

OUR STORIES: MINI CASE-STUDIES

Ilam School

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Me ka moemoeaa au, ko au anake; Me ka moemoeaa taatau, ka taea e taatau.

If I were to dream alone only I would benefit. If we were to dream together, we could achieve anything.

Transition Triumphs

Ilam School is a large primary school, situated on the doorstep of the University of Canterbury. An unique feature of Ilam is our international community. The roll is made up of approximately 500 children from 72 different cultural and national backgrounds. Over the course of our research, we had three combined New entrant (NE) / Year One classes and one Year One class.

In our community, children currently transition to school on or around their 5th birthday. They come from a range of Early Learning Services (ELS) both within the local community and outside of it.

Supporting tamariki and their whānau to have a positive starting school experience

As teachers, we want the experience of starting school to be positive for tamariki and their whānau alike. As a team we noticed that in some cases both parents and children were having a hard time with transitioning to school. We felt that in these cases parents and children were displaying separation anxiety.

Our curiosity around this led us to explore two areas which formed our two mini projects. Firstly, we wanted to explore what was happening from a child and parent/caregiver perspective, including what might be contributing to the separation anxiety. Could it be parental misconceptions, cultural experiences, or have transitions always been difficult for these particular children, and why is this? Secondly, we wanted to review our information sharing processes and practices, including our New Entrant party and enrolment form.

Mini Project 1: What makes me happy at school?

In this mini project, we gathered information from several different data sources. This information created multiple layers of our research. The more we listened, the clearer the issues became and this led to us making meaningful and purposeful changes for those concerned.

Part 1a: Tamariki Drawings – Draw me a picture

We asked our children what makes them happy at school. We annotated their drawings and then grouped them based on the emerging themes.

From the array of drawings, there were a few consistent messages from

the children. Many of the drawings featured friends and family members showing us that relationships, in particular knowing people or having familiar faces around, are key to children feeling settled and safe. This makes relationships with familiar people an essential consideration for transitions.

Familiar places and experiences were also frequently noted as themes. Children drew playground equipment and exploratory resources such as lego. This told us that children feel like they belong to a space when they recognise or know how to use resources and equipment. The importance of play triggered



our curiosity to dig deeper in this particular area.

Part 1b: Observations of tamariki at play – See me play

We spent time observing the children at play, noting their interactions, interests, confidence and ability in things such as oral language and motor skills, in a non-threatening way.

Our observations provided us with a wealth of knowledge about how we could build on familiarity with experiences in ELS to better support tamariki in the school environment. As a result, we introduced a play-based approach into our classroom programmes. Activities were on offer as soon as the children arrived at school. Parents were encouraged to join in too. These activities remained accessible throughout the rest of the teaching programme.



Reflecting on the transformation

We were really amazed by the response to these changes – it has actually transformed the whole start of our day, for tamariki, their parents and our teaching and learning.

For the tamariki

It was clear that the drop off was less stressful because the children came in happy, engaged in learning and connecting with others. This has had a positive impact on their resilience and confidence as a whole, resulting in less stressful transitions through the day and across year groups.

Something that we have also noticed is how children's oral language skills rapidly progressed due to the increase in informal conversations about their interests.

For whānau

[We found] changing the start of the day approach by incorporating a play-based start with choice, encouraging families to stay and play with their child, supported the children to feel more settled and eased both parents and children to say goodbye. (Whānau)

It wasn't just the children that were more settled, whānau members were far less anxious at drop offs. In fact they were a bit shocked that they weren't 'needed' as much as before, as they observed their children being so engaged in the activities. An offshoot of this was it also provided time for whānau to play with and alongside their children.

For kaiako

Since the start of this mini project, we have come to understand the benefits of a play-based start to the day. For example, since we have made these changes we have been able to spend more time observing and getting to know the children we teach. We have learnt about their interests and lives, and we have been able to identify specific learning needs in a non-intrusive manner. It has also made conversations with whānau much easier, because when the children are happy and settled their parents are able to fully engage with what we want to discuss with them.



New ways of working

This mini project has provided us with the opportunity to deeply reflect on our own teaching philosophies and preconceptions, and make changes to our programmes based on what the evidence has shown us. We now utilise play as a vessel for learning and wellbeing for our tamariki and their families. As a team, we really grappled with the term ‘play-based’ and what this implied.

We feel that we are not [strictly] a ‘play-based school’. The activities that are set out are activities that invite play, but also invite interaction between classmates and parents if they wish. We just felt using the term play-based was a bit of a fraud? We do so much play in our classrooms [...] maybe the word play-centered would be better? (Kaiako reflection)

This type of reflection showed us that the phrase ‘play-based’ can mean different things depending on context. For us, it was about play but it was also about the opportunities to interact with and alongside others.



