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# Waikato Journal of Education

## Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

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## Special Section: Te Kōhao o Te Rangahau—The indigenous lens on research



## General Section

Waikato Journal of Education
Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

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# Exploring whakapapa (genealogy) as a cultural concept to mapping transition journeys, understanding what is happening and discovering new insights

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## Abstract

This paper reports on a three-year (2010–2013) Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) project in Aotearoa New Zealand, titled *Learning Journeys from Early Childhood to School* (www.tlri.org.nz). The aim of the project was to investigate children's learning journeys from early childhood to school and involved three early childhood settings and two schools with at least 12 teacher researchers. In this paper we discuss the methodology from the project by conceptualising whakapapa (genealogy) as a cultural tool to mapping the research. We establish that whakapapa serves as a research discourse that is underpinned by the five research sites, particularly their context, knowledge and ways of being for the meaning-making, cultural and symbolic relationship to methodology, philosophy and people. Whilst we draw on whakapapa as a research methodology, we also emphasise that the utilisation of this as a conceptual framework plays a critical role to understanding and responding to children's learning journeys from early childhood to school.

The inclusion of whakapapa charts (see appendix) shows the journey of what took place within and between each setting. The layering of the project details specific points of entry and continuation with and between the sites, theorising the conceptualisations explored.

## Keywords

Whakapapa, kaupapa Māori, methodology, relationships, transition

## Kaupapa Māori theory and research

This article weaves together Māori knowledge and cultural values to position kaupapa Māori theory and research as a methodology. This positioning establishes the links between theory and research to introduce the notion of whakapapa as a tool for conducting research. Even though this was not a kaupapa Māori research project, the authors believe kaupapa Māori theorising generates sites for transformation as a powerful tool. It can create positive ideological shifts and changes, and draws on cultural processes and preferred tools to work on principles and practices for ethical understandings (L. T. Smith, 1999).

Whakapapa, according to Walker (1990), was the beginning of all things that moved through three states of conception, formation, and creation, which in turn descended from an energetic time and place called Te Kore. From Te Kore came Te Pō, symbolising a time when the earth came into being (Walker, 1990, p. 10). From Te Pō came the emergence of light. This was called Te Ao Mārama, the

time where the earth and the skies came into being. In synchronicity with the sky father Ranginui and Papa-tū-ā-nuku, the earth mother, Te Ao Mārama would eventually become "the dwelling place of humans" (Walker, 1990, p. 11) through the creation of Ira Tangata, the human principal. This unification from Ira Tangata to the human principal moved to a spiritual and physical connection between people and the universe as the "genealogical descent of all living things from the gods to the present time" (Barlow, 1991, p. 173).

The meaning of whakapapa is 'to lay one thing upon another' as, for example, to lay one generation upon another. Everything, according to Barlow (1991), has a whakapapa: birds, fish, animals, and plants. This construct reflects it's grounding in and of philosophical belief and values or tikanga Māori, which create a place of reciprocity to exist between people and their environment. This way of knowing also implied a set of processes governed by laws of reciprocity for protection and maintenance, enabling Māori to reside in the natural world and allowing for the foundations of a society in which to live and operate. Pere (1984) explains that central to the knowledge of whakapapa is the means of protecting, retaining, expanding and understanding knowledge of the Māori world and existence. Within whakapapa is a layering of knowledge reflecting the reality and existence of a culture, and in our project we explore the key features and implications around methodology for the layering and phenomena of the people and children involved. We also pay attention to a range of western ideas and show the connections and understandings in regards to our own bicultural learning journey as researchers enhancing and contributing to the project.

## Whakapapa as methodology

In 1998, Charles Royal developed *Te Ao Mārama*, a research paradigm to identify whakapapa as an analytical tool used traditionally by Māori to understand "the nature of phenomena, the origin of phenomena, the connections and relationships to other phenomena, describing trends in phenomena, locating phenomena and extrapolating and predicting future phenomena" (Graham 2009, p. 2). Barlow (1991) also explains that whakapapa acts as the foundation for the organisation of knowledge. Royal's, notion of 'phenomena' and Barlow's explanation that whakapapa is the layering of knowledge had commonalities to our work with the five different sites as a tool to analyse occurrences and layer these in the order of what and how something took place throughout the project. The combination of 'phenomena' and 'layering' acknowledged Linda Smith's (1999) recommendation to be open to the multiple ways of thinking about, understanding and discussing knowledge. Hemana (2000) also explains that whakapapa acts as a vehicle for scientific enquiry as well as a social agent that describes a range of relationships. Taking into consideration the phenomena of layering these relationships, the project would map the changes over time, positioning whakapapa as a narrative discourse enhancing the identity and knowledge of others that works within the notion of time and place as a validated philosophy and practice.

