

OUR STORIES: MINI CASE-STUDIES

Rāwhiti School

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Rātā
Foundation

CORE
EDUCATION
Tātai Aho Rau

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Image from www.rawhiti.school.nz/about-us/



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

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

Rāwhiti School is a Full Primary School in the culturally diverse suburb of Brighton in the east of Christchurch. We have six learning studios, one of these is our level 2 bilingual programme Ata Hāpara. Ata Hāpara has a maximum of 80 tamariki from New Entrant to Year 8 and four kaiako. An average of 12 tamariki transition into Ata Hāpara each year from ELS settings. Kylie works with the Year 0-2 rōpū and is in charge of the transition programme for these tamariki.

Rongo-mā-tāne is our mainstream transition studio (Year 0/1 and our younger Year 2s). An average of 65 tamariki transition into Rongo-mā-tāne each year from ELS settings. A selected group of older tamariki transition to the next studio at least biannually. Numbers of tamariki and kaiako fluctuate throughout the year (80-120 tamariki, four to six kaiako). Nicole is the Kaiwhakahaere of Rongo-mā-tāne and leads the transition to school programme.

Helping tamariki feel connected

It was our hunch that some of our tamariki were being disadvantaged by not having any school visits. Some were coming to school not feeling connected to our setting or people. We felt that we were already providing a flexible transition to school programme that allowed many opportunities for engagement. Why were we still not engaging some whānau? We wondered how our children felt about school and what helped them to become more connected.

The research phases

We conducted our research in three phases of gathering data from different sources: our tamariki (drawings, conversations and observations); whānau (surveys and focus rōpū conversations); and ELS (conversations at an evening hui). Each phase was a research cycle in its own right that included planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting on the data. All phases were considered together to understand the whole story around transition to school at Rāwhiti.

Phase 1: What do tamariki think about starting school?

We gathered evidence of tamariki perceptions starting school through drawings and discussion. We also talked with them about how they overcame any concerns that they had.

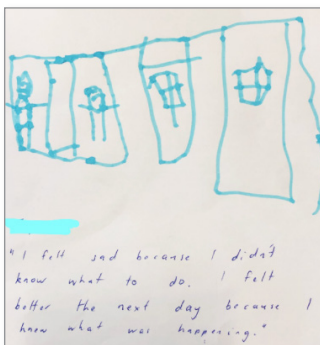
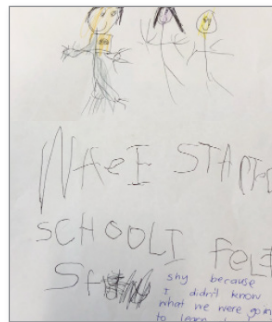
We were surprised that there was a disconnect for some tamariki between what we had observed when they had started school and how they recalled their experience. Several tamariki who had a seemingly stable start to school, recalled being nervous, worried and sad. Several tamariki who were visibly upset when they started school

recalled feelings of happiness.

Tamariki shared that they had gained comfort from existing friends, siblings, items of familiarity, and playing. They explained to us that they had been sad, worried or scared about making friends, not knowing anyone, their whānau leaving them, things being new, not knowing what was going on, and not wanting to miss out on things at home. We also felt that it was noteworthy that the same event could conjure different emotions for different tamariki; not knowing what

they were going to learn brought up scared feelings for some tamariki and excitement for others. Tamariki in Rongo-mā-tāne also mentioned that they felt shy or sad because there were 'heaps of people' or 'too many people'. They also talked about their nervousness of not knowing every single person.

What our tamariki told us



Phase 2a: What do whānau think about starting school?

We decided to consult with whānau about the information that we were providing about transition to school. We shoulder tapped several whānau from each of our studios to form a focus group. They looked through our enrolment information pack with a critical eye, and considered what should be kept, changed, removed or added. Our enrolment pack was a presentation folder jam packed full of leaflets and generalised information sheets that were at risk of quickly becoming out of date or irrelevant.

The whānau focus group valued many parts of the information pack, especially information about their prospective teachers. Whānau also noted that parts of the pack were only needed at certain times and they questioned how wise it was to hand out so much material at one time. They wondered if the information could be shared through alternative means, so they could access it as needed. Different whānau wanted to be given critical information in different ways. This reminded us that we shouldn't make assumptions about what is best for all whānau. They noted that our packs lacked the 'wow factor' for their tamariki; their tamariki were excited about getting it but

disappointed because its content was mainly directed to adults.

