



TEACHING & LEARNING
RESEARCH INITIATIVE
NĀU I WHATU TE KĀKAHU, HE TĀNIKO TAKU

Learning journeys from early childhood into school

Sally Peters, Vanessa Paki, and Keryn Davis

July 2015



Introduction

This project focused on the transition between early childhood and school and explored ways to understand and enhance children's learning journeys as they move between the two sectors. Transitions can be seen as an intrinsic component of life, with individuals in any society experiencing a series of passages "from one age to another and from one occupation to another" (van Gennep 1977, p. 3). Each transition point can be thought of as crossing a threshold, leaving behind the known to enter a new role, context, status, or position (Fabian, 2002). Transitions can offer both crisis and opportunity (Hörschelmann, 2011, p. 379) and the threshold phase is often a time of uncertainty as the familiar is left behind, and the person is not yet fully incorporated into the new. This has been described as a move from "being to becoming" and then to a new "being" (Ackesjö, 2013, p. 393).

The focus on enhancing learning journeys and exploring the effect of transition practices on learning was in response to claims that successful transitions are important aspects of longer-term success (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2008a, 2008b). We sought to provide insights into what successful transitions might look like from the perspectives of those involved, and how they might be achieved. We were also interested in how transition experiences might affect learning. This study addressed some of the gaps in understanding of transition practices that had been identified in a previous literature review (Peters, 2010). In particular, we investigated ways to address inequities in learning and enhance transition experiences by seeking the views of groups who were under-represented in existing research.

Our research had a specific interest in improving the transition to school for Māori children. This had been a key goal in *Ka Hikitia—Managing for Success: The Māori Education Strategy 2008–2012* (Ministry of Education, 2008a). However, we believed that more work in this area was needed. Earlier research suggested that some important issues for Māori children include the extent to which the school context welcomes their culture (Macfarlane, Glynn, Cavanagh, & Bateman, 2007), the nature of the children's relationships with teachers and others (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Macfarlane, 2004; Macfarlane et al., 2007), the nature of the teachers' expectations for their success (Bishop & Berryman, 2006), and whether a sense of belonging was fostered (Macfarlane, 2004). However, overall there appeared to be very little literature on the transition experiences of Māori children and their families, and their voices were noticeably absent.

In addition, we were interested in the links between the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), *The New Zealand Curriculum [NZC]* (Ministry of Education, 2007) and *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 2008c). The NZC's focus on key competencies and their alignment with the strands of the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) opened new possibilities for thinking about learning journeys from early childhood education (ECE) to school. Although there had been some useful research on the dispositions associated with strands of *Te Whāriki* and the key competencies at school (Carr et al., 2009; Hartley, Rogers, Smith, Peters, & Carr, 2012), further work was required to understand how this theoretical alignment in the curriculum documents might support the children's learning journeys as they moved on to school.

The research questions

The study set out to address the following broad research questions:

1. How can children's learning journeys be enhanced as they move from early childhood education into school?
2. What do "successful" transitions look like for Māori children?
3. How do children's working theories, learning dispositions and key competencies support their learning journeys from early childhood (ECE) to school?
4. Key competencies are culturally situated. How are these competencies enacted in different communities?

5. What is needed to build and strengthen a bridge between sectors so that children's learning is supported?
6. What are the longer-term implications for children of the transition practices undertaken in their early childhood and school settings?

Method

A weaving of Māori and Pākehā knowledges

Central to the project was the partnership between the university researchers and the teacher researchers, and the participation of children, families and communities. In common with Anderson and Freebody's (2014) view of successful partnership research, the university and teacher researchers had a shared passion for the issues being researched and a shared curiosity about the findings.

Given the project's focus on highlighting the views of groups who were under-represented in existing literature (particularly Māori children and their families), we were conscious that the work had to be culturally relevant and respectful (Macfarlane, Webber, Cookson-Cox, & McRae, 2014). Although ours was not a kaupapa Māori research project, we used the principles of kaupapa Māori research described by Bishop (1996, 1997) with regard to initiation, benefits, representation, legitimation and accountability (the IBRLA framework).

Working to ensure a Māori world view was represented in the analysis and theorising, within the framework of accountability to participants and funders, opened exciting but at times confronting opportunities to debate and explore research approaches. We were drawn to the "braided river" metaphor (Curtis, Reid, Kelley, Martindell, & Craig, 2013) for the research, whereby multiple streams diverge and converge. Macfarlane (2014) presented this braided river as a weaving of Māori and Pākehā knowledges, understandings and research traditions. Such collaborations are not straightforward, as others have noted (e.g., Jones & Jenkins, 2008), but we believe they are essential and are something we will continue to explore beyond the project.

After much discussion we eventually conceptualised the notion of whakapapa as a useful way of thinking about the layers of background and histories of each person, group and context (including those of the research team). "Whakapapa", as a noun, means genealogy or lineage, but as a verb it means to place in layers, or to recite in proper order. Rameka (2011) notes that whakapapa

operates at various levels but is most commonly concerned with genealogical narratives, stories that are recounted layer upon layer, ancestor upon ancestor, up to the present day. (pp. 247–248)

Whakapapa provided an important reminder of the layers of factors influencing the children's learning journeys. We explain this idea in more detail in Paki and Peters (2015).

Context

The project was based in two schools and three early childhood centres. Three of the settings were in Te Awamutu and two were in Hamilton.

Te Awamutu: Te Awamutu Primary School and two ECE services, Rewi Street kindergarten and Apakura Te Kākano (a Māori-medium setting, with between 76 percent and 97 percent of the enrolled children identifying as Māori) are located Te Awamutu, a small town with a fairly stable population. The school opened in the 1870s and the kindergarten in the 1950s. A number of parents had attended the kindergarten and school their children now went to. The Māori-medium centre had been established more recently and was less than 10 years old when the project began.

Hamilton: Te Totara Primary School and Learning Links early childhood service are in a new urban subdivision in Hamilton. The school was established in 2008 and the ECE service opened just before the project started. Much of the housing was built around them during the years of the project, and families moved to the area to occupy these new homes, leading to considerable growth in enrolments during that time.