Schwandt (2001) explains methodology "as a theory of how inquiry should proceed. It involves analysis of assumptions, principles, and procedures in a particular approach to inquiry. Methodologies explicate and define the kinds of problems that are worth investigating and what comprises a researchable problem" (p. 161). We would also say that methodology for some can come before method in the conceptual thinking to initiate the research, even if you are not aware of this. In our project we may have experienced both. We had some hunches or assumptions and we had an idea of whose voices and what kind of information we might need. We were mapping the approach and design in order to document and review what counts as knowledge, whose knowledge it belongs to and how it is represented. This reflected a focus on collective processes of initiating the research, theorising the research and participating in the data gathering, analysis and interpretation (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2007).

## Learning journeys from early childhood into school

The main aim of the project was to explore ways of understanding and enhancing children's learning journeys from early childhood into school. The study was very much interested in addressing some of the gaps in understanding regarding transition practices that had been identified in an analysis of

previous research literature in this area (Peters, 2010). The focus on enhancing learning journeys and exploring the impact of transition practices upon learning over time responded to claims that effective or successful transitions are important aspects of longer-term success (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2002; 2008). In particular, the study investigated ways to address inequities in learning and enhance transition experiences by seeking the views of groups who were under-represented in existing research.

In the process, the project grew into a cross-cultural understanding and collaboration between each setting. This included the transition between the cultures of early childhood and school, each with their own curriculum, history and traditions; between home and education settings; and between the cultures of all involved. Such collaborations offered each site the opportunity to work together and look for ways to build a sense of whānaungatanga, which Bishop, Berryman and Richardson (2001) describe as

> …warm interpersonal interactions, group solidarity, shared responsibility for one another, cheerful co-operation for group ends, corporate responsibility for group property, material or non-material (e.g. knowledge) items and issues. These attributes can be summed up in the words aroha (love in the broadest sense; mutuality), awhi (helpfulness), manaaki (hospitality), and tiaki (guidance). (p. 41)

However, as researchers, one of the challenges that both of the authors had to take into consideration was that each site had its own whakapapa and the merging of these spaces is a complex phenomena. This would eventually lead us to the notion of a 'braided river' (Curtis, Reid, Kelley, Martindell, & Craig, 2013), where multiple streams diverge and converge in isolation and together.

## Research questions

Six key research questions soon emerged. These were:

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 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?

## Research design

Working with Māori and non-Māori settings opened the doors to exploring a design that would benefit and respect each site. We drew together the philosophies, practices and the contexts of our research partners as a way of developing a research design that was culturally appropriate to respond to the research questions. The research design was an intricate, complicated and sensitive process and would lead us to consider our position as researchers. Conceptualising whakapapa as a collective endeavour, we were guided by the participants to inform our thinking around the ethics, approaches and methods around the design. Working together involved a sense of responsibility and commitment for partnership rather than working as individual agents or unbiased observers (Powick, 2002). This layering of new insights would assist us in the types of data gathering which we discuss in the following section. Although there are many differences between the early childhood and school sectors in terms of their communities, history, pedagogy, curriculum and so on, it was hoped that the

teacher researchers could develop shared understandings so that children's learning journeys could be supported as they made the transition to school.

If whakapapa strives for a connection between people, places and things, then whanaungatanga (relationships) is the bond that moves from philosophy to practice. The "structure and organisation of whanaungatanga" (Macfarlane, 2004. p. 38) is highlighted here to express the importance and dedication to the functioning and wellbeing of the collective to support the transition of all involved. In our project it was important to consider a collective vision to the research design that engaged with the partnerships between the university researchers, the teacher researchers, and the children, families and their communities. The project created different platforms of partnerships, identifying that positive relationships are important for children to successfully transition from early childhood to school (Peters, 2010). One of these platforms explored in the project was the relationship between the child and the teacher. Our findings noted that the relationship is not only important at the transition time but has implications in the longer term on learning as the child continues throughout his/her schooling (Alton-Lee, 2003; Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Bishop & Glynn, 1999).