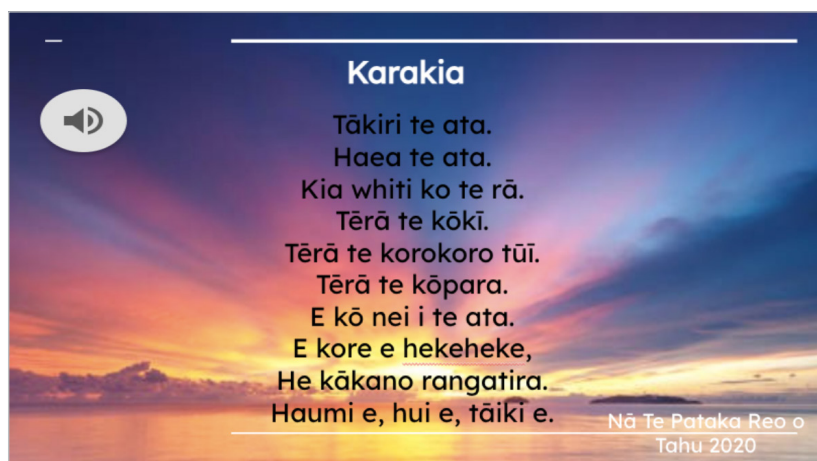
Cultural responsiveness was a theme throughout their discussion. Whānau would like to access studio karakia and waiata more readily (supported by audio). They would also like to gain further knowledge about the kaupapa of Ata Hāpara, our bi-lingual studio, in order to increase awareness, understanding, and acceptance of this taonga. This highlighted the need for clear and specific information regarding our bi-lingual programme, as the transition pathway is different to that of mainstream.

We found the focus group process especially powerful because it challenged our beliefs about what information is important to have available before children start school. Whānau spoke passionately about wanting to know the rules of the school in order to avoid the embarrassment of accidentally breaking a rule, who the administration and auxiliary staff are, and the specifics of the daily time table for both studios.

What are the implications for our practice?

Spurred by this feedback, we started to plan and create a transition site for our school based on the Manaiakalani principles 'ubiquitous, empowered and connected'. This gives whānau access to information when they need it and is in a 'rewindable format'. We worked to present the information that had been requested in a 'modal format' to entice engagement and maintain

interest. We have attempted to present the site in a parallel format, so that comparisons can easily be made between bi-lingual and mainstream education in our school. This feedback also motivated Kylie to write a karakia to explain the meaning of Ata Hāpara which is the name of our bi-lingual studio. We've used the site to share videos about our studio programmes in order to teach the tamariki how to navigate to these high interest items.



Phase 2b: Surveying whānau using a Google form

On completion of our transition site, we sent a Google form to our focus group members asking for their feedback to gauge the site's ease of use. We devised the form in two distinct parts; the first part was evaluative and the second part was quiz based. We wanted to determine how easily whānau could navigate their way around the site. The quiz asked them to find the information that they had suggested for inclusion on our site.

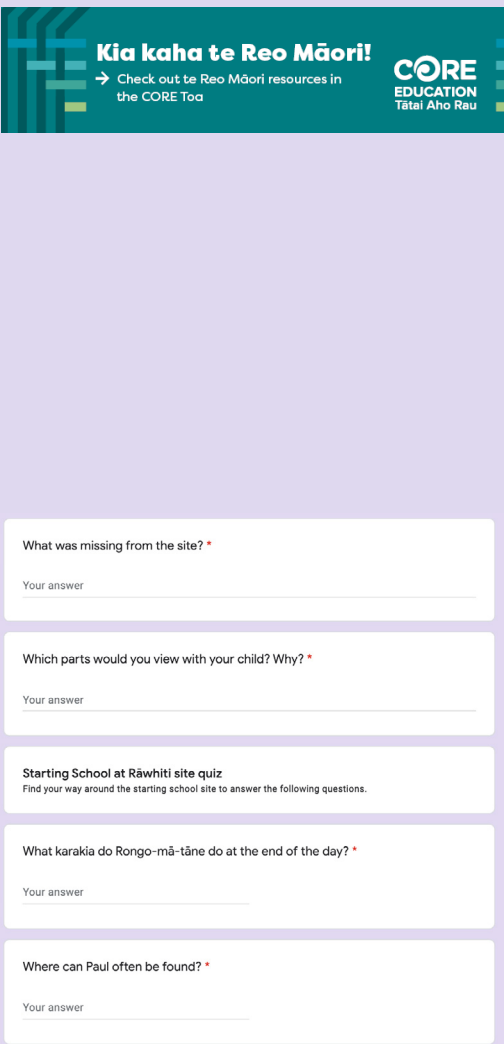
Whānau found the site easy to navigate and were able to find the information that they needed. They appreciated the clear and simple layout, and especially liked the videos, slideshows, and the map of the school (related to play for tamariki). It was encouraging to hear that whānau thought that the site would be useful for both themselves and their tamariki in the future.

