Te hautū i te awa whiria o ako
Supporting pathways to lifelong learning
for children in English-medium schools

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2  Te hautū i te awa whiria o ako

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Foreword

Like most research stories, the kaiako in the participating schools and research team at CORE Education Tātai Aho Rau (CORE) experienced challenges but during our two years, these experiences were exceptional. Christchurch was the site of a horrific terrorist attack in 2019 and later that year, Aotearoa New Zealand was caught up in the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a testament to the kaiako that they continued with their research projects. They may have thought of themselves as ordinary; we saw them as anything but – we found their resilience and commitment to the project extraordinary.

Acknowledgements

Many people made this research possible. First we would like to thank Rātā Foundation for their support over the past two years. Their generosity made it possible for us to undertake an in-depth and genuinely exploratory approach to support transformative responses to local issues associated with starting school. We also acknowledge the wise words of Associate Professor Sally Peters, who stimulated our curiosity and showed us ways to turn this into research.

Second, the drivers of this research were the kaiako from the participating schools. Without their commitment (especially during the 2020 Covid-19 Lockdown) this research could well have faltered.

Third, the tamariki, their whānau, and the early learning services in their communities were willing participants and their contributions led us to some valuable insights and findings.

Fourth, we were ably supported by the collective wisdom of our Early Learning Steering Group. Led by Rātā, this group’s broad and deep expertise provided us with timely advice, critique and support.

Finally, CORE Education Tātai Aho Rau whānau wrapped their considerable skills and knowledge around our project team throughout the project. We are very grateful to them all. Our kaihautū Māori, researchers, content strategist, videographers, animators, graphic designers, editor, and marketers form a stream in our braided river of learning pathways. Their experience coupled with their creative know-how has yielded exciting resources to engage kaiako, whānau and communities beyond those who participated in the research.

Sarah Te One, Sarah Whiting, Tracey McAllister, Alyssa McArthur, and Keryn Davis
(CORE Education Project Team)
At a glance
Intentions, findings and recommendations

This project sought to make a difference to the transition to school experiences of all tamariki in the Christchurch region. Our aim was to quickly and sustainably effect change at a systems level. We proposed two projects: one for Māori-medium, situated in kōhanga reo and kura kaupapa, and this one, situated in English-medium schools. The research design was led from the ground-up by kaiako (teacher/teachers) engaged in everyday teaching and learning with and alongside tamariki (children) and whānau (family). We wanted to make a difference straight away and we were audacious in our aspirations.

The name of our research project, Te hautū i te awa whiria o ako – Supporting pathways to lifelong learning for children in English-medium schools uses the metaphor of a braided river to describe the multiple learning experiences and expectations navigated in the early days of transitions to school. The image of a river evokes movement and life and is complemented by the Māori-medium project, Kia hoe tahi i te awa kōwhiri o ako – Mobilising whānau commitment to Māori-medium learning pathways. Understanding how different rivers of learning flow into schools altered our perceptions of the education landscape and the way we thought about transitions to school.

The focus of the English-medium project was encapsulated by our three research intentions:

- to ensure learning pathways for all tamariki
- to empower agile, innovative, responsive and courageous kaiako
- to enable systems-level change

This report tells the story of a group of new entrant (NE) kaiako (teachers) who embraced these three ambitious research intentions and transformed the ways they work with tamariki, whānau, other kaiako, and stakeholders within their wider learning networks through a process of participatory action research.

Their research and experiences show that transformational, systems-level change happens when kaiako are open and responsive to what learning matters, and are able to collaborate with colleagues. Community-wide, experience of what is involved in the transition to school supports a shared understanding between schools and whānau, and tamariki. Professional collaborations within and across learning networks support evidence-based systems change when professional dialogue leads to embedding innovative, and responsive pedagogy.

Over a two year period, these

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1 Kōhanga reo are Māori language nests for children between birth and starting school; Kura Kaupapa are Māori-medium schools.
2 Kia hoe tahi i te awa kōwhiri o ako (the Māori-medium project) summary report will be completed in late 2021.
intentions emerged first as questions, and ultimately evolved into findings. Interrelated but distinct, braided rivers ran through the children’s learning, through whānau experiences, through kaiako practices and through systems; relationships, communication, identity and belonging threaded through the data and led to three significant findings.

These major findings afforded kaiako insights into their own ability to design and implement effective, research-based strategies that support tamariki engagement in learning at school.

Our research process created a safe, shared space where kaiako had time to question, theorise their practice, trial new ways of working, and to then embed these as foundations for upwards systems change. Their pedagogical decisions were based on careful consideration of the views of the child in the context of their whānau and their early learning service (ELS) experiences. Through a range of mini-projects, we gained critical insights into how to ensure all tamariki continue learning; how kaiako can empower themselves; and that small, seemingly insignificant shifts can result in systemic change where learning success is a reality despite the broad scope of the systems.
Right now kaiako can:

- **Take action to establish, build and strengthen reciprocal relationships and effective communication pathways with ELS, local schools and whānau.** Network, share, and observe the practice of others. Listen to different experiences, perspectives and cultural expertise to inform your thinking and improve processes and practices.

- **Support continuity in learning and experiences for tamariki and their whānau as they transition to school.** Consider how to integrate into the school the funds of knowledge, learner identities, and the working theories tamariki and their whānau use to navigate new and existing learning pathways.