Although this was not overtly a kaupapa Māori research project, we had a commitment to our participants to work with principles of kaupapa Māori. Linda Smith (1999) explains that kaupapa Māori underpins and assumes Māori philosophy, action, practice and context. It acts as an intervention through legitimising and validating being, acting and living Māori (Bevan-Brown, 1998; Bishop, 1996, 1997; Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Mutu, 1998; G. Smith, 1992). Linda Smith (1999) reminds us that a kaupapa Māori critique of research extends far beyond the ethical issues of individual consent and confidentiality to whether we are serious about making a positive contribution to the lives of children and their families. Given the focus within the project aimed to highlight the views of groups who were underrepresented in existing literature around transition (particularly those of Māori children and their families), we were conscious that the project had to be culturally relevant and respectful (Macfarlane, Webber, Cookson-Cox, & McRae, 2014). We were particular interested in the usefulness of the IBRLA framework developed by Russell Bishop and Ted Glynn (1999) as a cultural process for understanding and employing a set of principles, practices and processes for ethical understandings. The IBRLA framework has five key principles with regard to initiation, benefits, representation, legitimation and accountability (see below).

**Table 1. IBRLA Framework**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Initiation** | Whose concerns, interests, and methods of approach determine/define the outcomes of the research? |
| **Benefits** | Who will directly benefit from the research? |
| **Representation** | Whose research constitutes an adequate representation of ones' social reality? |
| **Legitimation** | What authority do we claim for our texts? |
| **Accountability** | Whom are researchers answerable to? Who has control over the initiation procedures, evaluations, construction, and distribution of newly defined knowledge? |

The application of the first three principles of initiation, benefits and representation were relatively inclusive of all involved; however, in practice, legitimation and accountability were not straightforward. As we worked to ensure Māori understandings were represented in the analysis and theorising within the framework of accountability to participants and funders, exciting but at times confronting opportunities to debate and explore research approaches were revealed. Looking back, we became aware that this also added new ground to the layering of the study because it offered up opportunities for exploring kaupapa Māori theory and philosophies. Exploring these spaces and building collaborative relationships throughout the project created an environment for teachers, children and parents across each sector to establish reciprocal and respectful relationships.

## The people

Traditionally, whakapapa forms a view of the world and reality for Māori as an interconnected system of progression and existence. Whakapapa also refers to one's place, their location, ancestry and the meanings of the area and their people. Knowing their place and understanding, who they are, took place in two different locations. The first place located in an established rural small town in Waikato. There were two early childhood settings (a Māori immersion centre and kindergarten) and one primary school. The kindergarten and primary school have been established for some time with parents involved in this project having attended the kindergarten their children now went to. The third site, a Māori medium centre, had only been in operation for just over 10 years

In contrast, the second place involved one early childhood centre and one primary school in Hamilton in a new urban subdivision. The school was established in 2008 and the early childhood service opened just before the project started. They had no prior contact with each other before the project was proposed. Much of the housing was built around each site during the years of the project and families moved to the area to occupy these new homes, leading to considerable growth in enrolments in both the early childhood and school setting.

## Data gathering

At the beginning of the research, the lead researchers spent the first months engaging with each setting. We felt it was important to know about each whakapapa of each site through capturing the following:

- History of their setting.
- Sense of community (who is their community and how and in what ways do they engage?).
- Vision and philosophy of each setting.
- Curriculum, assessment and pedagogy (what did this look like and what theoretical and philosophical underpinned their thinking?).
- Special character of each setting (what makes them different?).
- Transition practices, challenges and opportunities.

The beginning of any whakapapa gives an origin to one's links to genealogy, place, history, and also locating people within a wider context rich in knowledge and meaning. Because we were curious about children's transition we were sensitive to staying connected and building an understanding of each site. Throughout the project we would analyse the data collected but also return to the research design and the research questions in search of understanding the bigger picture.