“Absolutely brilliant. The click throughs are perfect, the info is so detailed but yet not too overwhelming. Very impressive. We must be leading the way here with online intro packs!!! Well done.”
Feedback from a focus group parent.

What are the implications for our practice?

Whānau suggested we include further items of information and we will

continue to work on the site to make these improvements. Information on our transition site will now be included in the enrolment pack, our introductory letter to whānau, the school website and be used as a basis for information evenings. We believe that our site is a valuable resource that will be well used by kaiako and whānau in the future.



The image shows a screenshot of a Google Form. At the top, there is a header with the text "Kia kaha te Reo Māori!" and a link "Check out te Reo Māori resources in the CORE Toa". To the right of the header is the logo for "CORE EDUCATION Taitai Aho Rau". The form contains several questions:

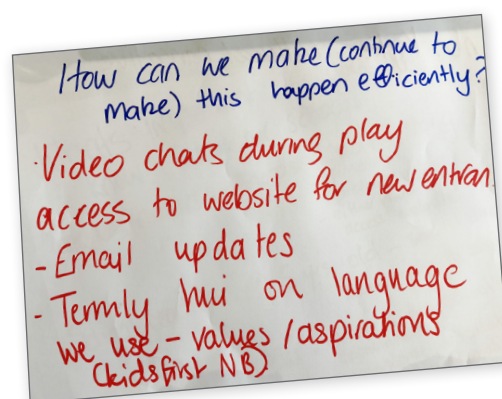
- What was missing from the site? *
- Your answer _____
- Which parts would you view with your child? Why? *
- Your answer _____
- Starting School at Rāwhiti site quiz
Find your way around the starting school site to answer the following questions.
- What karakia do Rongo-mā-tāne do at the end of the day? *
- Your answer _____
- Where can Paul often be found? *
- Your answer _____

Phase 3: Talking to our Early Learning Services

We invited teachers from our local Early Learning Services (ELS) to attend a Catch Up after school one day. Five teachers attended from three different centres. Other centres sent in their apologies. After a general chat and a look around the studio, we focussed on discussing three main questions: What is important for you to know about our school? What is important for school to know? How can we make, or continue to make, this happen?

The information that the ELS teachers identified as being most useful was essentially the same as what had been voiced by our whānau focus group and is accessible on our transition to school site. There was a strong emphasis on te ao Māori in our conversation. They also expressed their desire for their tamariki to continue to reap the benefits of strong relationships between 'kaiako and tamariki' and 'kaiako and whānau' that they established in their early childhood settings.

The ELS teachers then enquired about our perceptions of school readiness and our expectations for tamariki when they start school.



Many suggestions were given for building strong connections between our settings, including shared language, access to information, and regular hui.

One of our local ELS offered to host the next biannual Catch Up and we plan to share our transition site and cultural narrative at this meeting. To promote inclusion, we shared the summary of our meeting with all invited ELS.

We acknowledge that maintaining strong relationships with whānau and tamariki is easier to achieve in our bi-lingual setting because there are fewer tamariki and because they stay in the same studio for their 8 years of primary schooling.