By the final year of the project both schools had enrolments of around 500 and both had about 60 percent of their students identifying as Pākehā. Te Awamutu Primary School had around 29 percent Māori students and 12 percent from other backgrounds. Te Totara Primary School had a more diverse cohort, with 12 percent of the students identifying as Māori and the remaining 28 percent having a range of ethnicities, predominantly Indian, African and Chinese.

Teacher researchers

Throughout the project there was a core team of at least 12 teacher researchers and strong support from the two school principals. Other teachers were involved from time to time, and some settings used the research project to foster a whole-team focus on transitions.

Data gathering

The project adopted a mixed-methods methodology for data collection. Although the approach was largely qualitative and interpretive, we contextualised these qualitative findings using quantitative information from survey data. Data sources included: surveys, observations, photographs, interviews, teacher notes and diaries, and documents (including examples of children's work and assessments). How these different data sources fitted into the overall project is described below.

Phase 1

Phase 1 aimed to gain a broad perspective of the settings and some evaluation of current practices, and to formulate plans for action research that might enhance the transitions. This phase of data gathering included:

- surveys—a family/whānau survey and a community survey
- interviews with the teacher researchers, the two school principals and a number of other key staff
- observations of teaching and learning in each setting
- hui—parent meetings and community hui.

Drawing on the understanding developed in Phase 1, the teacher researchers and some of their colleagues undertook a number of action research mini-projects (some in collaboration with both sectors and some in individual sites), each with the aim of enhancing an aspect of the transition journeys. A range of data was used to document the process and evaluate the effect of these mini-projects. This included teacher diaries, field notes, observations and interviews.

Phase 2 and Phase 3

Case studies of 30 children's learning journeys were undertaken. These began when the children were in their last 6 months in ECE, and followed them into school. One set of case studies started in the first year of the project and followed the children for 2 years (Phase 2). The second set began in the second year of the project and continued for 18 months (Phase 3). The children selected as case studies in Phase 2 and Phase 3 were 4-year-old children attending the three ECE centres involved in the study whose families indicated they were going to make the transition to one of the two schools involved in the project. All of the children who met these criteria whose families gave permission for them to be case studies were included.

There were 15 children from each location (Hamilton and Te Awamutu). In total there were 16 girls and 14 boys. Their ethnicities, as reported by their parents, included European, Māori, Indian, Samoan, Sri Lankan and from the Middle East.

Data gathering for the case studies was shaped by the interpretive approach and followed Graue and Walsh's (1998) description of gathering data from many sources, looking for patterns and developing themes, and cross-checking hunches. For example, observations that indicated some children's play changed when they moved to school led to further observations in the playground to explore this. The case study data included:

- Parent/whānau interviews: As part of the case studies the parents were interviewed two or three times (where possible, before, during and after their child's move to school).
- Observations: The children were observed in ECE, over their transition to school, and during regular interviews once at school. Events such as school visits were also observed, where possible.
- Children's interviews: In Hamilton, after the children from Phase 2 had settled into school, these children visited the early childhood centre to talk to the children in Phase 3 about school and show them aspects of their school work. These conversations provided an informal and meaningful way of interviewing children about their experiences.
 - In both Hamilton and Te Awamutu, towards the end of the project, the case study children were interviewed in groups of two or three. As part of these interviews the children drew pictures about their time in preschool and school and what they thought new children might need to be successful at school. In Hamilton, the children also took photographs of "some of the places at your school that you think are really important. Places that you think a new child might need to know about".
- Document analysis: As much documentation as possible was gathered on the case study children. This included learning stories from ECE, assessments at school, and work samples.
- Teacher notes: Teacher notes on the case studies were recorded by interviews, sharing reflections in Google docs, and field note diaries.
- Team meetings: Team meetings and focus group discussions were recorded at different times throughout the three years of the project. These provided additional data on the case studies and mini-projects.



Timelines were created for each research site showing the case study children's journeys and the introduction of changes and events within the settings (for example, as a result of the mini-projects).

Phase 4

The project concluded with a final interview of the teacher researchers and a survey of the two school communities, evaluating the transition practices and exploring current views about transitions.

Analysis within the four phases

The research team aimed to capture the whakapapa of each site's story—who they were, their philosophy, their vision, what was currently happening, and both the teachers' and the community's evaluation of existing practices. Analysis of observation, survey and interview data involved looking for patterns and themes within and across groups.

The mini-projects were documented and evaluated by the teacher researchers based on observations and interviews with children and families. The teachers moved back and forth between data collection and action as practices were refined as a result of the evaluations (Creswell, 2008).

The next layer involved analysis of the case studies. The data collected were used to build a rich narrative of the child, their whānau, and their ECE and school experiences. Theoretical explanations broadened the scope of the rich descriptions in an attempt to explain why things happen as they do.

Analysis of Phase 4 data provided a summary of the whole project and a chance to evaluate the “story” that had played out in each setting.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Education, University of Waikato. After the initial approval we returned to the Ethics Committee for each new phase of data collection. Consent was also renegotiated with case study families during different phases of the work.

Findings

The following sections provide a brief overview of some of the key findings. These are all inter-related, providing insights into different aspects of the transition experience and ways in which learning journeys could be enhanced.

Enhancing children’s learning journeys as they move from early childhood into school

The project began by using interview and survey data to provide a picture of current understanding and experiences in the two communities. There were 63 surveys returned from parents and whānau and 34 community surveys.

Family and community views

One of the many survey questions explored how families and community members viewed the term “successful transition”, which appears in many Ministry of Education documents. As Table 1 shows, the most frequent responses from parents indicated that they felt a transition had been successful when their child was happy and eager to go to school.