Mini Project 1: A window into my world

The focus of this mini project was to share/access information about children (and the whānau they bring with them) when they start school. This involved exploring different research avenues with children, their whānau and Early Learning Services in our community.

Part 1a: 'Tell me about your child'

Reviewing our current forms

After reviewing our 'tell me about your child' forms, it was clear that they asked very closed questions which were presented as a 'tick box' type of activity. This left little space for real thoughts and experiences to be shared with us. We knew that this wasn't very helpful for us or inclusive for our whānau but we weren't entirely sure what we wanted it to look like so we spent some time pondering over the questions:

'What do we really want to know?'

'What is going to help us support children?'

'What is going to give us a holistic picture of this child?'

We were also curious about what parents and whānau wanted us to know about their child – what is most important to them?



Reviewing the research

Gathering thoughts from local Early Learning Services (ELS)

We invited our local ELS to a hui, which provided us with a great opportunity to mull over these questions and draw on collective knowledge around what was needed.

The time together really helped us to identify the information that we wanted to draw from parents and the type of questions we needed to ask to invite this. This formed the basis of our updated forms:

<p style="text-align: center;">Welcome to Ilam School</p> <p>We are excited to be a part of your child's learning journey. To help with your child's transition to school and to learn about your child, we have some questions below that we would appreciate you to answer in as much detail as you can. All information about your child no matter how small is important. Please fill this out and bring this with you to the New Entrant Party on Tuesday the 26th of January. If you cannot attend the New Entrant Party, please return to the school office before your child starts school.</p> <p>Child's name: Room number: Cultural Identity:</p> <p>Origin of birth: Language spoken at home:</p> <p>How can we support your child's transition to school? <i>Does your child have siblings at Ilam? Are they confident in new situations or will your child need more time to transition? Is your child happy to say goodbye when you leave them?</i></p> <p>What makes your child happy? <i>What are their interests? Hobbies/Sports? What do they enjoy doing at preschool? What makes your child laugh/smile? What are they proud of?</i></p>	<p>Is there anything you or your child is worried about starting school? <i>Do they have friends already at Ilam? Are they excited or worried about playtimes/lunchtimes? What might your child need help with, i.e. toileting issues?</i></p> <p>Is there any important/relevant information you wish to share about your child? <i>Please ensure that you make us aware of any health issues (allergy or dietary requirements i.e. Halal, Vegan, GF). Is your child already reading, writing or do you have any concerns? Does your child wear glasses or have any issues with their eyesight?</i></p> <p>Please add anything that may help us support your child. <i>Information such as childcare/living arrangements or who will be picking your child up each day is also very helpful.</i></p>
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Once created, the form was translated into Korean and Mandarin, to reflect the members of our community. We tested them out at our starting school party, in January 2021.



A valuable insight

The information gathered from the 'Tell me about your child' forms was far more enlightening than we could have ever imagined. It provided us with an holistic picture of each child and allowed us to gain an insight into the parent's perspective (see Cordry & Wilson, 2004).

This window into each child's world meant that there were far fewer surprises and enabled us to build stronger connections with each child and support them in a personalised, effective and non-intrusive manner. Some of the insights that came from these forms include:

Diversity of cultural identity – this was far greater than what would have been provided by the enrollment form with several ethnicities noted that were not included in our enrollment form

The way each child was viewed in their whānau and where their perceptions of schools might originate from – we could clearly see how precious each child is

What makes children happy/anxious and the strategies that parents use to support this

Toileting was a big issue for many of our learners

Overall, this has shown the many different perspectives required to fully connect with a child and their whānau and that there is not just one way of achieving this. In our practice, it is important that we

have ways to allow whānau to share the information that is important to them and know that it is valued by us. It is also vital that we provide different ways for this to happen, and at different times, to continue to develop that relationship.

Further consideration for the form – the need for multiple forms of communication

One thing we learned from creating the 'Tell me about your child' form in both Chinese and Korean, to represent the ethnicities present at Ilam, is that writing itself can be a barrier to sharing information. With this in mind, we have reiterated with parents that we are happy to transcribe the information they tell us. Multiple ways of engaging and communicating with us is crucial to successful transitions.

Sharing our learning across the school

The success of the 'Tell me about your child' form has led to systemic changes across the school. The forms have been used as a resource that is revisited during the time a child is in a learning space and will be adapted for use at other transition points during a child's time at school, for example as they move from one class to another. It will be interesting to see how this new-found knowledge will support kaiako to better support ākonga in their care, as well as if the information changes over time.