- **Put yourselves in the shoes of tamariki and whānau by deeply considering the experience of transitioning to school through their eyes and experiences.** Take a walk through the school and the classroom environment to consider how it might look and feel for the many different tamariki and whānau in your community. How might they engage with this environment? What will be familiar to them? How will they belong?

- **Share your expertise and learnings about supporting successful transitions to school to grow knowledge about how to create shifts in practice and understandings at your school.** Mobilise the findings of your school-based inquiry projects and existing learning networks. Encourage others to do the same.
Over the next 6-12 months, kaiako and leaders can transform transitions to school by:

- **Deeply understanding the experiences’ of tamariki, whānau and other kaiako.** Set aside time to observe, discuss and seek others opinions around what is working, for whom, and what needs to be worked on.

- **Shifting your mindset.** Don’t try to fix everything, trust yourself, take time to research and investigate rather than solving the problem or assumption, and be willing to sit with things that might not be perfect, or even right.

- **Creating resources and structures to support whānau to navigate the transition journey.** Create and provide a tool kit for starting school to support whānau and reduce their anxiety. Ask whānau and tamariki who have been through the transition process to inform the design and content.

- **Creating opportunities for more experienced tamariki to contribute to supporting new entrant tamariki.** Consider a buddy system where a tuakana (older child) supports a teina (younger NE tamariki), during their transition to school. This fosters leadership and allows for spontaneous opportunities to connect.
In the long-term, leaders and policy makers can support pathways to lifelong learning by:

- Creating capacity to activate change by allocating paid release time for kaiako to undertake in-depth research and professional learning. Include the design and development of local resources with ELS kaiako, whānau and tamariki.

- Dedicating funding for professional development and learning for kaiako from ELS and schools to collaborate on jointly designed research and professional learning projects. Ensure these supports for kaiako enable them to grow capability and are sustainable by design.

- Providing professional learning resources and materials and make these highly accessible. Fund the use of different channels and platforms to mobilise learning (web-based, online, face-to-face and print-based channels and platforms).

- Empowering and growing capability within the sector to find new solutions to systemic issues of inequity. Support efforts to work together with other stakeholders to first understand organisational inequities, and second plan to address these challenges.

- Introducing leadership and advocacy professional learning to ensure connectedness and collaboration within and between education networks. Undertake a stocktake exercise of initial teacher training to ascertain the extent to which leadership, advocacy and the benefits of collaboration are emphasised as part of professional practice.
Our why
The whakapapa of our project

It remains undisputed that educational success is a strong determinant of long-term social wellbeing outcomes. Research\(^3\) shows that “effective transitions are critical to the development of children’s self-worth, confidence and resilience, and ongoing success at school”\(^4\). This project sought to make a difference to the transition to school experience for all tamariki (children) in the Christchurch region.

In our proposal we articulated four broad interrelated aspirations driven by our overall intention to support lifelong learning pathways for all tamariki, by effecting evidence-based change quickly and sustainably in everyday pedagogical practice.

### Our aspirational outcomes

**To support children to reach their potential in the new learning environment of school:** All children will know their identity, language and culture are valued in their school. They will understand that they have a voice and are agents of their own learning. They will feel heard and know that their interests and passions will be supported by the school environment as they continue to develop their learner identity.

**To empower teachers to be responsive and creative thought leaders:** Teachers will have the courage to make changes to their practice through engaging with the action research principles. Culturally responsive, agile and innovative ideas will become embedded as pedagogical leadership traits.

**To initiate systems that are responsive to learners and whānau as they transition to school:** The system will be transformed to enable changes within, between, and across learning networks. Rather than a top-down, linear hierarchical approach, ideally, systems will be focused on learning to learn, learning to do, and learning to be. This also means teachers will understand the interplay between research policy and practice.

**Resources developed and shared widely:** The new learning will be mobilised across the sectors through curated spaces, newsletters, meetups, digital stories, and communication hubs.

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How the research began

During 2017, conversations between CORE Education, Rātā Foundation and the Ministry of Education coalesced around concerns about learning pathways between early learning services (ELS) and schools. Despite a plethora of research, some tamariki continued to experience barriers to learning success. Rather than experiencing a seamless learning pathway between ELS and school, many tamariki experience a cultural dissonance. Their working theories, identities as learners and their learning dispositions are informed by a system that threatens to overwhelm them and disrupt continuity of learning. The 2017 discussions landed on the importance of enabling systems level change within and across learning networks. This required a deep dive into the issues via research that was real, relevant and meaningful, and where findings would result in shifts in pedagogy (teaching and learning practices) and learning success for tamariki. In early 2018, CORE Education was invited by the Rātā Foundation to submit a research proposal about transitions to school with a focus on NE kaiako (teachers). Our proposal had two streams; one for Māori-medium (Kia hoe tahi i te awa kōwhiri o ako – Mobilising whānau commitment to Māori-medium learning pathways) and this one Te hautū i te awa whiria o ako – Supporting pathways to lifelong learning for children in English-medium schools. This report is about the English-medium project.