Table 1: Parent/caregiver views about what a “successful” transition to school would look like for their child

Criteria for a successful transition	Number of responses
Child is happy	22
Child is eager/wants to go to school	12
Child enjoys school/is enthusiastic/excited	9
Child is talkative and shares information	5

The findings of the community survey were similar, indicating that the respondents saw a transition as successful when the child (and in some cases the family) was happy. One of the principals (in a later interview) agreed that happiness was important:

Happy children, happy parents, happy teachers, happy school. One of the queries I get asked by parents is “How do you know my child will learn?” and I say, “The main thing is they get happy and settled and the learning will flow”. (School principal)

Asked about what would make transitions successful for them and their child, parents' most frequent response was "visits". Parents noted that the child being familiar with the environment, people, expectations and culture of the classroom and school all featured as prerequisites for success. Parents also indicated areas for improving the visits, such as: more flexibility in the number of visits, a more in-depth process, and clearer communication/information.

Relationships between the transitioning child and other children at school were another prominent feature of success identified by parents. Parents also highlighted the value of initiatives that supported the development of new relationships in school, such as buddy or peer support systems. The role of the teacher, and more specifically the characteristics of the teacher, also featured strongly in parents' responses.

Famil(iarity)

Based on her analysis of the children's interviews, one of the teacher researchers introduced the idea of "famil(iarity)" as the key to transitions: the role of *family* and of being *familiar* with the environment and expectations. In Te Awamutu, siblings and cousins at school seemed to be particularly important to the Māori children. In Hamilton, all but one child mentioned the importance of becoming familiar with the new environment and new role. Playing and playgrounds were another dominant theme.

Children frequently mentioned friends as important to them and not having anyone to play with was a major concern. Addressing these concerns was one of the areas a number of teachers decided to focus on in their mini action research projects.

Learning was also noted by almost all of the children. For example:

Because when I be a grown up I might like to work somewhere where you have to be really good at reading and, yeah, you might need to sign stuff so you need to be good at writing. (Girl, 4 years)

When the case study children visited their former ECE setting to talk about school, the younger children's comments showed how much knowledge they had gained from the conversations as the following examples show:

Our friends showed us their books, but you know they don't have a big smart board at their school ... I will have a big book when I go to school, you know. I will have three books. School will be nice. (Girl, 4 years)

[One of the boys who visited] said that they have lots of games that they play in the playground but they work in the classroom. It is nice to go to school and it will be a little bit more different than Learning Links. (Boy, 4 years)

Both *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9) and *NZC* (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 12) recognise the value to learning of interactions with people, places and things. Paying attention to how children gain familiarity and develop relationships in a new context provides a framework for thinking about supporting the children's learning journeys. The more support that can be provided for understanding the new context and relating to others, the more the child will be helped to re-engage after a transition so that the learning can continue.

"Successful" transitions for Māori children

In exploring the experience of Māori children, we looked at learning journeys to English-medium schools from three different ECE settings: one Māori medium and two English medium. These raised different issues for the transition experience, particularly regarding language and tikanga and highlighted the significance of Māori values and culturally constructed lived experiences in those transitions journeys. Observing case study children moving from a context rich with Māori culture to a mainstream school indicated some of the shifts that they were navigating, especially when some of their cultural values and expertise were not recognised. A significant example came from the observations early in the project when teachers reflected that a child who displayed some leadership skills in the ECE setting and usually led the kai karanga (to call the children to eat), might feel very lost when there was no kai karanga at school.

There was willingness but uncertainty for some of the mainstream teachers about facilitating the transition for Māori children. Initial practices across both school sites seemed to focus on getting to know the family (including the extended family), using some Māori language, and respecting protocols, such as not sitting on tables. During the project, at the Hamilton school, the entrance and office area were adorned with student artwork representing Māori themes, which provided a vibrant welcome to the school. A study was instigated with children across the school to examine “our journey to our place”. These and other activities were small steps, but the two case study children at this school who identified as Māori had positive transition experiences, as one mother commented:

He comes home very excited about his achievements ... He's progressing really well ... He seems to enjoy school ... He's socially secure and everything out of that will follow. That belonging and stability and acceptance.

In Te Awamutu, Māori children remembered the name of their early childhood centre and talked about their early childhood teachers. When they were asked about their first day at school, “several children talked about family members who were already at school” (new entrant teacher). The children also spoke about family groupings, where the school placed children with other whānau members. In contrast, in Hamilton the Māori children talked about their interests and how to help children who were new to the school. There was unlikely to be extended family at the school, but one Māori mother commented on the close relationships formed at her son's ECE centre with all involved (families, teachers from both settings, and the principal), which helped the transition. She noted that the relationships and communication were “great”. “It's like a community and everyone knows pretty much what's going to happen tomorrow.” This indicated that a sense of community and whānau can be formed to support parents and children when they do not have other family in the area to call on. The findings also suggest that, when thinking about the transition to school, there is ongoing relevance to *Te Whāriki's* claim that:

[C]hildren's learning and development are fostered if the well-being of their family and community is supported; if their family, culture, knowledge and community are respected; and if there is a strong connection and consistency among all the aspects of the child's world. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 42)

A cultural pedagogy of relations founded on respect and responsibility requires a deep engagement with the values and practices of the child's cultural context. The inclusion of Māori language and culture resonated with a lot of families. They noted use of te reo Māori in simple greetings and phrases, through to culturally preferred teaching and learning, was a desired outcome. For some families referring to the child by the child's name (correctly pronounced) showed a lot of respect, especially when their child first started school. A number of families mentioned that this acknowledgement gave their child a sense of empowerment and respect, which helped the child to settle and helped parents to feel welcome.

The place of learning dispositions and key competencies in transition

Analysis of the initial teacher interviews indicated surprising similarities in ECE and school teachers' views about some fundamental aspects of teaching and learning: The quality of learning has to be personalised, contextualised and meaningful, and participation, engagement and collaboration with children, whānau, teachers and their communities have to be realised.

The project team was keen to explore the ways in which key competencies and learning dispositions might support children's learning journeys, and to gain a greater understanding of how key competencies are enacted in the different communities. With this in mind, we were interested to find out what the families felt were the important things that children should be learning in ECE and school. Academic skills and social skills were mentioned most often for both school and ECE. These had equal weighting in the ECE responses, but at school, academic skills were mentioned almost twice as often as social skills. Fostering values, respectful behaviour and manners were seen by parents as largely the domain of ECE.