Part 1b: New entrant party/ Information sharing

Our prior experiences of the NE party and information sharing with parents, had suggested that the information shared was dense, overwhelming and overall too demanding for parents. We needed to narrow the information down. In addition to this, the COVID 19 pandemic demonstrated a need to be able to share this information with parents digitally when face-to-face discussions are not possible.

What information is important to share?

Initially, we reviewed all the information we currently share with new families. We then re-organised it in order of what we believed was most important. From this, we felt that the information that was most important for new families included:

Emotions

- the array of emotions that accompany transitions and how to notice and navigate them; in particular separation anxieties and strategies to support calm and happy goodbyes.

Being familiar with the school environment

- introduction to the teaching staff in the team – putting names to faces what a day looks like e.g start and finish times and in particular the interactive learning approach we have adopted
- the different ways that parents might receive information and how they can connect with us
- upcoming events that involve them or their children when they might like to come and visit before their children start.

Closing the gap between ELS and School

- how we work with ELS to support children's transitions
- how parents can provide us with insights into their children's learning by sharing their portfolios with us.

Presenting the information

We pulled all of this information together in a slideshow that can be shared with parents at our New entrant parties.

After we had the opportunity to trial our new slides and how they were received, we reflected that there was still too much information being shared in one go. This is something that we need to continue to refine and tweak to get the right balance between giving too much or not enough information.

The slideshow will also be added to our website with interactive tabs. It has been designed to provide a rewindable experience for parents, enabling them to revisit information. They can go deeper into areas of interest to them by clicking on the interactive tabs.



How can we continue to counter information overload?

We know the information we share with new families at the starting school party is beneficial and so now we are wondering about how we can counter the information overload of that particular session. Some of the things we are considering include:

- Seeking feedback from the current cohort of NE families around what information has been the most valuable and when they would like to receive information moving forward?
 - Different ways of providing information at different times. Maybe meet the teacher / School Entry Assessment meetings to cover,
- for example, “This is what I have seen in the classroom and how they have settled into school...”, to set goals, provide information to parents not covered at the NE party, and to allow time for parents to ask questions (system change).
- Sharing information about children’s learning progress from year-to-year raised some interesting ideas about what information to share and how to share it. An important consideration when sharing this type of data is ethical questions about its ongoing use, especially if data is re-purposed. Our thinking is underpinned by the right of children and whānau to know what information is shared, how and why. This is one of our next challenges.

Pulling the two projects together – the recurring themes and findings

Across both our mini projects there were some really clear themes around supporting a calm, stress-free and therefore positive transition to school for both the children and their families. The theme that continually arose across the two projects was that of relationships and how having connections with the staff, children and the school makes a huge difference to New Entrant children's transition to school. In addition to this, effective and purposeful communication helps everyone to feel informed and therefore familiar with the school itself.

Here are some of the key findings sitting under those themes:

Relationships need to be fostered from an early stage and having strong relationships with tamariki and parents enables kaiako to personalise learning and support for the whole whānau. For example, relationships with tamariki and whānau are fostered through the play-based starts because spending time with learners in a space that they choose is non-threatening and inviting. This allows teachers to see different aspects of their learners and for the learner to see different aspects of the teacher too.



Children's relationships...

with	are important because ...	Examples that show this:
friends	they enable the children to feel connected to the space and the people within it. Friendships provide an anchor of familiarity which builds a sense of security.	<p>From the 'Tell me about your children' forms:</p> <p>"I'm a little bit afraid of not having friends."</p> <p>"She is so positive about making new friends and meeting her teachers... she will be fine after some days, I think."</p> <p>"My daughter has some friends at Ilam school who used to go to Lady May – she's quite excited about playtimes"</p> <p>I really hope to feel part of friends.</p>
their families	they are what they have known, what is familiar and for most of our children, this establishes familiar pillars of support. Having these pillars makes them feel safe, secure and therefore settled.	<p>From the 'Tell me about your child' form:</p> <p>"He is our love, our treasure and we are able to support him in this new trip"</p> <p>"Brother in room 17 – ask him"</p> <p>Observation from interactive mornings:</p> <p>Parents playing alongside their children.</p>
kaiako	when children know that their kaiako know and care about them, they feel connected to a space and therefore in the best place to learn.	<p>From the 'Tell me about your child' form:</p> <p>If you smile at me, hug me, and ask me if I'm okay we'd be very good friends. Just give me time."</p> <p>"She is so positive about making new friends and meeting her teachers... she will be fine after some days"</p>

From the children's drawings:



From the children's drawings:



Reciprocal communication pathways

Having informal, friendly conversations with the parents allowed them to ask questions and for us to tell them pieces of information that they might need to know. In addition to this, the communication with ELS plays an important role to ensure we are on the same path. Finally, we have had to ensure that we have multiple ways to share and access information to support all parents.