Children, parents, teachers and their communities participated at different phases in the data gathering through a mixed methods approach. There were four phases of data gathering throughout the three years of the project. Whilst we adopted a largely qualitative and interpretive approach to understanding the transition learning journeys, we contextualised these findings within quantitative information from survey data and within the historical considerations of the whakapapa of each setting.

As noted above, there were four phases to the data gathering, which added to the exploration of conceptualising whakapapa as a framework. From understanding the whakapapa of each setting we were guided by this process and background to capture the voices of all these settings. It was in Phase One that we aimed to gain a broad perspective and sense of understanding to what was happening in the settings. This phase included

- family and community survey;
- teacher interviews;
- observations and recorded conversations in each setting;
- sector and cross-sector team meetings;

- parent and community hui (meetings); and
- mini projects (cross-sector action research projects).

Two sets of case studies were undertaken. One set commenced in the first year (Phase One) of the project and followed our case study children for two years (Phase Two). The second set began in the second year of the project and continued for 18 months (Phase Three). It was important to follow our case study children over 18 months to two years because we were interested in gleaning a fuller picture, rather than being restricted to a first set of changes. Woven within this was the importance of advocating for children to ensure that our methods were best suited to researching their experiences (Christensen & James, 2008). A number of additional parent and child interviews and observations helped to contextualise and map each case studies data. The case studies of children began in an early childhood setting and through to school. Dockett, Einarsdottir and Perry (2011) suggest that the inclusion of diverse methods when researching with children offers meaningful insights and opportunities for children to expressing their ideas and experiences. We reflected on and identified children's agency and the ways in which this would shape the research. We also included children's observations, interviews with children, and children's drawings and photographs as means of mapping their transition.

Further to the development of this phase, timeline diagrams of children's transition journeys within the changes of the action research mini projects documented a sense of what had happened and predictions on what might or might not be explored. This phase also included:

- parent/whānau (family) interviews;
- observations of teaching and learning in early childhood and school settings;
- children's interviews;
- document analysis (children's assessment and work samples in both settings;
- teacher notes (interviews, shared reflections, field notes, Google Doc);
- teacher interviews; and
- teacher meetings.

In Phase Four, we concluded with a final survey of the two school communities, evaluating the transition practices and exploring current views about transitions. In the final interviews with the key teachers, they described their experiences in their respective settings, the cross-sector relationships that had been developed, and their views regarding the implications for children's learning of the initiatives developed during the project.

## Analysis

The analysis of the phases identified some key ideas and similarities containing specific components of information, adaption to different knowledge systems, and deepening relationships with others. The merging of each phase created the foundations to building our own whakapapa, drawing from what took place and what would happen next. In particular, teachers from both early childhood and primary settings became more informed of each other's assessment practices. For some research teachers, Drummond's (1993) definition of assessment for learning lent them the potential to analyse what they were doing: it drew to their attention the "ways in which, in our everyday practice, we [children, families, teachers, and others] observe children's learning [notice], strive to understand it [recognise], and then put our understanding to good use [respond]" (p. 13).

It has been established that whakapapa is linked to the past, present and future. In the development of the phases, both data collection and analysis were an interconnected process over time. We also employed formulas of initial coding which moved towards a more concentrated coding within the observations, surveys and interview data to deepen the reflection, explore possible comparisons and help with theorising what we found within and between the data collection (Charmaz, 2013). This then lead to the next layer of the whakapapa for each case study child. The data collected drew together a rich narrative of the child's voice, their whānau, their early childhood and school experiences, and

comments from our advisory group where teachers worked alongside the advisors in developing further analysis and understanding of the data. The layers of the data in this stage captured the whakapapa of the child moving between different relationships and different contexts, and the analysis aimed to make sense of this system of relationships. The case study journeys were written up, drawing from the multiple forms of data. These were analysed within the case and across cases. Theoretical explanations broadened the scope of the rich description to attempt to explain why things happen the way they do. This moved the isolated observations to a focus on broader phenomena. Within the phases, the opportunity for teachers across the sectors to work together produced a number of mini projects through action research. This led to the development and production of mini projects, which included

- lunchbox Fridays;
- early childhood and school visits;
- curriculum approaches;
- literacy pack;
- 'starting school' videos;
- enhancing play spaces;
- principal as postman;
- bilingual literacy kit;
- Wednesday wonderland;
- graduation;
- parent groups;
- leaving pages; and
- review enrolment process.