The proposal was accepted and became an integral part of Rātā Foundation’s strategic Early Years Project which included two innovative and complementary education projects which aimed to see school entrants getting a good start to their school years. The first project, in partnership with CORE Education, aimed to empower new entrant teacher practices to ensure children transitioned successfully to school; and the second, with the University of Canterbury’s “A Better Start” project, focused on supporting early childhood teachers to build strong oral language skills in children aged three to four.

In brief, CORE Education’s projects were school-based, kaiako-led mini action research projects designed to inquire into local issues. The point of difference with this research was an expectation that the participating kaiako would be thought-leaders and advocates for innovative solutions based on their mini project findings. Kaiako were supported by a team of researchers and research-coordinators at CORE Education. For example, throughout the project we encouraged kaiako to organise Kāhui Ako meetups because these were influential places to mobilise learning for other kaiako from ELS, primary and upper secondary schools. Kaiako were scaffolded to develop presentations and to facilitate workshops where they could share not just what they were
learning, but how. This support came via face-to-face and virtual hui and webinars and through regular visits by the research coordinators. Even before the Project ended, our kaiako were engaging across Kāhui Ako and using video and audio recordings from these hui as part of their data collection.

The Early Learning Steering Group

CORE Education’s proposal suggested that a Steering Group be established. We wanted to ensure fidelity with the community so the group members included representatives from Ngai Tahu, the Pacific community, the Ministry of Education, and whānau (see Appendix 1 as well as CORE Education, University of Canterbury and Rātā Foundation personnel). The role of this group was to both advise and inform. As well as listening to short presentations about the projects delivered at hui, ideas and proto-type resources were shared for feedback. The Steering Group added a degree of rigour to the research and also allowed for an overview of the two projects.

Our people

Te hautū i te awa whiria o ako
Supporting pathways to lifelong learning for children in English-medium schools included 18 kaiako in six schools. These kaiako engaged with over 600 tamariki plus their whānau. Connections were also made at a community level at ELSs and at meet-ups with Kāhui Ako. We estimate that over 150 kaiako, who in turn work with on average 25 tamariki each, were influenced by our research. We also presented at two conferences and to one national professional learning provider. The conference sessions were attended by at least 100 people and the webinar attracted approximately 25 participants.
By June 2021

Directly reaching 600 tamariki + whānau

Working directly with 18 kaiako in 6 schools

Working with on average 25 tamariki each

Working directly with 150 kaiako

Reaching 4,350 tamariki

Directly working with 600 tamariki + whānau

Two conferences

Attended by at least 100 people

National professional learning provider webinar

Webinar attracted approximately 25 participants

Potential indirectly impacting 3,125 tamariki

By June 2021
Being tamariki-ready
Flipping the script about starting school

There is no shortage of research on transitions to school. Numerous research reports indicate that this is an enduring issue that creates tensions in education despite the wealth of knowledge. Sadly, educational inequities persist despite innovations, policies, guidelines and reviews, and some groups of children, notably Māori and Pacific, those with disabilities and those from some minority groups, still dominate statistics of educational underachievement. The ‘spark in the child’s eye’ dims when there is a disconnect about what counts as valued knowledge. What learning matters is about place, culture, identity and language. There are certainly good intentions to work collaboratively with whānau and with ELS to ensure learning continuity, but often the starting point assumes that the child will adjust to school, and the weight of expectation from whānau, kaiako in both sectors, in the community and beyond is that school will determine the what, why, and how of learning.

We wanted to flip that script. We were interested in future-focused learning on the idea that new knowledge is co-constructed by kaiako, tamariki, whānau and community and that children’s working theories should inform curriculum design. We wanted a cultural shift from expecting tamariki and whānau to be ‘school-ready’ to the school being tamariki- and whānau-ready. The notion of ‘extending the village of attachment’ appeals:

“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. (Whānau voice)"

Critical to this shift was a desire to effect change at the systems level – change for tamariki, change for whānau, and a change in new entrant (NE) kaiako practices, not just when starting school but also while at school. Implicit to this concept is the notion of ako – learning and teaching as an inextricable, reciprocal relationship where there is discernible shift in the balance of power between learner and teacher. Through noticing,
recognising and responding – close attention – both tamariki and kaiako engage in learning albeit for different purposes and from different perspectives. Traditional research processes generate data, but we wanted this data to transform current pedagogical practices so that all tamariki have a strong identity as learners, a sense of belonging to a community of learning and, as part of that, understand that their contribution is valued. Our point of difference was an expectation that our kaiako would actively mobilise what they were learning as they were learning.
Our research approach

Qualitative, interpretive and phenomenological methodologies underpinned our research design. We used participatory action research methods as the basis for our research. Collaborative action research is a well-established educational research approach largely because its pragmatic, interpretive methods are based on what teachers know and how teachers teach. Data are collected and analysed concurrently and cyclic/spiral action research is both an iterative and reiterative process where innovative practices are continuously evaluated.

Three research intentions became our main research questions. We asked:

- How can we ensure successful learning pathways for all tamariki?
- How can we empower kaiako to be agile, innovative, responsive and courageous?
- How can we enable systems-level change?

CORE’s Human Ethics Committee approved our research. Generic information sheets and consent forms were produced, including some in minority group languages, for each school. We continuously referred to our ethics agreement and the process of collecting ethics forms was consistent throughout.