Reviewing the research

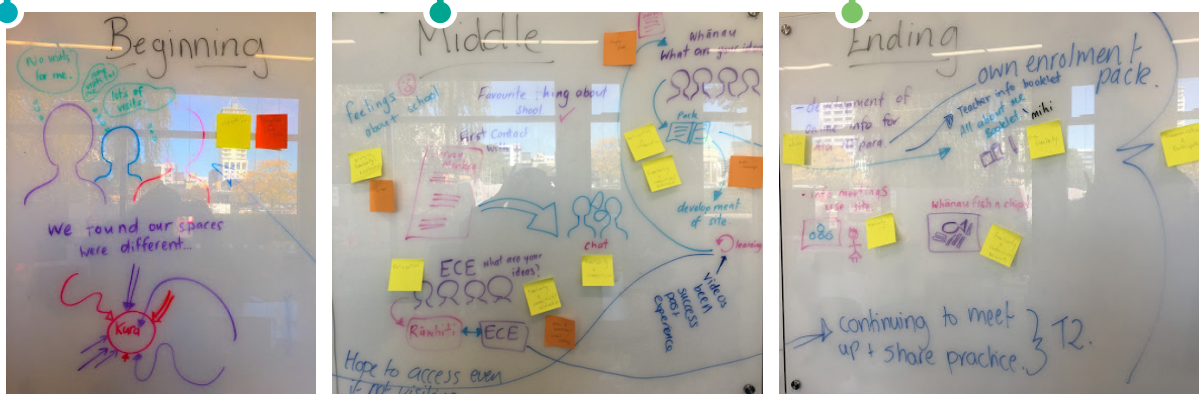
Story hui

The final phase of our research project was to review what we had done and the impact that this has had on our practice. To do this, we used the **story hui** framework. This involved one person talking about the story, whilst the other annotated and drew it out. This happened in 3 parts:

The beginning – the story teller talked about what was happening prior to the start of the project, particularly what drove the need to change the status quo.

Middle – what actions were taken and what further information was gathered along the way.

Ending – the story teller talked about what has happened as a result of the changes made and the lessons learned.



After this initial process, the illustrator had to summarise the story they drew to check for clarification and further expansion. After this, we were able to see the specific phases of the project and the key themes that emerged out of the learning.

Research themes and findings

Throughout the different phases of this research there were some very definite themes around what contributed to purposeful and successful transitions to school for tamariki and their whānau. In summary, we found that building and sustaining relationships, ensuring that everyone knows they belong to the space, and communicating effectively supports smooth entries to school by letting tamariki and their whānau know that they are valued and included. We have outlined these themes in more detail below:

Relationships (Whakawhanaungatanga – connection and collaboration)

with... whānau

are important because... they develop positive relationships with those that know tamariki well so we can work together in partnership.

Examples from discussion with ELS:

“It is important to build relationships with families and letting them know about their children’s days”

Being able to set an alarm at the same time as break times and then say to the children “when you hear the bell, know that I will hear my alarm and will be thinking of you.” – Parent quote from parent focus group

with... ELS

are important because... they have a connection with the child and their whānau and therefore are an important part of the lives of children before they start at school.

Example from the evening with local ELS: discussion around how important it is to see children in their natural environment to get to know them.



with... tamariki

are important because... friends and whānau were high in the children's thoughts as they considered their prevalence or lack thereof.

Friendships can ease the transition to school process.

Relationships through shared experiences and working together provide tamariki with a sense of belonging.

Examples:

Friends featured strongly in the responses:

Happy because of existing friends

"I didn't feel scared when I started this class because I had friends."

Making new friends

"I felt happy because I knew I would make good friends."

Worries about making friends

"I felt nervous because it was my first day and I was really scared to make any friends."

Friends helping them to overcome their uncertainties.

"I felt nervous because I didn't know anyone. I felt better when someone played with me."

Whānau connections at kura

"I felt scared and sad because I didn't want to miss out on things at home. My sister made me feel safe because she looked after me."

Whānau leaving

"I was scared because I didn't want to leave Mum. I wanted to stay home."

Whānau helping

"I felt good and happy because when I started I was really really happy because I had a hug from Mum and Dad and I had a bean if I was brave."

Identity and Belonging

(knowing who you are, where you come from and your place in the learning space, familiarity of space and people, being actively involved)