The mini projects had many layers that either evolved into new developments or were short lived. But more importantly, it was the evaluation of the teachers' action research that would become an exercise of reflection and critical thinking. The teachers were able to move back and forth between data collection and action as practices were evaluated and refined as a result of the evaluations (Creswell, 2008). This is where new opportunities created new ideas and the layering of these mini projects and cross-sector initiatives created changes in their practices and curriculum. The whakapapa of the analysis (Peters & Paki, 2014) of Phase Four data provided a summary to the whole project and a chance to evaluate the 'story' that had played out in each setting. As with Phase One, analysis of the survey and interview data looked for patterns and themes within and across groups and moved into the final stage of analysing all the data and returning to each research question. From analysing the data alongside each research question, we began to identify key findings and consolidate what we discovered.

## Final comments

Whakapapa is far more than a connection to people through genealogy, but can be used to co-construct the layering of knowledge for both early childhood and schools to better understand each other. As a framework, whakapapa created a place within the project to anchor many voices and perspectives as an intercultural composition to enhancing children's learning journeys from early childhood to school. Whakapapa has the potential to create a research process, in particular by thinking about research as a process of 'layering' and the recognition that research engages with one's relations and connections. Hence, it is simultaneously both paradigm and method.

Employing a cultural framework situates the context of exploring whakapapa as a theoretical construct of practical validity and commitment, offering a culturally preferred process for transitional pedagogies. We found that the research was an ever-changing adaption to what was happening and provided opportunities for teachers to reflect on pedagogical practices and beliefs. Throughout the

project, there were opportunities for people to question their own thinking in a way that led to positive ideological shifts. As an implication, the research was not just about the university researchers, research participants, research community as a framework, but simultaneously opened itself to being challenged and contested (Graham, 2005; Williams, 2007) through critical reflection from the research partners and advisory group, thus contributing to its rigour. Whakapapa acts as an interface to research in representing the voices of participants where the layering of knowledge, processes and relationships must make a positive contribution to the lives of children, whānau and teachers. With so many variables to consider with cross-sector research, an implication when utilising whakapapa is that it requires the researcher to facilitate a process that is culturally and ethically inclusive for all research partners. A level of competence, articulation and leadership, where the research partners eventually take ownership of research that impacts on their practice and thus build sustainability, was the researchers' primary goal. Through conceptualising whakapapa we discovered that this was a model that can bridge both early childhood and schools in a range of contexts to enhance children's learning journeys from early childhood to school.