The teachers in both sectors were not necessarily aware of the alignment between the strands and their associated dispositions in *Te Whāriki* and the key competencies in *NZC*. As one recent primary graduate noted:

In the postgrad course, you just don't learn anything about *Te Whāriki* ... You don't really hear about it. I think it gives a different perspective of what avenues you can do the learning through. (Primary-trained teacher researcher)

An ECE teacher noted that taking the time to understand the two curricula and their links could deepen understanding of one's own curriculum:

We realised that aspects of shared understanding, language, meaning, pedagogies and philosophies (for all) are important in supporting a child through transitions. We had opportunities to explore these throughout the first year of the project ... Linking the two curriculums took us on a journey, which surprisingly led us back to looking at *Te Whāriki* with fresh eyes. We realised that supporting successful transitions did not necessarily require us 'moving up' to a new curriculum, but fully embracing our own. There were benefits when using both as a lens to position the child and filter their learning—however, it is the curriculum "in action" and "in context" that ultimately makes meaning.

In some cases the ECE teachers had known a child for three to four years and had a lot of knowledge and understanding to offer the new setting, so that dispositions and working theories could be built on at school. Thomson (2002) commented that we can imagine children's interests, linguistic and cultural resources as contained in a "virtual school bag", brought to the educational setting: "Virtual school bags are variously opened, mediated and ignored" (p. 9), with teachers tending to draw on the contents of those bags "whose resources match those required in the game of education" (Thomson & Hall, 2008, p. 89). Some of the strategies trialled in the mini-projects aimed to make the children's interests, dispositions and competencies more visible to teachers so that they could and connect with and build on a wider range of children's interests and knowledge.

Building and strengthening a bridge between sectors so that children's learning is supported

Cross-sector collaboration

There was excitement in tackling the challenge of working together as a cross-sector research team, but it was not without its tensions, especially in the first year. The sites had their own histories, philosophies and curricula. Recognising and acknowledging how identity and orientation towards others and to learning is shaped within a setting (Ritchie & Rau, 2010) was important in creating a respectful place to explore ideas about transition. Rogoff's (2003) reminder that "mutual understanding occurs *between* people in interaction; it cannot be attributed to one person or another" (p. 285) was also important to keep in mind.

Understanding of the other person's perspective on what was happening was the key to collaboration. This is an important issue to consider for all cross-sector relationships, because it is surprisingly easy to talk past each other, just as Metge and Kinloch (1984) discussed more than 30 years ago in relation to cross-cultural communication:

A culture can be simply and usefully defined as "a system of shared understandings"—understandings of what words and actions mean, or what things are really important, and how these values should be expressed ... most become so thoroughly internalised that we cease to be aware of them ... coming to think of them (if at all) as ... not only the right but the only conceivable way of doing and looking at things. (Metge & Kinloch, 1984, p. 8)

"Day in the life of" observations, where teachers carried out one or two running record observations in the other sector and then discussed their observations with the teacher whose class or ECE setting was observed, helped to foster greater understanding of each other and set the scene for the collaborations that followed.

Action research mini-projects

The teachers from both sectors planned a range of action research projects (the mini projects) aimed to enhance transition and the learning journeys. Some of the mini-projects were:

- Cultural audit of resources
- Bodies
- Leaving pages
- Lunch box Fridays
- Playground activities, books and DVD
- Enhancing play spaces
- Review of enrolment process
- Signing in
- Early childhood and school visits
- Curriculum approaches
- Literacy pack
- Starting school videos
- Principal as postman
- Bilingual literacy kit
- Wednesday wonderland
- Graduation
- Parent groups

We have provided brief details of four of these mini-projects below.

Mini-project 1: Cultural audit

One of the mini-projects was a cultural audit involving the Māori-medium ECE centre and its local school. Teachers in both settings began with a stocktake of their existing Māori resources and then explored how the resources could be duplicated or shared between each site. This began after a teacher from the primary school noticed how a transitioning Māori boy appeared able to settle in better when he had access to a book he was familiar with from his ECE setting. Creating opportunities for familiarity and shared meaning was seen as a chance to foster a sense of belonging in the new place and a means to support the child's learning journey.

Mini-project 2: Bodies

FIGURE 1: Life-size “bodies” documents information about children



Both schools trialled children creating life-sized body outlines in their preschool or transition programme. Children's friends drew around the child's body to create a life-size image on paper. The child's "body" was then annotated with aspects of their story (written collectively by the child, their friends, family, and teachers from both early childhood and school), identifying their family, their friends, what they like to do, and anything important to them. These were brought to school before the child started and displayed in the hallway or classroom. In this way a sense of belonging was fostered, with the child becoming part of the class before he or she started, and the teacher could get to know something about the child.

Children's portfolios from early childhood were also used as conversational tools with teachers and children, but the bodies drew immediate interest from other children, to initiate a point of entry for forming new relationships. Related to this, one ECE centre created "leaving pages" when a child was heading to school. This was a one-page summary of the child and her or his interests, along with photos. New entrant teachers said that the page was helpful as a quick introduction to the child.

Mini-project 3: Lunchbox Friday

One of the early childhood centres introduced lunchbox Fridays. The idea was to help children have a sense of agency regarding the change of routine and responsibility when they moved to school. Instead of having lunches provided, on Fridays, the children were asked to bring their own lunchbox and snacks. The children then participated in cooking and preparation activities at the ECE centre to make their own lunches, and packed their boxes with the food made in ECE and with the snacks from home. They discussed healthy food choices and what to eat for morning tea and lunch. It became "something exciting that they get to look forward to" (ECE teacher). The new entrant teachers noticed that, once at school, the children were able to think ahead about what they would eat at morning tea and lunchtime, ensuring they had enough food at each meal. They were also comfortable eating from lunchboxes, reducing uncertainty and facilitating familiarity and confidence.