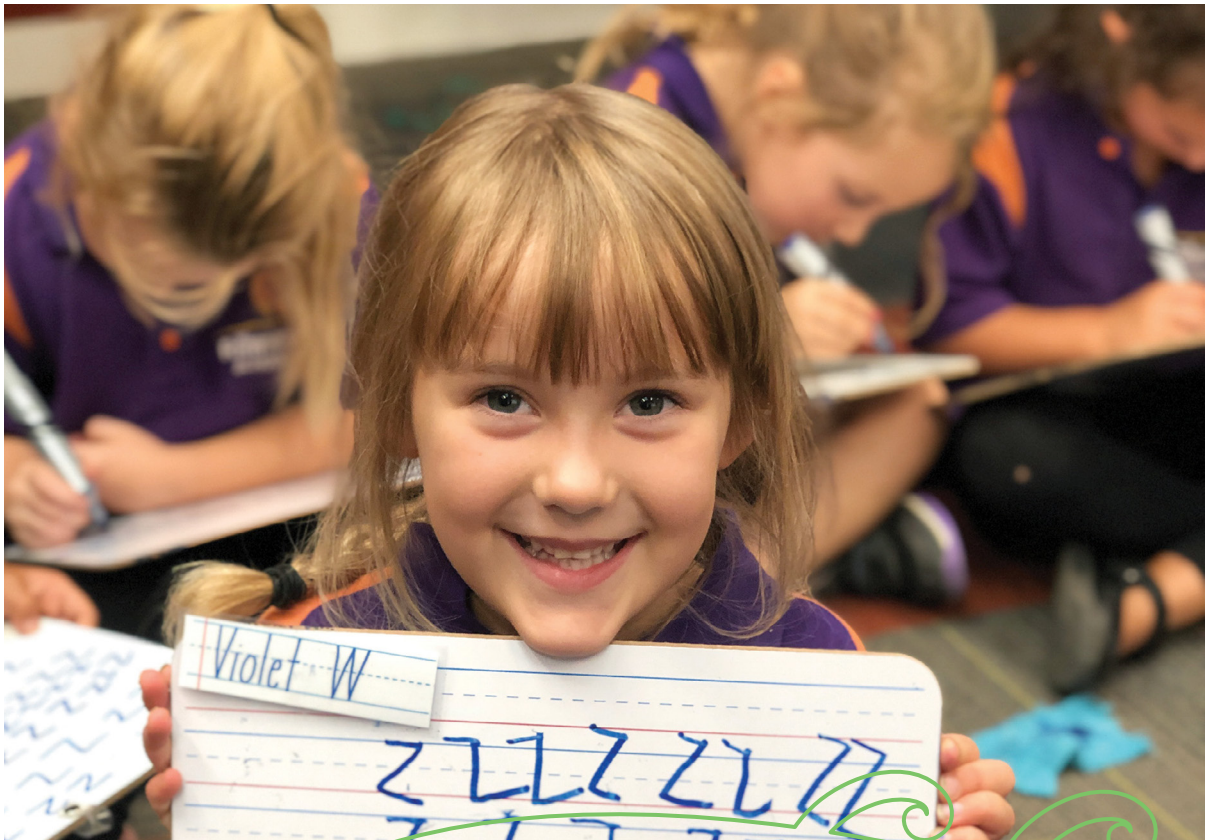
for... whānau

is important because... They need to feel connected, informed and be able to support their tamariki by being familiar with routines etc.

Examples of this include: (Quotes from parent focus rōpū)

“At preschool you kind of know everything and then all of a sudden you walk into the gate [of school], with your first child are like ‘What is going on?’”

“Having the karakia for kai would be really nice, so we can practice it at home too.”



for... tamariki

is important because... We believe that tamariki learn better in an environment where they feel welcome, comfortable, settled and valued. We want the tamariki to consider school to be 'their place' and be connected to the people and the place. It is important for tamariki to feel comfortable with routines and what is expected of them.

Examples of this include:

Learning:

"I felt excited because I couldn't wait to see what we were going to learn about"

"I felt shy because I didn't know what we were going to learn about."

Routines:

"I felt sad because I didn't know what to do. I felt better the next day because I knew what was happening."

Amount of children:

"I felt scared because there was too many, lots of people."

Familiarity of play:

"I felt good. [What made you feel good?] Just the playing."

"I was happy because I got to play on the playground."

Novelty play equipment:

"Why, you can drive with the bikes on the bike track."

"I went to the mountains."

From parent focus rōpū:

"It would be really nice to have a kid friendly illustrated map for children to be able to become familiar with the school – this is where your classroom is, this is where the playground is etc."

"There needs to be a kid friendly pack [Enrolment] because this guy wanted to look through it and there wasn't really anything in it for him."

From ELS evening:

Knowing the cultural narrative to be able to share with whānau and talk to it.

Communication

with... whānau

Is important because... It bridges the gap between home and school – making things familiar and visible.

They like to know what is happening at school so that they can have conversations at home and better support their children .