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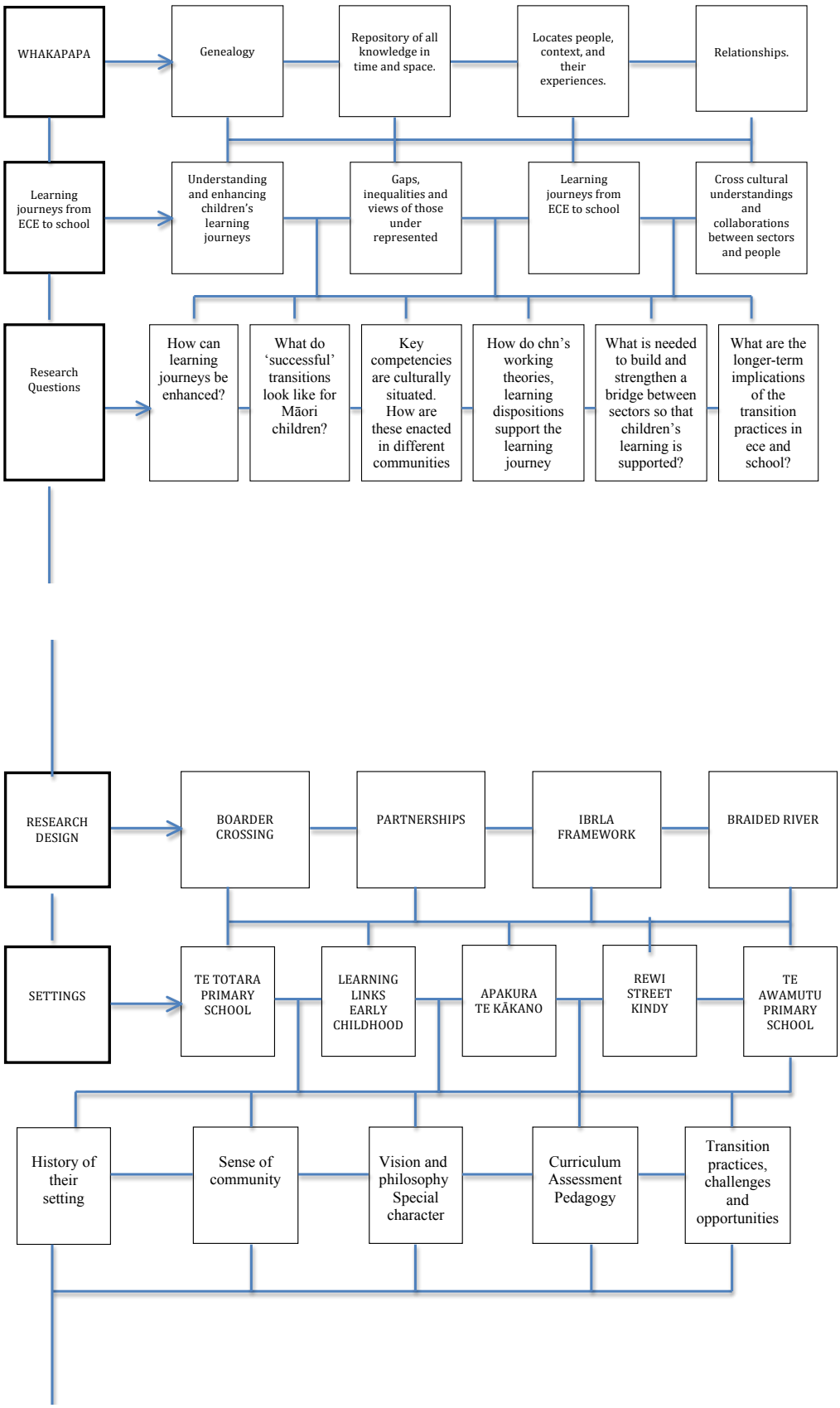
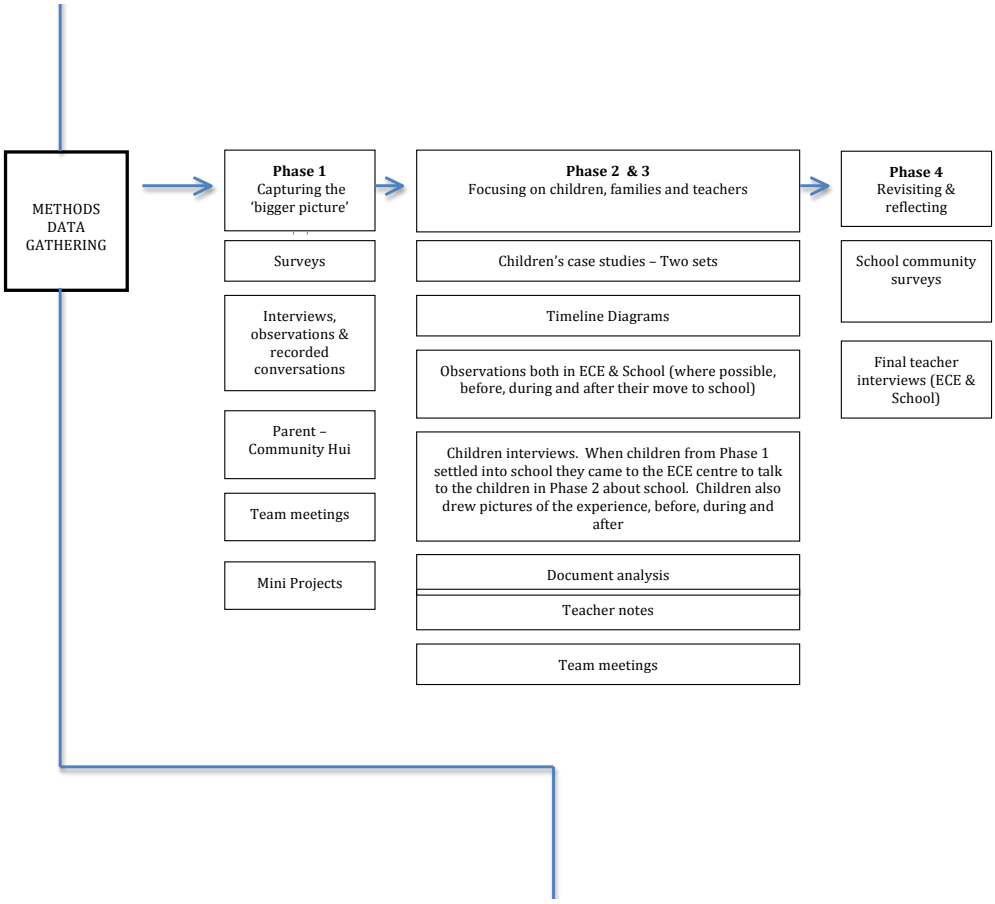