Mini-project 4: Playground activities, books and DVD

As was found in earlier studies (e.g., Peters, 2004, 2012), some children found the large school playgrounds daunting, and not having friends could be problematic. Observations of the case study children showed that, for some, the nature of their play changed when they got to school. ECE teachers were concerned when they saw previously confident children spending the breaks wandering around without being included with peers, or relying heavily on siblings if they had them.

The new entrant teachers in Hamilton responded immediately, making a shared book about playgrounds and how to make a friend. A DVD, narrated by children and including information about the playgrounds, was posted on the school website for families to access, and later a PowerPoint presentation was created, with the children's comments and photographs. These resources were shared and discussed with the children. They drew children's attention to the fun places peers enjoyed playing in, and also to quiet areas and areas to meet. Suggestions were given on how to interact with others (e.g., asking open questions such as "What are you playing?" rather than closed questions such as "Can I play?", which might lead to a "no" response). At the same time, the play spaces were modified, with a "safe place" created near each new entrant classroom with a tray of toys to play with. More detail on these playground initiatives can be found in Peters (2015).

Reflections on the mini-projects

A key factor with the mini-projects was the process of identifying areas that could be enhanced, and then designing and evaluating the strategies that were implemented. These examples are therefore intended to stimulate discussion and reflection regarding what might be relevant in other contexts.

The longer-term implications for children of the transition practices in their early childhood and school settings

Understanding the children's learning journeys over 18 months to 2 years was important given that our view of transition considered "long-term trajectories rather than focusing solely on initial adjustments" (Petriwskyj, Thorpe, & Tayler, 2005, p. 66). The findings show the complexity of factors shaping each learning journey. We saw the children's transition segments we were focusing on in the project as one part of their overall learning journey and influenced by their wider whakapapa. Whakapapa "is fundamental to how one comes to understand the world and their place within that world" (Rangihau, 1977, cited in Berryman, 2008, p. 43).

The case studies show that some children thrived at school right from the start. For others, even the most confident sometimes struggled on entry to school. With ECE and school teachers involved in data gathering, any changes in behaviour for the case study children on entry to school were highlighted, rather than the teachers in the school assuming this was usual behaviour for the child. Teachers were keen to identify and address the reasons for children being unsettled or unresponsive.

In addition to the broad strategies implemented by the mini-projects, more subtle and nuanced strategies were used to help individual children, both in ECE and at school. A brief "flavour" of two of the children's journeys is provided below.

Roger's journey

Roger is the younger of two siblings, described by his parents at age 4 as an active, outgoing boy who liked to do things without anyone's help. As he approached school entry, ECE teachers described him as quite shy, but there were also examples of confidence and leadership. He showed an interest in technology, including the interactive whiteboard and iPads, and in being outside challenging his physical skills. His ECE centre and school were involved in a number of collaborative activities, and Roger enjoyed participating in these before starting school, especially when they involved his older brother.

Although Roger appeared confident and proud to be starting school, once he made the move there were some tears during the first week. His teacher encouraged him to self-manage when he was unhappy by talking to her or other children about what he didn't like about the situation. In an interview, he complained of not having anyone to play with from his class. He recalled "feeling angry . . . because no-one's going to play with me and I wanted to go on my iPad . . . Because I was trying to find someone to play with me, and everyone can, I can't even find anyone". Although his teacher arranged a buddy to play with him, he said, "I didn't like them, they didn't want to play with me".

Roger's older brother acted as a support during the morning tea and lunch breaks and his teacher encouraged this, feeling confident Roger would make other friends once he was more settled. This proved to be the case. Roger soon managed the morning routines independently. After two terms at school his teacher noted that although he had initially resisted some learning activities, saying they were too hard or he wasn't interested, when he was able to connect to his own interests (such as soccer) he was very animated and focused: "When he was allowed to write about soccer there was no slowing him down at all and the ideas flowed" (new entrant teacher).

Rachel

Rachel is the younger of two siblings. The family were recent migrants to New Zealand and their home language was not English. Rachel began ECE with very little spoken English. She was able to express herself initially through the use of drawings and photography. She took photographs of her artwork, connected with others (“Can I take your photo?”), explored storytelling through photographs (e.g., tigers in the dolls’ house), and became increasingly playful (joking with teachers, asking “What’s this?” showing a completely blue picture—a photograph of the sky). Her drawing and painting explored themes from her home country (such as elephants).

When Rachel and her family met with her new entrant teacher for the first time, she was shy and reluctant to engage at first. However, aware of what Rachel was involved in at ECE, her new entrant teacher had made sure she had a camera ready and also talked about a shared interest—elephants. Then she showed Rachel her school starter pack and Rachel took photos of this and other things in the classroom, and the teacher took a photo of Rachel. After this interaction Rachel began talking to her new teacher.

Her family were happy with how Rachel settled into school but found communicating with school or answering some of Rachel’s questions a little difficult because of the language issues. Her father helped by using the internet to find home-language translations of English words. Rachel started school when there were only four children in her class, one of whom had attended the same ECE setting. Her English language developed rapidly and she made friends quickly. Her older brother was also a support at playtimes. Her teacher noted, “She was happy to participate in all class activities and played well in the playground”.

These stories provide a taste of the many and varied learning journeys that took place. They highlight the importance of, among other things:

- gaining familiarity with school
- learning dispositions and key competencies
- finding something of interest
- connecting to and developing working theories
- friends and sibling support
- language and communication.

Towards the end of the project, changes in teacher practices and the effects on transition experiences were being noted by families:

The transition practices were a lot more sorted ... So they’ve definitely come a long, long way. So you go in there and the kids that are starting in the first few weeks of the first term, they go to school and they know what they’re doing. (Parent of a new entrant child)

Pretty much all the kids we have sent to school lately have had parents who have come back and said they are picking things up faster. They have come back and said thank you. (Early childhood teacher researcher)

Implications for practice

The first rounds of data gathering suggested that surprisingly little had changed since one of the author's earlier research projects (Peters, 2004). Children were still navigating difference in the kinds of learning that were expected and valued in ECE and at school, and at the same time struggling with aspects of school that affected their learning, such as difficulties with the playground and in making friends. This indicated the need for change in transition practices if learning journeys are to be enhanced.