The research fell into four phases:

1. PHASE ONE
   Imagine and design
   Familiarising ourselves with the kaupapa; finding our questions; learning to be teachers and researchers

2. PHASE TWO
   Plan and do
   Implementing our action research projects; generating data

3. PHASE THREE
   Analyse
   Interrogating our data; looking for gaps; identifying themes

4. PHASE FOUR
   Reflect, review, renew
   Drawing down findings and recommendations

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Children observe with different eyes

Children observe with different eyes, ask different questions - they ask questions adults don’t even think of.¹¹

Embedded into our approach were children’s rights and we used Lundy’s (2007)¹² model of children’s participation as a guide. The early stages of our research thoroughly explored how to ethically include children in authentic, meaningful ways. Discussions at our hui disrupted existing views of ‘child voice’ and discernable shifts in practice were immediate in the reflective comments from our kaiako. The reasons for this were directly attributable to hui content, researcher input and the collective and collaborative nature of the inquiry.

I used to think I listened to children. When they put up their hands, I let them speak. But I decided who. We knew that needed to change. (Kaiako reflection)

I wonder if I just talk too much. (Kaiako reflection)

How to include the views of children transitioning to school captured the imagination of all the kaiako and led to a shared project which involved approximately 150 children in the first instance. A question about what makes children happy at school resulted in a delightful and illuminating collection of artwork. The point we agreed was that listening to children implied attention to where and when they were heard, who heard them and, most importantly, how what the children said transformed the audience – which in this case was NE kaiako.

I think that ‘What makes you happy at school’ was quite an eye opener. Like we knew, things like the friends, that the equipment and the play was really important. But actually hearing it from the children and having the pictures was quite powerful, that it was from their voice. (Kaiako reflection)


Multiple methods

Another process that captured the imagination of the kaiako was the mosaic approach which uses multiple data collection techniques to create a holistic picture of an issue. This approach appealed to the kaiako because it was a visual depiction of how different types of data and methods can triangulate to add trustworthiness and robustness to findings.

The following research methods were used:
- Focus group interviews with whānau
- Individual interviews with whānau and kaiako
- Conversational interviews with tamariki both individually and in small groups
- Observations (written, photographs, video, audio recording)
- Narrative reflective processes such as Story Hui; Story Spine

Finding our puzzles of practice

We used a mix of teacher inquiry and action research approaches to support the design of each project. Defining specific puzzles of practice was a helpful process that encouraged kaiako to work together on a question about their practice and then identify specific actions they could take to address the issue. The process is cyclic and current exemplars for inquiry in education follow a similar process of act, do, review or reflect. This approach allows kaiako to see (and understand) how their research informs pedagogy and, at the same time, leads to new puzzles. The questions or issues in a puzzle of practice can be short-, mid- or long-term.

School-based mini projects

Each school designed its own action research project supported by the research lead and two research coordinators. The research projects were all related in some way to the overarching inquiry questions but were context (school and community) specific (see Appendix 2). This approach is similar to case study work but rather than an external researcher doing the field work, kaiako designed their own projects. This had multiple benefits:

- Local issues were foregrounded
- The kaiako could reconceptualise pre-existing relationships and, to some extent, redress the power differentials.
- The inherent actions of the action research cycles were responsive to context and there was an immediacy to the approach.

As with case study research, the findings were not generalisable, but the research method was replicable. Similarly, the questions asked in one school (What makes me happy at school?) provoked others to consider how the issue under investigation manifested in their situation.

Regular contact with kaiako

Face-to-face hui, virtual hui and regular site visits contributed to a strong research ethos that maintained momentum throughout the project, even during the 2020 lockdown. The combined impact of hui, visits and webinars was a source of professional development otherwise unavailable to the participating kaiako. The two Research Coordinators kept online journals of their visits and discussions with the kaiako in the schools. These were shared with the Research Lead who worked with both kaiako and the Research Coordinators to guide and support the mini projects. Sometimes these discussions were live, via zoom, on the phone, or in person; sometimes via email and asynchronous comments when a live google slide deck was used to communicate progress and possibilities. Sharing the data like this created another layer of reflective consideration. As with many situations, when you are closely involved it can be difficult to gain perspective. In this project the combined perspectives of kaiako, the Research Coordinators and the Research Lead established fidelity to the methodology and integrity to the processes.

Some of the team. November 2020
### Communication and contact points during the research

#### Hui (face-to-face)
10 - These were structured to suit the phases of the project. Phase 1 began with a two-day hui. Phase 2 hui were generally a day and during Phases 3 and 4, we adopted half-day hui together with one-on-one time with one of the research time for the other half of the day.

#### Hui (virtual)
5 - These were short, focused and to the point.

During lockdown, to our surprise, our kaiako wanted to keep meeting and so we designed a two-stage format. First we introduced the issue and set some tasks and then a fortnight later, we met again to discuss the outcomes.

#### Visits
40 - Each school had 2 visits a term; The research coordinators visited each school at least 8 times. These visits were usually two hours but could be full day.

The visit notes were an important record of progress over time.

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### Are we teachers or researchers or teacher-researchers?