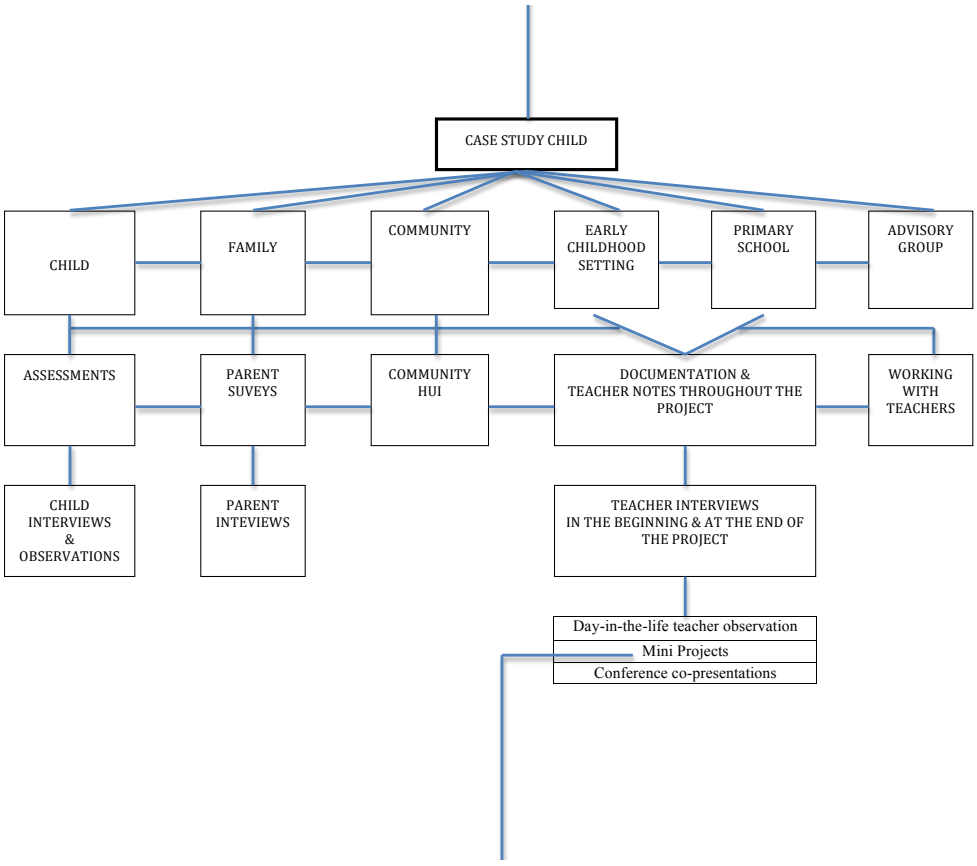
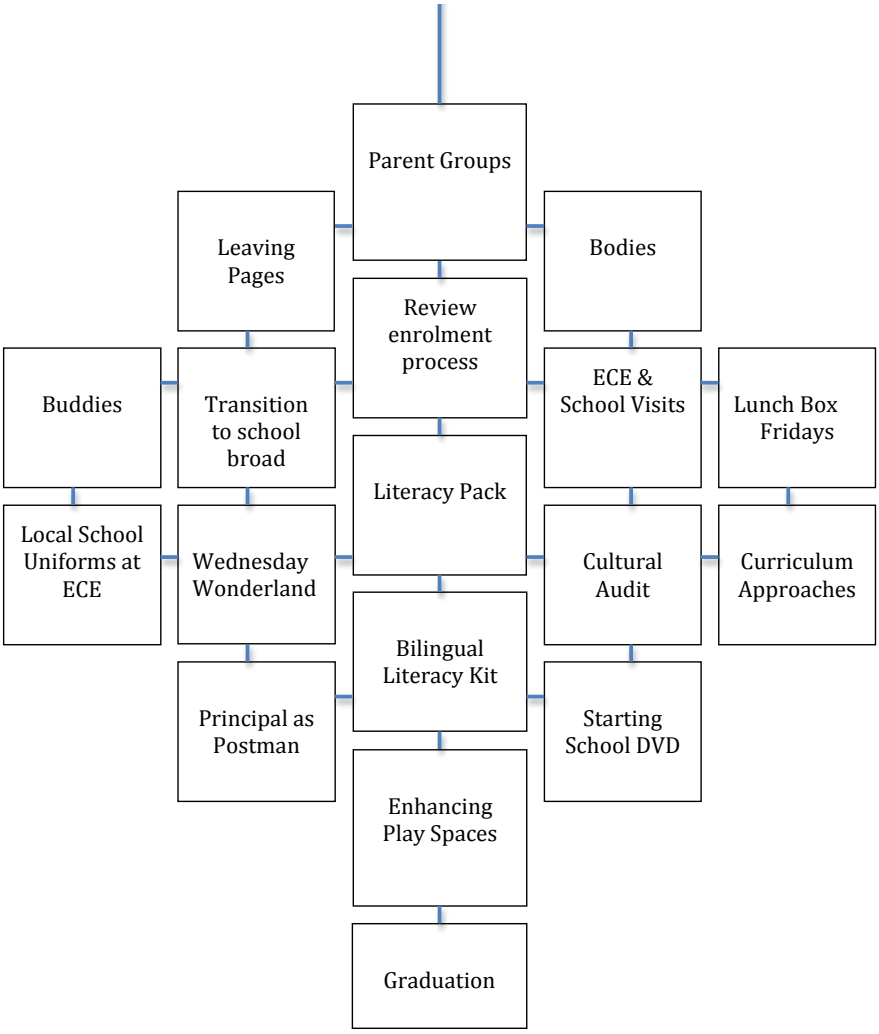
## Appendix: Whakapapa—Mapping transitions




