Editor Reviewed Article

Tamariki Māori and their whānau: Defining a successful transition to "mainstream" school from an early learning service

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Positive long-term educational outcomes associated with successful transition to school are well-established. Yet, although over 90% of tamariki Māori are enrolled in English medium schools, there is limited evidence about the transition to school experiences of tamariki Māori and their whānau. Guided by a Māori-centred approach, this article shares the voices of six whānau members, who discuss the transition experiences of their tamariki who started English-medium schooling between 2018 and 2023. Whānau voice identified three overarching themes to consider in supporting the transition to school process: defining success holistically; recognising that a successful transition to school happens over time and is influenced by multiple factors; and the importance of co-designing culturally responsive transition processes in partnership with whānau Māori.

Introduction

My interest in school transition processes developed during my undergraduate study in the Early Years (0-8 years) teaching programme at Massey University. As a student teacher working across both early learning settings and primary schools, I had to navigate between the early childhood and school curricula. During this time, my eldest child was transitioning to school, a process that proved more challenging than I expected. Despite my understanding of effective transition practices, I quickly became aware of the complexities of this process, particularly for tamariki Māori, reinforcing my awareness of getting this process right. This article is based on findings from my Master of Education Professional Inquiry research in 2023. The findings sought to answer the research question, "*What do whānau Māori perceive to be the most important factors*

and activities to promote successful transitions from an early childhood setting to "mainstream" school for their tamariki?"

Mainstream education in Aotearoa New Zealand has historically marginalised Māori learners through the dominance of Western pedagogies, discourses and research approaches that position Western knowledge as superior to Māori ways of being. Within this context, it is significant that around 90% of Māori children attend English-medium schools, meaning most tamariki Māori encounter these dominant systems from their first day at school. Despite significant national attention to Māori achievement, research that explicitly centres whānau Māori perspectives on the transition to school remains limited (Cram et al., 2020; Jacobs et al., 2021). This gap highlights the need to understand how broader structural forces shape Māori whānau experiences of starting school.

Successful transitions are widely linked to positive long-term academic and social outcomes (Rouse et al., 2023). Yet, situated within the wider educational, cultural, social and political landscape, the transition to school is a complex process involving multiple interactions over time and experienced differently by whānau and tamariki in different contexts. For Māori learners, research emphasises the importance of wellbeing, belonging and emotional development as essential for engagement and success (Denston et al., 2022). However, how success is defined depends on the socio-cultural and theoretical perspectives adopted by kaiako, researchers and policymakers (Peters et al., 2015). This raises the question of how well current curriculum frameworks support diverse and culturally grounded understandings of transition.

New Zealand's curriculum frameworks provide important foundations for continuity and culturally responsive transition practices. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), grounded in sociocultural theory and bicultural commitment, affirms Māori as tangata whenua and incorporates kaupapa Māori principles aimed at transformational change. Similarly, the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) promotes "coherent learning pathways" and emphasises collaboration between early learning services, schools and communities. In kaupapa Māori theory, reciprocity and relational connection form the basis for understanding educational success (Smith, 2021), aligning with the literature identifying relationships as critical for effective transition-to-school practices (Peters et al., 2015; Ritchie & Rau, 2010). Together, these frameworks present a vision for transitions that are culturally grounded and relationally strong for tamariki Māori and whānau. The challenge, however, lies in how these commitments are interpreted and enacted in practice.

Although these curricula promote culturally responsive pathways, the theoretical perspectives that guide transition practices often privilege ecological and sociocultural ideas in ways that obscure persistent power imbalances. Boyle et al. (2018) argue that even when developmental "readiness" models are challenged, Western frameworks continue to dominate how transition is conceptualised. Their analysis highlights that uneven power relations among stakeholders shape whose voices influence decisions, regardless of the theoretical lens. This becomes particularly problematic when defining what a successful transition looks like for tamariki Māori in English-medium settings, where colonial norms often prioritise academic achievement and individual attainment (Cram et al., 2020; Trotman et al., 2018). Such dynamics create a disconnect between curriculum aspirations and whānau Māori understandings of what truly matters for their children.