*We gradually began to understand a different way of working where the ideas and understanding came out of slowing down, taking time, discussing and letting the thinking happen. Some of our best ideas came from discussions around a range of topics where we exchanged stories, shared opinions and asked questions of each other.* (Kaiako reflection)

Our NE kaiako underwent a transformation that started by understanding themselves as both teachers and researchers.

Primed to find solutions to problems, in the beginning our research mantra of ‘slowing down to speed up’ was difficult. As the research leads and coordinators, we were constantly challenging the ‘quick, react, solve’ approach, recognising that this highly attuned responsiveness was a skill as well as attitudinal. We worked to change attitudes and to support re-prioritisation by letting go. This approach inherently addresses the power imbalances between teacher and child in a classroom (Alexakos, 2015).

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After a few meetings with our CORE facilitator [research coordinator], Tracey, we gradually began to understand a different way of working where the ideas and understanding came out of slowing down, taking time, discussing and letting the thinking happen. Some of our best ideas came from discussions around a range of topics where we exchanged stories, shared opinions and asked questions of each other. (Kaiako reflection)

Theory and analysis

"My head hurts."

(Research Coordinator comment during a theory session)

Our research was influenced by sociocultural theories, including bio-ecological models of development. Sociocultural theory\textsuperscript{15} suggests that learning and development results from participating in cultural processes found in communities of learners, of practice and of inquiry.

In a process that aligned with the sociocultural constructs associated with transformation, we charted our kaiako journeys as they moved from novice to expert teacher-researchers. As the nature of participation changes from novice to expert, the experience of the cultural process transforms both the participant and the way the participant joins in and interacts with the community. Shared understanding, communicating and joining in by using the tools and artefacts present in the community contribute to that transformation. Integral to these elements are relationships between people, places and things.

In our research, the cultural process under investigation was the transition from ELS to school. Parental expectations, ELS kaiako expectations, whānau expectations, tamariki expectations and NE kaiako expectations all contributed to a shared understanding of what transition to school means. We learnt that arriving at a shared understanding was complicated by a range of factors such as personal experiences of school, false


At work in the CORE tari, February 2021
assumptions about what tamariki needed to know before starting school, and incorrect information about the practicalities of enrolling at school. Effective communication was critical and an important precursor for building relationships.

I spend a lot of time in the car park just chatting with whānau. They feel safer there than in our School spaces. I also find that I get lots of texts. Parents who never, ever set foot in the School, let alone my space, will text me. Texting is a really good way to share information about their child but also about what’s happening at school. (Kaiako reflection)

Once established however, relationships become the key to transforming participation. Relationships are about belonging and belonging is about joining in and engaging with the resources (tools and artefacts) in a classroom or NE space.

Bioecological theory offered us a lens to contextualise our research as part of a bigger whole. We were able to understand that as we were functioning/operating in our microsystems – the individual schools, other, external influences had an impact. For example, a kaiako assumption that whānau aren’t interested in attending information evenings can be reconsidered based on what else might be happening for that whānau at home and at work. The interconnected system theory provided a useful foundational springboard for the researchers to understand the complexity of systemic change. In simple terms, we came to understand how the classroom-based research projects wielded influence at an across school level in Kāhui Ako.

Making sense of the data – the analysis process

The nature of action research analysis is iterative. Next steps (actions) in the research are based on the data generated in the previous step. These are interpreted and new actions are designed. That way, reflective questions become critical to making sense of the data.

Every stage of the process involves analysis. In our project, this was multi-level. The mini project data was analysed in terms of the focus and in that sense, was a micro analysis specific to context. At a macro level, we used the principle questions to interrogate the data from across all projects to determine themes. This was done at hui, all together, via a workbook and during visits. Finally, we used the indicators we developed during the proposal stage as an evaluation tool (Appendix 4).

Over time, our themes were refined and our process streamlined, but the workbooks guided conversations about the data and served to focus on the big picture questions. Below are snapshot summaries of the mini case studies produced as a result of intense discussion and reflection.

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17 See CORE Education Tātai Aho Rau English Medium Progress Reports 8 and 9.
Our stories: Mini case studies
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.

Rāwhiti School is a full primary school, composed of six learning studios (one of which offers a level 2 bilingual programme), in the culturally diverse suburb of Brighton in east Christchurch. The two learning studios involved in this research were:

• Ata Hāpara (bilingual) which has a maximum of 80 tamariki from new entrants to Year 8 and four kaiako. An average of 12 tamariki transition into Ata Hāpara each year from ELS settings.

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

The kaiako had a hunch that some of the tamariki were being disadvantaged by not having any school visits. They observed how some were coming to school not feeling connected to the setting or people. They felt that they were already providing a flexible transition to school programme that allowed many opportunities for engagement and yet they wondered:

Why were we still not engaging some whānau? We wondered how our children felt about school and what helped them to become more connected. (Kaiako)

To address these wonderings, they conducted their research in three phases, gathering data from different sources:

• tamariki (drawings, conversations and observations);

• whānau (surveys and focus rōpū conversations);

• ELS (conversations at an evening hui).

Each phase was a research cycle in its own right, including planning, implementing, observing and reflecting. All phases were pulled together to create the whole story around transition to school at Rāwhiti. The completed story was reviewed using the story hui process to extrapolate key themes and findings.