Examples of this include: (Quotes from parent focus rōpū)

One parent said *“It is about building a bridge between home and school. Having home at school, and school at home... extending the village of attachment between home and school”*

Another parent said *“I love knowing what the day looks like... you want to know when you can schedule an appointment in, etc.”*

for... ELS

Is important because... They can help to build familiarity of the school with whānau and tamariki.

They can share key pieces of information with whānau and answer any questions they might have.

Examples of this include:

From ELS evening – discussion around familiarity with the school and event invites, who is teaching who, day set-up etc.



Discussion

To expand on the findings from our research, we have linked them back to the three main questions we were hoping to address during this time.

How do we ensure successful learning pathways for all tamariki?

Tamariki expressed that friendships and relationships in their class were the greatest contributor to feeling happy as they started school. There was a difference between our two settings as to who these relationships needed to be with. Tamariki in our bi-lingual setting discussed the reassurance of having their whānau in their studio. In contrast, tamariki in our mainstream class mentioned being worried about not knowing anyone, despite whānau members attending their school. We believe this is due to tamariki seeing their studio as 'their school' and in the bi-lingual setting siblings are in one space.

From an egocentric perspective, we were taken back that there was little mention by tamariki of the influence or input of kaiako regarding their initial feelings of starting school. This challenged our thinking about the role that kaiako played in transitioning to school, because we were not identified as a contributing factor to the children's happiness. Therefore we must shift our focus to helping tamariki build connections with each other and ensuring they feel a sense of belonging in their learning space and the school as a whole.

In response to our changing focus, we developed a site to house and share information about school. Through this site, we have increased the likelihood of children engaging with our transition to school programme by providing alternatives and supplements to face-to-face visits. Our goal is to encourage children to feel more connected to the people and place of Rāwhiti School through virtual means.



How do we empower new entrant kaiako to be agile, responsive, innovative and courageous practitioners?

Our greatest learning [as kaiako], through this process has been to be strategic and take our time when considering change. In the past our urge to quickly solve problems and activate new systems has led to knee-jerk reactions. Being allowed the time to observe, reflect and gather the opinions of stakeholders has meant that we have made substantive changes which are more systemic in nature and are based on wider values and opinions beyond our own.

Through this research we have also been able to work towards a shared purpose, as two kaiako teaching in the same school, with the same age group but in two very different settings (kura auraki and kaupapa Māori). This reciprocal relationship has widened our understanding and made our decisions more robust. Our combined innovation has been acknowledged and appreciated by our whānau as forward thinking. We are now able to share information about both our settings with the wider community.

How do we enable systems change within, between, and across learning networks?

Our research has opened a door to conversations that may not have happened otherwise. We have been able to gather different voices while considering the bigger picture of transitioning to school and the relationships and partnerships that are involved. In gathering the viewpoint of whānau, we questioned our previous perceptions around 'partnership with whānau'. Our whānau focus group enabled the participants to share, discuss, prompt, and challenge each other's viewpoints. Listening to and acting on their suggestions promoted feelings of acknowledgement and value while creating a genuine partnership between home and school.

In gathering the viewpoints of our ELS contributors, our concept of relationships with other sectors was broadened. Our ELS kaiako shared with us their aspirations to learn and understand our tikanga and cultural narrative, rather than just developing familiarity through visits and information.

Our virtual site is easy to use and replicate. It makes sharing and updating information straightforward. We feel that we have been responsive to the voices of our whānau, tamariki and ELS colleagues and that this is reflected in the currently published site.



Conclusion: One size doesn't fit all for transitions

As we embarked on this project, we knew that we would delve deeply into our transition practices and consider what was working and what would need to be reviewed. The result of this mahi was far greater than we ever expected. We shifted our perceptions, developed genuine partnerships with ELS, whānau, and tamariki and learnt a great deal about ourselves as kaiako.

One of the biggest takeaways from this project was the reality that one size does not fit all in terms of transition. We need to consider that even though changes were made in response to the current cohort these changes might not reflect the needs of new whānau. Therefore we need to continue to take the time to seek their input into this process.

Moving forward we plan to continue to harness our collective investment in transitions and further our collaborative partnership to make changes as needed. Encouraging and supporting whānau to access our transition site information for their tamariki is still an important part of our role.

Our findings throughout this collaborative process have also spurred us to look more closely at the benefits of a te ao Māori context and how mainstream education may be able to adapt their practices to also gain these benefits. Through these insights, we would hope to assist children to also feel more at home at school in their mainstream class.



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