In contrast to narrow academic benchmarks, multiple studies show that whānau and caregivers define successful transitions through indicators of wellbeing, such as their tamariki being happy, eager to attend school and willing to share their daily experiences (Education Review Office, 2020; Trotman et al., 2018). While some whānau express concern about academic milestones (e.g., writing their name, alphabet knowledge, counting), their primary focus is the emotional state, sense of belonging and overall wellbeing of their tamaiti (Te One et al., 2021). How well whānau feel supported in navigating the transition process is a key influence on whether they perceive the transition as successful. These findings, combined with limited empirical research, point to the need for deeper understanding of transition experiences for Indigenous children and their whānau (Duckworth et al., 2021). This sets the scene for the present study, which seeks to amplify whānau Māori perspectives on the important factors that support tamariki throughout their transition to school.

The research

As a novice Māori researcher, it was important for me to maintain a Māori-centred focus. The Māori ethical framework (Smith, 2021) guided me through the research process to ensure that tikanga Māori (Māori way of doing things) was followed. Adopting Māori principles such as whanaungatanga, manaakitanga and mahaki (humility) supported the maintenance of trusting, mana-enhancing, whānau-like relationships. In addition, ethical approval for this Master's level research was obtained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

A snowball sampling technique (Parker et al., 2019) was used to invite six whānau Māori to discuss the transition to school experiences of their tamariki. A snowballing technique means a small group of known whānau and professional connections were asked to invite potential participants on my behalf, embedded in a relational approach. All participants were wāhine and were geographically spread across the North Island of Aotearoa. To maintain the privacy of the whānau members, pseudonyms have been used. Semi-structured interviews were used, and although a kanohi-ki-te-kanohi (in person) approach was preferred, interviews took place via video calling due to the scope and logistics of the project. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data were analysed using an inductive thematic approach as described by Braun and Clarke (2021). Findings are reported next, including direct comments made by whānau.

Findings

Whānau Māori understand success holistically

Whānau Māori in this study consistently described a successful transition as something that was felt rather than measured. A successful transition was an experience in which their tamariki were happy, settled, confident, and secure in themselves. As Nanny Mere explained, “A successful transition is when everyone is happy to go to school and stay.” For many, success was visible when their tamaiti “loved school,” “wanted to go each day,” and came home eager to share their experiences.

A recurring message was that success depends on recognising tamariki as whole beings, connected to their whānau, culture, emotions, interests, and wider worlds. One participant reflected on the struggle to be seen in this way: “I think it's the lack of understanding. Not seeing us, not seeing Moko as a whole. So she’s here now, she’s not crying, she’s okay, but she’s a whole.” These experiences highlight an important point that will be explored further in the discussion: Measures of success are grounded in mana, wellbeing, and whanaungatanga rather than academic readiness alone.

Whānau also noted that genuine signs of success rarely appeared immediately. Most described a settling period of six months or more, during which their child was learning routines, building trust, and adjusting to the school environment. Before they could name what success looked like, they often spoke first of the barriers they encountered.

Starting school later in the year created additional challenges

Tamariki who began school in Term 3 or late in the year often entered temporary or "overflow" spaces that disrupted continuity. Kōkā Makere recalled, "The school had so many students, it was like a throw-together classroom. She [the kaiako] was just managing this bunch of students before they started the next year." Similarly, Whaea Whā described how her daughter completed transition visits with one kaiako, only to start the following term with a different kaiako altogether. These experiences point to a broader theme of structural and environmental influences on transitions.

Physical environments shaped emotional and relational experiences

Whānau responses showed that physical spaces, particularly Modern Learning Environments (MLEs), had a strong impact on how tamariki settled over time. Some appreciated the openness, but many found these environments overwhelming, noisy, and unsettling. Whaea Whā remembered walking in and immediately thinking, "I personally was so overwhelmed because it was a really open-style classroom, I just got a vibe … this is not for us."

Environmental barriers such as limited wheelchair ramps, inadequate fencing, and insufficient learning support were especially concerning for whānau of neurodiverse tamariki. These gaps often signalled to families that the school was not fully prepared to welcome their child, reinforcing a theme of inclusion/exclusion and inequitable resourcing that emerges throughout the findings.