The kaiako were surprised about the range of responses from both tamariki and whānau which highlighted that there is definitely not one set way to transition to school. What they learnt was that the transition process must be responsive, transparent and as inclusive as possible. For the school, this has led to changes in their enrolment process by:

• staggering what information is shared and when having appropriate information available for ELS, whānau
and tamariki
• sharing information in multiple formats (paper, virtual, video, slides, in person)
• spending time to connect and build relationships with ELS and whānau

The kaiako feel that this is just the start of the journey for them. It has uncovered many insights that they will continue to work on moving forward. Here are their responses to our big questions:
• How do we ensure successful learning pathways for all tamariki?
We have increased the likelihood of children engaging with our transition to school programme by providing alternatives to face-to-face visits. Encouraging children to feel 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?
We have been responsive to the voices of our whānau, tamariki and ELS colleagues. Our innovation has been acknowledged and appreciated by our whānau as forward thinking.

• How do we enable systems change within, between and across learning networks?
Our website is easy to use and replicated. It makes sharing and updating information straightforward.

Points of interest: There was little mention by tamariki of the influence/input of kaiako in comparison to friends and whānau.
Ilam School is a large primary school, situated on the doorstep of the University of Canterbury. Ilam has a uniquely international community, made up of 72 different cultural and national backgrounds, many of which were represented during the course of this research.

The New Entrant and Year One kaiako had noticed that in some cases both parents and children were having a hard time with transitioning to school, with some clear displays of separation anxiety. This triggered their curiosity in two specific areas: what was happening from a child and parent/caregiver perspective and how might they change their information sharing processes and practices, including the new entrant party and ‘About your child’ information form, to support seamless and relaxed transitions to school.

Each area became a mini project, and within each mini project were several phases. The data gathered in these phases included:

- **Mini Project 1: What makes me happy at school**
  - tamariki (drawings, conversations and observations)

- **Mini Project 2: A window to my world**
  - tamariki (observations)
  - whānau (conversations and “Tell me about your child” form entries)
  - ELS (discussions at evening hui)

Each mini project provided the kaiako with valuable insight into what is most important when it comes to transitions
to Ilam to school, these learnings included:

- The importance of play – the familiarity of resources and the invitational set up allow children and their families to gently settle into the space. Whatsmore, kaiako noticed a huge improvement in the children’s communication and oral language skills through all of the informal, child directed conversations that occurred during play.

- Opportunities for communication with whānau need to be provided in multiple ways and at regular times. Also, providing parents and caregivers the opportunity to talk about their child from a position of ‘first teacher’ provided gems of knowledge that enabled the kaiako to better connect with and support each child.

- Transition doesn’t just start the moment the child begins five, the relationship with whānau and ELS well beforehand mean transitions truly are seamless. This also works in reverse, so once the child is at school, their connection with home and ELS doesn’t end.

As a result of these mini projects, there have been changes in kaiako perceptions as they gently and regularly ‘turn the finger inwards’, to ask themselves what their role in the situation is, and what can they do about it? The changes this team have made have also been picked up by other teams across the school with the intent of making all transitions as seamless and stress-free as possible.
Kaiapoi North School is located in North Canterbury. The role growth has recently risen to 510 students. Prior to engaging in the project, four-year-olds transitioning to Kaiapoi North School would have two to four preschool visits in their new classroom. Centre visits were limited and sporadic. NE kaiako observed how some tamariki found the transition to school a happier experience than others and because of this wondered how to ensure that 5 year olds are building happy connections within the school community?

To explore this, the kaiako began gathering data from older students, new entrant students, whānau/parents and staff. Several methods were used to build comprehensive data sets; surveys, interviews, discussion groups, observations and drawings.

One cycle of inquiry led to another as kaiako enacted the review cycle: act, do, review and reflect. As the kaiako gathered more data they realised that they needed to think carefully about how to better support tamariki with their transition to school.

In the first cycle, the kaiako reviewed drawings by new entrant tamariki about what made them happy when they started school. These pictures revealed that familiarity with the teacher and the classroom, friends and siblings were important to children transitioning to school, along with having a parent come and stay for a time. The kaiako observed that tamariki settled more quickly than in the past, and that they had a strong sense of belonging to the group. Kaiako felt confident to allow whānau into their ‘space’. At the same time, listening to tamariki opened doors to genuinely understanding what the experience of starting school meant to both tamariki and whānau. This insight led into the next mini-project.

In the second cycle, the teacher-researchers established regular connections with local ELS through open mornings at school each month. Aligning with their school value of e Piringa - Connect, these visits strengthened between ELS and NE kaiako. This new opportunity provided the chance for tamariki to become familiar with future classmates, teachers, and the school environment, promoting a greater sense of belonging when transitioning to school.

A shared understanding created a borderland between local ELS and the NE classes as opposed to a border. (Kaiako)

In the third cycle, the school’s buddy system was revamped. Historically, the buddy system was timetabled fortnightly, with structured expectations and buddies were put together randomly. It was obvious that some older buddies did not enjoy the role yet they identified the importance of spending time with the new tamariki to support them in this new space. After further inquiry, changes were
made to the whole system, with senior buddies applying for the role, receiving training and then being matched to their younger buddies by personality and interest. Once matched with a buddy, the senior students created welcome cards, spent time with their buddies at pre-school visits and were taking time during their own school day to pop in and see their little buddy, both in and out of the classroom environment. As a result, early indications are that both parents and children are seeing the value of our New Entrant Buddy programme, as supported in the following:

I truly believe having an older buddy reduced a lot of anxiety that may have come up for [child]. [Child] looks up to [the buddy] like an idol. He says, ...but [child’s buddy] will help me.