The findings reiterated the conclusions in Peters (2010) that “almost any child is at risk of making a poor or less successful transition if their individual characteristics are incompatible with features of the environment they encounter” (p. 2). The contrasting stories (not all negative, not all positive) are important for parents and teachers to keep in mind, and to understand the reasons for the child's reaction and be willing to take action to make changes. Knowing a child's history, and seeing the transition as a small part of a rich whakapapa, helped with understanding the issues for each learner. We saw a change over the years of the project towards teachers taking more ownership when there were problems or potential problems for children, and a greater sense of agency to change patterns (e.g., rather than predicting a child might have difficulties due to lack of friends, taking steps while the child was still in ECE to support some friendships that could be continued at school).

We reflected that when children and families navigate this journey to a different educational context, teachers are co-navigators on the journey. An important implication is for teachers in each sector to have an understanding of the other setting in order to be effective “co-navigators”. Otherwise, we may be following different “maps” and may very well be heading in different directions. This understanding could be enhanced by changes to initial teacher education programmes and professional development to facilitate deeper understanding of the sectors a child's learning journey travels through. Supportive management and policies that shape the teachers' work with children are also important.

What came through strongly is that power and responsibility neither did, nor should, rest solely with ECE or with schools. Children's learning is supported when both sides work together. A bridge built without communication and understanding has the potential to be a bridge to nowhere, with one side reaching only halfway across, or the shape and form being too different for the two sides to connect. However, shared communication allows the bridge to form from both sides and meet in the middle. This is not always easy. Teachers are not only trying to connect across sectors, but are also navigating sometimes conflicting views of different families, as well as other staff and wider policy contexts.

The learning journey that is navigated between the ECE and school settings and curriculum documents is based on a tūāpapa (foundation) of language, culture and identity. In our project this was located within both te ao Māori (the Māori world) and te auraki (the mainstream). Elsewhere, we (Peters & Paki, 2013) have used data from the study to discuss the ways in which the four principles of the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, can provide a framework for thinking about the transition to school. These four principles are whakamana (empowerment), kotahitanga (holistic development), whānau tangata (family and community), and ngā hononga (relationships).

A key finding of the project is that a successful transition for a Māori child is both a collective and an individual responsibility. The Ministry of Education (2012) concluded:

One of the main challenges of the first *Ka Hikitia* was that the strategy did not translate into real gains for **many** Māori learners and their whānau. Many members of the education community agreed with the intent behind the strategy, but didn't know **what to do with it** or **how to put it into action**. They were unsure **where to go for help** [bold in the original]. (p. 16)

As one step to help to address this, the appendix shows eight indicators that Māori researchers and other members our team have developed from the findings, lived experiences and practices explored from the five participating sites in the project. The adaption and development of these indicators has the potential to build on notions of success seen as important by the child and their whānau.

The limitations of the project

This project explored ways to understand and enhance children’s learning journeys from early childhood into school. The size and scale of the project created demands in terms of maintaining complex relationships within and across a diverse team of researchers. Time for relationship building and maintenance was factored in—but perhaps underestimated. Keeping the data record proved challenging, with so many people involved in data gathering. Despite the rich data gathered, the project can only look at the descriptions and patterns of experience rather than direct aspects of cause and effect. However, these “small stories” offer valuable insights into what enhances children’s learning journeys.

Conclusion

The project’s findings supported the view that the transition to school involves a move from “being” in early childhood through the threshold phase of “becoming” a school pupil and finally incorporation into a new “being” at school (Ackesjö, 2013, p. 393). The process does not have to be the same in each sector, with the transition offering opportunities for new learning; nonetheless, if the changes and challenges were too great, we saw negative effects on the children’s learning journeys. Unless the school teachers know something of the children and their backgrounds they may not realise this is happening. Transitions should be characterised by opportunities, expectations, aspirations, and entitlements (Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group, 2011). Building strong supportive relationships between the teachers in each sector, families and children appears to be a key factor in sharing information and developing approaches that support successful transitions.

The project always intended a cycle of evaluation of existing practices, and depending on the results of this, a possible cycle of action research. The success of the mini-projects was, however, unexpected. These followed Creswell’s (2008) description of action research, in that they were practical, focused on the educators’ own practices, collaborative and dynamic. It was the process of designing and carrying out the projects, spiraling back and forth between data collection and action, that seemed to be particularly powerful.

The focus of the mini-projects gave life to the curriculum alignment between the strands of *Te Whāriki* and the key competencies at school (see Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 42). For example, a number of mini-projects considered the alignment between *mana whenua/belonging* in *Te Whāriki* and the key competency *participating and contributing* in the NZC. This included strategies that increased familiarity with the new setting, thus reducing uncertainty in the transition threshold phase. Others looked at *mana tangata/contribution* and *relating to others*. Goals of *mana tangata* include equitable opportunities for learning, children are affirmed as individuals, and children are encouraged to learn with and alongside others. When these are in place in ECE and at school, children are supported to relate well and interact effectively with others (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 12).

The current study provided more detail about what themes in a review of previous research on supporting successful transitions (see Peters, 2010) look like in practice and offered examples for teachers of some of the strategies that were useful in these contexts. Within these, the acceptance, understanding and adherence to cultural practices “offers students a sense of identity, place and hope” (Giroux, 2005, p. 146) and facilitates partnerships with children, families, teachers and their communities to flourish.