Relationships and whanaungatanga were central

Above all else, whānau described relationships as the heart of transition. Whaea Shanae expressed this clearly: "I don't know if [the new entrant kaiako] realised how much relationship management was involved … I would have liked her to get to know me, and most importantly get to know my child."

Many whānau praised the strong relationships they had in early learning settings and noticed how different the school environment felt. Transition visits varied widely. Some whānau were offered five visits, others only three. Many whānau felt unwelcome or unsure how long they were "allowed" to stay. Mixed messages between the early learning setting and school further added to the confusion.

An example came from Whaea Shanae, who said, "Even when she [the new entrant kaiako] was there, I was made to feel like I shouldn't hang around … there were no other

parents. It was weird." These relational tensions highlight how much partnership and shared responsibility matter during transition.

Deficit thinking continued to undermine trust

Several whānau reported experiences where their tamariki were viewed through deficit framings. Whaea Aroha challenged a teacher's comment about her autistic son being "disruptive," responding, "No, he's teaching those children about a child with autism." Other whānau described their children as being overlooked once they appeared to be coping: "He's clever enough … so he's ticking the boxes … he's the kid over in the corner doing his work but being ignored," said Kōkā Makere. These stories remind us that deficit narratives and narrow definitions of readiness continue to shape some transition experiences.

Māori identity, culture, and belonging were key to confidence

Whānau were clear that seeing Māori culture, values, and people in everyday school life strengthened tamariki confidence and belonging. Some whānau experienced schools where "Māori values flowed through the school," leading to positive outcomes at home. Whaea Whā shared proudly how her usually shy daughter volunteered to perform: "Tahi put her hand up to do a pao … I was like, who is this kid?"

Leadership and representation mattered greatly. Where Māori governance or staff presence was strong, whānau saw more consistent inclusion of tikanga and reo. Whaea Ono explained, "There is a strong Māori presence on the Board of Trustees who seem to drive the inclusion of tikanga and Māori values." In contrast, tokenistic gestures or missed opportunities for engagement left whānau feeling like outsiders. As Nanny Mere said simply, "… you walk in and you just don't feel like you should be there."

For tamariki with additional learning needs, cultural identity was often sidelined as schools prioritised other supports. Whaea Aroha summarised this loss: "To be honest, the Māori bit falls away." These experiences highlight the point that culturally grounded inclusion must honour the whole child.

Discussion

Theme 1: Defining success holistically: Emotional wellbeing, belonging, and whanaungatanga

The transition-to-school process needs to be revisited and developed with and alongside whānau Māori to challenge a process that has been developed as an ideology of power (Pihama, 2015). It is timely to challenge the deficit discourses often associated with Māori learners in our Western education system, especially in this critical time of transition which sets the context for future school engagement. In this study, whānau described successful transitions in terms of their tamariki being settled, happy, and confident, and, crucially, feeling known as whole people within relationships that recognise identity, language, and culture.

Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) asserts that leaders who understand the importance of transitions are better equipped to make changes to processes that are effective for children, whānau Māori and kaiako. However, as Peters et al. (2015, p. 8) argue, a "cultural pedagogy of relations" founded on respect and responsibility requires deep engagement with the values and practices of the child's cultural context. When belonging and whakawhanaungatanga are foregrounded, as whānau in this study consistently emphasised, emotional wellbeing and engagement strengthen, and tamariki are more likely to experience school as a place where it is "cool to be Māori." This aligns with whānau descriptions of increased confidence and pride when Māori identity is normalised in everyday school life.

If the education system provides the environment for our tamariki Māori to succeed, then it must include cultural continuity and growth (Berryman & Woller, 2013; Bishop et al., 2014). Where strong partnerships with whānau Māori exist, there is increased engagement in school and a positive impact on student wellbeing (Bishop et al., 2014), which in turn fosters improving academic outcomes, in domains such as reading and maths (Education Review Office, 2015). Yet, enacting culturally responsive partnerships is a persistent challenge for many teachers and compounded by lack of understanding of the link between language, identity, pedagogy, and literacy acquisition that has led to significant failure for Māori children by the school system over many decades (Rona & McLachlan, 2018). The findings of this study reinforce that emotional security, cultural belonging, and relational trust must sit at the heart of any definition of transition success.