The older buddies are committed to supporting and helping with the transition to school process to ensure a positive and happy experience. Parents have shared positive feedback about the system’s change. The kaiako are looking forward to the continuation of the successful new entrant buddy system at Kaiapoi North School.
Kaiapoi Borough School is located in North Canterbury. KBS is rated decile 7 and has a current roll of 374 pupils. Kaiako were keen to delve deeper into their transition process and ensure that it was ‘best practice’ for all tamariki and whānau. Their overarching question was: ‘What facilitates a successful transition to school?’

As first-time teacher-researchers they weren’t sure where to start, so with the support of a research coordinator, they decided to approach their big question through a series of mini projects. The first was a review of the enrolment pack. Knowing that this document was an initial impression to new entrant families, it was a starting point. They sought answers to the following questions: What is the purpose? Does it cater for all? Is it current? They used several methods to gather data including student voice through focus groups, surveys to staff and ELS teachers and interviews with whānau.

A pressure point came about when the teacher-researchers delivered the enrolment packs to the local ELS centres. A discussion on the doorstep with one centre manager took the school syndicate lead by surprise. The ELS manager shared the centre practices around school readiness and preparation for school. From this, the teacher-researchers realised that there was a disconnect in the understanding of school readiness. After a hui with the teacher-researchers from Kaiapoi North School, it was agreed that they needed to build more of a shared understanding of expectations around starting school with the local schools and ELS.

The suggestion was brought to a facilitated session across the Kāhui Ako. During this session, all participants felt they could do more, and were ‘super keen’ to make stronger connections between the sectors and collaboratively develop shared understandings around school readiness. This Kāhui Ako hui became a place for the mobilisation of their second mini project.

The second mini project involved the teacher-researchers visiting a number of local ELS where they observed a vast range of approaches to curriculum implementation and the expectations for school readiness. At the next Kāhui Ako hui, the opportunity arose for kaiako (both ELS and New Entrant) to identify and rank the skills that were perceived as essential for tamariki in both settings. Self-regulation was considered the most important skill across both sectors and academic skills at the bottom of the list. The kaiako discussed the many ways in which they were already promoting and teaching these skill sets in their settings and what this is like in both settings.

Relationships between the teacher-researchers from both Kaiapoi Borough and Kaiapoi North schools have grown.
immensely as a result of these projects and their shared interest in having a shared language around expectations associated with transitions. This has also been the case for schools and services right across the Kāhui Ako, Katote. This relationship will continue to develop with possibilities of exploring whānau expectations and understandings being future projects.

Something else that the kaiako are keen for the Kāhui Ako to support is professional development on building children’s self regulation skills particularly as it was such a high priority for all kaiako across both sectors. The conversation continues around readiness, building self regulation across settings and strengthening relationships between the sectors.

Reflecting on the project process as a whole, the kaiako feel that they have learnt about the importance of slowing down, mulling over conversations and data and really considering what it could be telling them. Real change can only happen once all information has been given the time and attention it deserves.

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18 Katote is the name of this Kāhui Ako
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number of tamariki currently enrolled</th>
<th>Number of kaiako</th>
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<tr>
<td>Rāwhiti</td>
<td>Decile 3&lt;br&gt;Primary School (Yr 1-8)&lt;br&gt;Bilingual unit&lt;br&gt;(Merger school post earthquake from 4 different schools)</td>
<td>Roll 561&lt;br&gt;Māori - 175&lt;br&gt;Pacific origin - 32&lt;br&gt;Pakeha/European - 330&lt;br&gt;Asian - 17&lt;br&gt;MELAA - 4&lt;br&gt;Other - 3&lt;br&gt;International - 0</td>
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<td>Decile 3&lt;br&gt;Primary School (Yr 1-6)</td>
<td>Roll 253&lt;br&gt;Māori - 62&lt;br&gt;Pacific origin - 22&lt;br&gt;Pakeha/European - 87&lt;br&gt;Asian - 55&lt;br&gt;MELAA - 24&lt;br&gt;Other - 3&lt;br&gt;International - 0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ilam20</td>
<td>Decile 6&lt;br&gt;Primary School (Yr 1-6)</td>
<td>Roll 418&lt;br&gt;Māori - 28&lt;br&gt;Pacific origin - 14&lt;br&gt;Pakeha/European - 168&lt;br&gt;Asian - 142&lt;br&gt;MELAA - 27&lt;br&gt;Other - 33&lt;br&gt;International - 6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haeata21 Community Campus</td>
<td>Decile 1&lt;br&gt;Primary - Secondary (Yr 1-13)&lt;br&gt;Haeata is a newly established co-educational campus.&lt;br&gt;(merge of 4 schools post quake)</td>
<td>Roll 610&lt;br&gt;Māori - 319&lt;br&gt;Pacific origin - 89&lt;br&gt;Pakeha/European - 168&lt;br&gt;Asian - 30&lt;br&gt;MELAA - 4&lt;br&gt;Other - 33&lt;br&gt;International - 0</td>
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<td>Decile 7&lt;br&gt;Primary School (Yr 1-8)</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

