focus group with 6-8 leaders for approximately 40 minutes.

Throughout the research none of the participants or your organisation will be identified. If you wish to withdraw the organisation from the project, you will have the opportunity at any point within the data collection process and up to three weeks after the information has been received. All focus group participants and interviewees will have the opportunity to review, edit and delete their contributions from the transcripts.

I hope that you are happy for your colleagues to take part and that your organisation will gain a useful insight into the implementation of the *New Zealand Curriculum* and approaches to professional development, information which may be of use in your future strategic planning. If you have any queries about the research, you may contact my principal supervisor at Unitec New Zealand.

My supervisor is Howard Youngs, phone 09 8154321 ext. 8411 or email [hyoungs@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:hyoungs@unitec.ac.nz).

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Vaughan Couillault', written in a cursive style.

Vaughan Couillault

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15/02/2011

**ORGANISATION CONSENT FORM**

**TO:**  
**FROM:** Vaughan Couillault.  
**DATE:** 15 February 2011  
**RE: Master of Educational Leadership and Management**

I have had the research project explained to me and I have had an opportunity to have my questions answered. I understand that everything said as part of this study is confidential and none of the information provided will identify me, the staff or the organisation. I understand that I have the right to withdraw my contribution

**I agree for the organisation to take part in this project.**

**BOT Chairperson**

**Principal**

**Name:** .....

**Name:** .....

**Signed:** .....

**Signed:** .....

**Date:** .....

**Date:** .....

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2011-1157**

This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from April 2011 to April 2012. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.