Theme 2: Transition happens over time and is influenced by multiple factors

Findings from this study indicate that successful transitions do not happen immediately but evolve over time as relationships form and conditions enable belonging. Whānau experiences also highlight how multiple factors shape this journey. These factors include the timing of school entry (e.g., late in the year); temporary or "overflow" classroom arrangements; the design and accessibility of physical environments (including Modern Learning Environments); and variability in new entrant teacher expertise. These influences can either help or hinder the capacity of tamariki and whānau to connect with kaiako and peers, and to feel welcomed and supported. For many whānau, these contextual factors either accelerated or significantly disrupted their child's sense of stability in the early weeks of school.

Where there was strong collaboration between all key stakeholders, whānau Māori in this study were more likely to identify their children's transitions as successful. For children with disabilities, this becomes even more important, as their whānau are navigating multiple layers, systems and people. Whānau Māori assert that to build resilience, it is important that any plans are developed collaboratively, to better share knowledge and provide an inclusive learning environment. This is further supported by the need for more sustained contact between professionals who work as part of a community (Macfarlane et al., 2007). Taken together, these findings reinforce that transition is not a discrete event; it is an extended process shaped by systemic conditions, professional capability, and everyday practices in classrooms and across services. The dynamic, sometimes fragmented, nature of these experiences highlights why whānau consistently emphasised time, relationship-building, and continuity as essential conditions for transition success.

Theme 3. Co-design culturally responsive transition processes with whānau Māori

The findings point to a clear wero (challenge): transition processes must be co-designed in partnership with whānau Māori so that manaakitanga is tangible, whānau participation is welcomed, and processes are flexible to whānau needs. Whānau in this study described variable practices around school visits and early engagement. Some whānau felt unwelcome, or constrained by limited visit opportunities, highlighting how school-led procedures can unintentionally exclude. Conversely, when early learning services and schools worked collaboratively alongside whānau and tamariki, whānau were more likely to describe transitions as meaningful and successful, reinforcing the

importance of early relational work that positions whānau as partners rather than visitors.

Leadership is pivotal here. A strong Māori presence in governance and school leadership was noticed by whānau as driving the inclusion of tikanga and Māori values and positively influencing school choice. Yet whānau also described tokenistic "box-ticking" and missed opportunities for authentic relationship-building. Addressing this requires leaders and kaiako to move beyond deficit framings and to enact partnership practices that are culturally grounded, relational, and sustained over time (Berryman & Woller, 2013; Bishop et al., 2014; Macfarlane et al., 2014). When partnerships are strong, engagement and wellbeing improve, with flow-on academic benefits (Education Review Office, 2015). In other words, co-design is not a courtesy; it is a condition for equitable transition and learning. Meaningful co-design requires honouring whānau as holders of indispensable knowledge about their tamariki, rather than as recipients of information.

Across these three themes, the message from whānau Māori is consistent: transitions are most successful when whanaungatanga and belonging anchor definitions of success; when the process is understood as longitudinal and shaped by multiple contextual factors**;** and when schools, early learning services, and agencies co-design culturally responsive processes with whānau Māori. Realising these imperatives requires leadership that centres Māori identity, language, and culture every day, not only at particular times of the year. It also requires professional practices that recognise tamariki as whole, capable learners whose strengths flourish in relational, inclusive, and culturally sustaining environments. This study affirms that transition is a collective responsibility, grounded in partnership and guided by the cultural worlds of tamariki and their whānau.

Conclusion and future directions

> *"Once the fizzle is gone, then it is really hard to motivate your children … my moko became withdrawn and did not want to go to school from an early age." (Nanny Mere)*

At the manawa (heart) of successful transition to school is whanaungatanga. The relationships between tamariki, whānau, kaiako and peers are essential to fostering tamariki sense of belonging, wellbeing, and engagement in school. Whānau Māori in this

research observed positive shifts in their tamariki engagement, confidence and attitudes toward school once these connections were formed.