The findings have illustrated what happened in these settings, but they are not intended as recipes for others to follow. The aspects that are generalisable include the importance of attending to the issues in each setting, developing deep understandings of the others involved, and offering nuanced approaches to supporting children and their families. As one of our teacher researchers concluded:

It’s just finding what fits. It’s not like a formula “do this and your kids are going to transition fine”. It’s all those little things, like watching the videos ... for some kids it will just spark something. For other kids it won’t. You have just got to find what fits. (Teacher researcher)

Project team

University of Waikato

Associate Professor Sally Peters
Vanessa Paki
Maretta Taylor

Te Awamutu Primary School

Gareth Duncan
Maree Parkes

Rewi Street Kindergarten

Helen Rees
Carol Bird
Robyn O'Connor
Stephanie Spence

Apakura Te Kakano

Hinemoa Pohatu (from 2012)
Kim Redshaw (from 2012)

CORE Education

Keryn Davis

Te Totara Primary School

Brian Sheedy
Jennie Brook-Watt
Bridie Carr-Neil
Anna Pratt

Learning Links

Karin Shaw (2011)
Lynley Westerbeke (2011)
Phylcia Tan (from 2102)
Julia Tilley (from 2012)
Jo Painter

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the New Zealand Teaching and Learning Research Initiative [TLRI] for its funding of and support for this project. We also appreciate the work of the passionate and committed teacher researchers, colleagues in each setting beyond the core team who contributed to the research, and to the teachers at Barnardos Early Learning Centre in Hamilton who shared some of the Te Totara journey. We also want to thank the children and families for their generous participation in the research.

We were fortunate to have a strong advisory group to ensure that we were working in ethically and culturally appropriate ways, as well as providing robust findings. We are grateful for their contributions as critical friends who challenged and extended our thinking throughout the project.

References

- Ackesjö, H. (2013). Children crossing borders: School visits as initial incorporation rites in transition to preschool class. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 4(3), 387–41
- Anderson, M., & Freebody, K. (2014). *Partnerships in education research: Creating knowledge that matters*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.
- Berryman, M. (2008). *Repositioning within indigenous discourses of transformation and self determination*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Waikato.
- Bishop, R. (1996). *Collaborative research stories: Whakawhanaungatanga*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press.
- Bishop, R. (1997). Māori people's concerns about research into their lives. *History of Education Review*, 26(1), 25–41.
- Bishop, R., & Berryman, M. (2006). *Culture speaks: Cultural relationships and classroom learning*. Wellington: Huia.
- Carr, M., Smith, A. B., Duncan, J., Jones, C., Lee, W., & Marshall, K. (2009). *Learning in the making: Disposition and design in the early years*. Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense.

- Creswell, J. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Curtis, G., Reid, D., Kelley, M., Martindell, P. T., & Craig, C. J. (2013). Braided lives: Multiple ways of knowing, flowing in and out of knowledge communities. *Studying Teacher Education: A Journal of Self-study of Teacher Education Practices*, 9(2), 175–186.
- Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group. (2011). *Transition to school: Position statement*. Albany-Wodonga: Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education, Charles Sturt University.
- Fabian, H. (2002). *Children starting school*. London, UK: David Fulton.
- Giroux, H. (2005). Cultural studies. Resisting difference, and the return of critical pedagogy. In H. A. Giroux (Ed.), *Border crossing: Cultural workers and the politics of education* (2nd ed., pp. 137–155). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Graue, E., & Walsh, D. (1998). *Studying children in context: Theories, methods and ethics*. London, UK: Sage.
- Hartley, C., Rogers, P., Smith, J., Peters, S., & Carr, M. (2012). *Crossing the border: A community negotiates the transition from early childhood to primary school*. Wellington: NZCER Press.
- Hörschelmann, K. (2011). Theorising life transitions: Geographical perspectives. *Area*, 43(4), 378–383.
- Jones, A., & Jenkins, K. (2008). Rethinking collaboration: Working the indigene-coloniser hyphen. In N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln, & L. T. Smith (Eds.), *Handbook of critical and indigenous methodologies* (pp. 471–486). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Macfarlane, A. (2004). *Kia hiwa ra! Listen to culture: Māori students' plea to educators*. Wellington: NZCER Press.
- Macfarlane, A. H. (2014, April). *Ngā tapuwae o mua, mō muri: Challenges and promises of tribally-based research*. Paper presented at Te Kōhao o te Rangahau Indigenous Research Conference, University of Waikato, Hamilton.
- Macfarlane, A., Glynn, T., Cavanagh, T., & Bateman, S. (2007). Creating culturally-safe schools for Māori students. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 36, 65–76.
- Macfarlane, A. H., Webber, M., Cookson-Cox, C., & McRae, H. (2014). *Ka awatea: An iwi case study of Māori students' success*. Christchurch: Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, University of Canterbury.
- Metge, J., & Kinloch, P. (1984). *Talking past each other: Problems of cross cultural communication*. Wellington: Victoria University Press.
- Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te Whāriki: Early childhood curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (2007). *The New Zealand curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (2008a). *Ka hikitia—Managing for success: The Māori education strategy 2008–2012*. Wellington: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/theMinistry/PolicyAndStrategy/KaHikitia/History/KaHikitia2008To2012.aspx>
- Ministry of Education. (2008b). *Pasifika education plan 2008–2012*. Wellington: Author.
- Ministry of Education (2008c). *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (2012). *Me korero—let's talk: Ka hikitia—accelerating success 2013–2017*. Wellington: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/theMinistry/PolicyAndStrategy/KaHikitia/MeKoreroLetsTalk.aspx>
- Paki, V. & Peters, S. (2015). Exploring whakapapa (genealogy) as a cultural concept to mapping transition journeys, understanding what is happening and discovering new insights. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 20(2), 49–60.
- Peters, S. (2004). *“Crossing the border”: An interpretive study of children making the transition to school*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Waikato.
- Peters, S. (2010). *Literature review: Transition from early childhood education to school*. Report commissioned by the Ministry of Education. Wellington: Education Counts. Retrieved from <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/ece/78823>
- Peters, S. (2012). “I didn't expect that I would get tons of friends... more each day”: Children's experiences of friendship during the transition to school. In L. Miller, R. Drury, & C. Cable (Eds.) *Extending professional practice* (pp.147–156). Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Peters, S. (2015). International dimensions of play and transitions. In J. Moyles (Ed.) *The excellence of play* (4th ed., pp.286–296). Maidenhead, England: McGraw-Hill.
- Peters, S., & Paki, V. (2013). *Te Whāriki: Weaving multiple perspectives on transitions*. In J. Nuthall (Ed.), *Weaving Te Whāriki: Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum framework in theory and practice* (2nd ed., pp. 197–216). Wellington: NZCER Press.
- Petriwskyj, A., Thorpe, K., & Tayler, C. (2005). Trends in construction of transition to school in three western regions, 1990–2004. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 13(1), 55–69.
- Rameka, L. K. (2011). Being Māori: Culturally relevant assessment in early childhood education. *Early Years: An International Research Journal*, 31(3), 245–256.
- Ritchie, J. & Rau, C. (2010). Poipoia te tamaiti kia tū tangata: Identity, belonging and transition. *First Years Ngā Tau Tuatahi*, 12(1), 16–22.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Thomson, P. (2002). *Schooling the rustbelt kids: Making the difference in changing times*. Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Thomson, P., & Hall, C. (2008). Opportunities missed and/or thwarted? Funds of knowledge meet the English national curriculum. *Curriculum Journal*, 19(2), 87–103.
- Van Gennep, A. (1977). *The rites of passage*. London: Routledge.