METHODS DATA GATHERING
Phase 1 Capturing the 'bigger picture'
Phase 2 & 3 Focusing on children, families and teachers
Phase 4 Revisiting & reflecting
Surveys
Interviews, observations & recorded conversations
Parent – Community Hui
Team meetings
Mini Projects
Children's case studies – Two sets
Timeline Diagrams
Observations both in ECE & School (where possible, before, during and after their move to school)
Children interviews. When children from Phase 1 settled into school they came to the ECE centre to talk to the children in Phase 2 about school. Children also drew pictures of the experience, before, during and after
Document analysis
Teacher notes
Team meetings
School community surveys
Final teacher interviews (ECE & School)


CASE STUDY CHILD
CHILD
FAMILY
COMMUNITY
EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTING
PRIMARY SCHOOL
ADVISORY GROUP
ASSESSMENTS
PARENT SUVEYS
COMMUNITY HUI
DOCUMENTATION & TEACHER NOTES THROUGHOUT THE PROJECT
WORKING WITH TEACHERS
CHILD INTERVIEWS & OBSERVATIONS
PARENT INTEVIEWS
TEACHER INTERVIEWS IN THE BEGINNING & AT THE END OF THE PROJECT
Day-in-the-life teacher observation
Mini Projects
Conference co-presentations


Parent Groups
Leaving Pages
Bodies
Review enrolment process
Buddies
Transition to school broad
ECE & School Visits
Lunch Box Fridays
Literacy Pack
Local School Uniforms at ECE
Wednesday Wonderland
Cultural Audit
Curriculum Approaches
Bilingual Literacy Kit
Principal as Postman
Starting School DVD
Enhancing Play Spaces
Graduation