Whilst this study is small, it helps to magnify whānau Māori voices and provides valuable insights into transition experiences. However, systemic change needs to happen at all levels of policy, management and leadership to ensure that transition practices truly reflect and support whānau aspirations for their tamariki. It is timely for all educators, schools, early learning services and agencies who work together to critically examine how well current practices serve tamariki and whānau Māori and consider how they can be improved.

The wero remains: How do we ensure children's fizzle of excitement and motivation does not burn out before it has time to spark? What do you need to change to ensure our tamariki Māori are set up well at the beginning of their school journey, so the system is successful for them?

Key actions going forward

To create inclusive and responsive transition experiences, a key next step is to actively and meaningfully engage with whānau Māori, and to listen and draw on their experience and insights to collaboratively shape our practices. The points summarised below have been collected from whānau Māori participants as expressed across the interviews. While they are not presented as direct quotations, they have been drawn closely from participants' accounts and reflect their voices. They represent provocations and actions to consider.

Strengthen whanaungatanga

There is value in schools, early education services, and external agencies evaluating their transition practices alongside whānau Māori to ensure they align with culturally responsive approaches.

- Stop and talk to me at the gate.
- Slow down. It's too rushed.
- Have more than one kaiako in the classroom so one can spend time with me.
- Value the importance of the relationship between the parent and the teacher.
- I like to talk openly about the transition.
- Get to know my child.
- Provide meaningful opportunities for whānau Māori to come together to support each other.
- Know our whakapapa.

- Connect to wrap-around services that include iwi involvement.
- Create a sense of community.

Engage in meaningful partnerships

Listen to whānau voices and co-design transition processes that acknowledge whānau ways of being, and aspirations for their tamariki. Leadership needs to take responsibility to establish meaningful partnerships with whānau Māori and support staff to create these conditions.

- Be honest with me, tell me how it is, ask me what will help, know me, know my child, work with me.
- Provide information and make contact well before my tamaiti starts school.
- Make time to have a kōrero with me about my child's day. Don't wait until 3 months or a year down the track.
- Celebrate the good stuff but be transparent around areas that you might be struggling with.
- Believe that we know our children best.
- Whakarongo.
- Be intentional to support me and my child to settle each morning.

Build continuity between early learning services and schools and work collaboratively with external agencies

Greater collaboration between all stakeholders and whānau is needed to support the diverse needs of whānau Māori and tamariki.

- Be a strong, loving advocate for disability, inclusion, and Māori.
- Create a shared source of information between all stakeholders, so whānau are not having to constantly email and share information all the time (adopt an online platform).
- Create opportunities to support inclusive practice and share strategies that work to meet tamaiti needs.
- Invest in my child, take the time because it benefits him and all other children.

Adapt classroom practices

Early learning services and schools should reflect on how inclusive their environments are to foster a sense of belonging, including advocacy for more targeted funding and support for new entrant teachers needed to resource and manage the classroom.

- I would have liked to see and hear Māori spoken and more integrated, more interwoven into the kaupapa (not just in term 3).
- Start with Māori culture first. Value the whole child who should not be disconnected from the whānau.
- Support us and our tamariki to deal with multiple transitions throughout the day and when we get home.
- Encourage and orchestrate peer friendships that my child can manage.
- Adopt a tuakana/teina approach in the classroom to support peer relationships.
- Honour that access to te reo Māori and values are important to me.

Prioritise developing mana enhancing measures of success

Success goes beyond academic benchmarks and school readiness, recognise that wellbeing, emotional security, and identity is integral to positive transitions and is the foundation for learning.

- Let my tamaiti participate in things that he is good at, interested in, and take on a leadership role to boost his confidence.
- Pronounce my child's name right.
- Prioritise relationships and allow tamariki time to make connections with you and their peers.
- Adopt Māori/holistic frameworks of hauora (wellbeing) to support emotional regulation first.
- Make links and share between home and school, as our tamariki come home and share what they have learnt at school (e.g. local waiata that we used to sing at school).
- Make links and connections to whakapapa and use this in meaningful ways throughout the curriculum.
- Celebrate our Māori tamariki and their whakapapa.

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