A familiar environment creates a sense of belonging

Drawing these two themes together, was the importance of being familiar with the space and the people that occupy it. This is about providing children and their families with resources that they have used before, maybe at their Early Learning Service. It is also about ensuring that each family can see themselves in the environment. Here is the data that supports this theme:

Familiarity with..

is important because....

resources

the children are aware of how to use them and it connects their prior experiences with their current (ie the things they used at ELS or home)

playground

children have a strong connection with the playground, it is the space they want to learn to navigate and the place where they can either feel most at ease or most stressed.



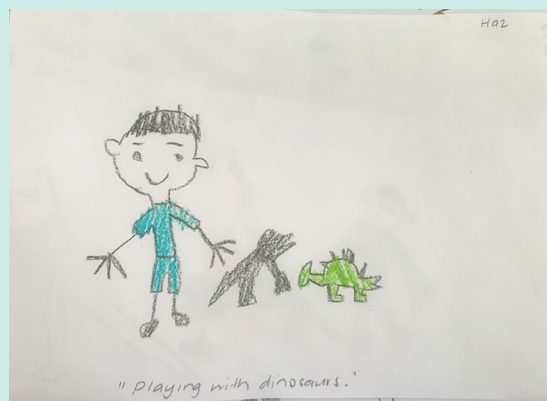
Examples showing this include...

From the 'Tell me about your child' forms:

"Puzzles, art - drawing and colouring"

"Loves to build and create, magnatiles, draw and complete puzzles."

From the children's drawings:



From the 'Tell me about your child' forms:

"Loves playing outside with friends, especially the slides."

"Monkey bars, he enjoys outside activities"

"Happy doing outdoor activities.... physical skills at preschool"

Discussion

– giving the children a voice

Children have a right to have their voice heard. In our everyday teaching routines and practice we need to be asking ourselves: are they engaged? And, if not, why not? A happy child is ready to learn and thrive in a school environment.

When a child is transitioning to school we need to think about the following:

- How are both child and caregiver feeling about school?
- Has there been a prior issue with separation anxiety? If so, what helped to lessen this?
- Parental experiences
- Learning/behavior
- Capabilities ie toileting, making friends, independence
- What makes the child happy – ensure that children can share their ideas
- Communication lines open – between teacher, child and caregiver
- Current situation – blended families, separated, pandemic levels
- Team reflection – Building relationships and using/building the key competencies.
- Cultural background/experiences.

We as teachers need to commit to embedding these practices into our teaching and daily routines so as to ensure that all children and parents/

caregivers are given the opportunity for a positive experience when starting school. All children need to feel that they are welcome, they are valued and they belong.

“As a result of changing the start of the day, the children were happy and engaged with play and learning opportunities before school. This continued this year (2021) and had a positive impact on the children starting school who were more settled. There was a huge difference between the levels of anxiety with separation between the 2020 group of children and the 2021 children starting school.”
(Kaiako reflection)

“This idea has filtered across the school and other teachers are using ‘What makes you happy in the classroom?’ for all ages”.
(Kaiako reflection)

Children come to school with different life experiences and no transition to school will be the same for each child. Some children will breeze through the door while others will need extra time, TLC and support. This is applicable to parents as well. School is new, it is big, it can be scary, unknown and seeing your child embark on this journey can be terrifying, especially if this is the parent’s first child. If parents have had a negative experience at school, this



may be projected in the way that they behave around their child.

As teachers, we have to be ready for the child coming to us, not make the child ready for us. We need to look at each child individually and tweak the transition to suit them. We need to bridge/reduce the gap between ELS and school.

The changes to how we shared information to our community, ie the NE party, illustrated:

That by having the children and parents start off together, playing and exploring and then the parents move away (when they feel ready to) meant that there were no tears and less separation issues compared to 2020. The ability for the children to settle through play and exploration was noticeable.

Being familiar with the space, the people and the routine before starting school is important for both parents and tamariki as we saw how **“Those that went to the NE party were more settled on the first day of school”**. (Kaiako reflection)

Conclusion

– Successful transitions are about working with children and their families

Both of these mini projects have provided us with such a valuable opportunity to really hone in on what is important for our families and how we can use this information to best support their children as they transition. By making changes that promote connection such as inviting multiple voices to share their perspectives and allowing children and whānau to explore the school environment before starting school so it becomes a familiar setting, we have managed to promote triumphant transitions to school. This is something that requires continued reflection and commitment to ensure that it works for all.

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