Appendix: Cultural indicators

PRACTICAL APPLICATION	DESIRABLE OBJECTIVES	REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS
<p>School governance</p>	<p>Māori are fully represented and involved in school governance.</p>	<p><i>Does your school encourage Māori to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> participate in school governance monitor and report on school performance with respect to its effectiveness for children transitioning from Māori-medium early childhood settings? <p><i>Does your school:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> appropriately ask Māori parents how the school could support them in transition provide for Māori to appoint its members to the board of trustees incorporate a review system to identify and evaluate the school's processes?
<p>Strategies for transition</p>	<p>Strategies are established for the promotion and development of Māori participation and development of a range of culturally appropriate transition practices.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does your school have a strategy for developing and supporting children who transition from Māori-medium settings? How does your school assess if your transition strategies are culturally appropriate and effective? What process does your school use to review its strategies?
<p>Planning & policy for transition</p>	<p><i>Planning</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are clearly set, culturally appropriate directions for transition of children progressing from Māori-medium settings. <p><i>Policy</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy clearly includes statements on Māori cultural values to be integrated in all transition phrases. 	<p><i>Planning: Does your school's planning process:</i></p> <p>take account of the Treaty of Waitangi</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> consider how the school can give effect to both <i>Te Whāriki</i> and <i>The New Zealand Curriculum</i> with respect to children transitioning from Māori-medium settings to mainstream schooling include objectives that support children transitioning from these settings involve kaumātua, kuia, parents, whānau and/or local leaders in planning for transition? <p><i>Does your school policy development process:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> engage and draw on research to identify and address transition issues for children transitioning from Māori-medium settings to mainstream schooling, and does the research your school uses represent an adequate depiction of Māori concerns and/or interests involve kaumātua, kuia, parents, whānau and/or local leaders in policy development around transition?

<p><i>Te reo Māori me ōna tikanga</i></p>	<p>Children transitioning from Māori-medium settings have opportunities to learn in and about their language and culture.</p> <p>Children transitioning from Māori-medium settings are culturally knowledgeable and able to build on their skills to achieve spiritually, physically, emotionally and intellectually.</p>	<p><i>Does your school:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support the transmission of language for children transitioning from Māori-medium settings • support staff to become familiar with te reo Māori and tikanga Māori in promoting their own teaching practices • involve local Māori for professional support for staff • provide a range of culturally appropriate resources in te reo Māori • promote local Māori knowledge with tangata whenua • have guidelines for the promotion of te reo Māori and tikanga Māori • promote pōwhiri for children transitioning?
<p><i>Human resources</i></p>	<p>Staff develop relevant skills and experience in providing education that is culturally appropriate to Māori.</p>	<p><i>Does your school:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support teachers to develop relevant skills and competencies, in terms of understanding cultural practices and values • provide opportunities for all staff to learn te reo Māori • review to improve • link te reo Māori and tikanga Māori to the school's charter • provide opportunities for all staff to participate in professional activities to expand their knowledge and cultural awareness?
<p><i>School environment</i></p>	<p>The school has facilities that are culturally similar with the local Māori community and/or environment.</p>	<p><i>Does your school:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • present a sense of belonging consistent with the values and needs of Māori • provide opportunities for local Māori to support and work alongside the school for the ongoing development of the school's environment • provide a physical environment that reflects or symbolises some aspect of the Māori culture?
<p><i>Linking home, community & school</i></p>	<p>Work alongside parents and wider community to promoting effective transition strategies for children transitioning from Māori-medium settings.</p>	<p><i>Does your school:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide opportunities for whānau and local hapū to be involved in the school's operations • provide opportunities to involve local Māori to engage in open dialogues for the ongoing development of effective transition strategies • review to improve • encourage and promote whānau involvement through the support and knowledge of local Māori leaders, whānau or local tangata whenua?

<p>Curriculum, programme development and delivery</p>	<p>Seek to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> empower the child to grow and learn, reflecting the holistic ways of learning and development promote and reflect the wider world of family and community as an integral part of the school incorporate and understand that children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places, and things. <p>Curriculum and programme development are delivered to promote and adapt teaching styles to reflect the child's predispositions to learning and development.</p>	<p><i>Does your school:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> recognise the social and cultural context as one of the "foundation stones" of your curriculum and programme development reflect the understanding of the cultural heritages of both partners to the Treaty of Waitangi include a range of cultural perspectives within the curriculum and programme development use a range of culturally appropriate assessment models and performance standards to represent an adequate depiction of the school's predisposition towards learning and development, with the aim of appropriately and successfully improving educational outcomes for children transitioning from Māori-medium setting to mainstream schooling involve kaumātua, whānau and/or local Māori for support and ongoing development in the school's curricula validate and recognise Māori knowledge and culture?
--	--	--

Notes

1. The "desirable objectives" could also be seen as statements of intent to support schools and teachers to have a set goal that is achievable.
2. The place of reflective questions offers further support for ongoing reflection and shared meaning by building on the collective voices of Māori. We acknowledge that schools will be on a continuum and may already be working towards culturally responsive ways in supporting Māori learners, and so these indicators aim to support schools and their teachers.