19 Addington Primary School withdrew from the project in February 2021 due to staff changes.
20 Ilam joined the project in Year 2 but had signalled its intentions to do so at the start.
21 Haeata withdrew from the project in July 2020 due to staffing changes and shifting priorities.
It’s all about relationships, communication, identity and belonging

Relationships, communication, identity and belonging emerged as three enduring themes which follow through into our major findings for each outcome. Each of these three themes is well represented in the literature and research about transitions to school and in our mini projects. The themes distilled into the following three findings:

- Connect, collaborate and co-construct
- Nurture professional teaching dispositions, skills and attitudes
- Establish a culture of possibilities - learn to critique, advocate and lead
Relationships

It is important to build relationships with families and let them know about their children’s days. (Whānau voice)

Relationships were critical to every phase of the project but exactly what this meant was ambiguous and too generic. What was it about relationships that warranted a theme? In this research, relationships were about reaching a shared understanding about transitions to school. Several perspectives contributed to this:

- What children understood
- What whānau understood
- What kaiako understood
- What the school understood
- What the wider community understood (ELS and Kāhui Ako)

Good relationships, especially with children and whānau, are based on trust and respect and these were understood in terms of supporting familiarity with people, places and things. A sense of familiarity – finding a toy or recognising a friend from an ELS, eased entry into a new space. Time to build relationships was crucial and our research found this to be true for whānau and tamariki alike. Innovative ideas such as ELS parties and visits to the NE space before terms began allowed kaiako time to observe. As one whānau member noticed:

I didn’t realise how much like preschool, school was. It made for an easy start! (Whānau survey data)

The teacher visiting (sic) my child at preschool, plenty of school visits, finishing early for the first 4 weeks, play based learning and good communication with us. (Whānau survey data)

Relationships with colleagues within schools and across other schools in Kāhui Ako created numerous opportunities to challenge the assumptions about what NE kaiako expected from ELS kaiako.

Communication

Our data focused on what was communicated, how it was communicated and with whom. For example, at a special function for new whānau, kaiako soon realised that there was far too much information passed on in the enrolment packs. As one kaiako noted:

... parents being overloaded seems to be because there is so much to tell them. (Kaiako)

Undoubtedly whānau felt overwhelmed by the information shared and this feeling was compounded by anxiety or nervousness about their child starting school:
At preschool you kind of know everything and then, all of a sudden, you walk out of that gate for your first child and you are like, what’s going on? I don’t know if it’s a sort of a balancing act because a lot of the information is to soften the blow for the parents. (Whānau focus group)

Feeling a self-imposed pressure, kaiako recognised that they had missed an important opportunity to just be in the classroom space, and be available and accessible to both whānau and tamariki.

Effective communication requires sensitivity and intuition. What mattered most to kaiako, whānau and tamariki was not necessarily what was presented during preschool visits or in the enrolment packages. Prioritising was a good strategy based on realising that information could be shared over time.²²

A whānau member commented:

[We] need a kid-friendly pack. Like this guy (referring to her son), when we picked up his [enrollment pack], he wanted to look through it but there wasn’t really anything for him. (Whānau focus group hui)

Identity and belonging

If you smile at me, hug me, and ask me if I’m okay we’d be very good friends. Just give me time. (Tamariki feedback)

Identity and belonging, like the previous two themes, were integral to understanding our data. We paired these together and attributed these constructs with notions of participation, contribution, inclusivity and engagement. For example, drawing on the literature, we wanted to emphasise the importance of identity as a learner and recognise the importance of “connecting funds of knowledge from home to school contexts and learning activities where [children’s] values, languages and cultural knowledge are an implicit part of teaching and learning practices and ways of learning…”²³

We were surprised that the ELS were interested in our cultural narrative and school waiata. This is something that we have now shared with them. (Kaiako)

A measure of belonging is whether or not tamariki are happy to apply what they know in a new setting (see Brooker, 2008, cited Peters, p. 55). Our kaiako were already attuned to respond to this but our research definitely broadened and deepened how they did this.


Te hautū i te awa whiria o iako.
The analogy of braided rivers became particularly apparent as we considered our findings alongside the three outcomes. In qualitative research, deciding on findings is complicated because a finding is not necessarily determined by how often something is said. Robustness is achieved through triangulation and by looking for themes across multiple data sets. Sometimes the themes become findings, but in this research our themes wove through our findings. As the name of our research suggests, themes and findings were our braided rivers of learning. Three major findings supported our aspirational outcomes:

Connect, collaborate and co-construct

I talked with the children about being researchers and how next year a whole new group of children would be coming along to KNS. I said that [we] really want to make sure that the new children have a happy time starting school. Are they able to think about what made them feel happy when they came to school? [...] The children needed to close their eyes and think about the question, then they were given paper to go and “draw their thinking.” (Kaiako reflection)

When asked what made them happy at school, children drew pictures about the importance of friendship, finding the familiar, knowing someone else at the school, and understanding that the environment was inclusive. Alleviating the anxiety associated with transitions highlighted the importance of having someone to play with:

“I felt nervous because I didn’t know anyone. I felt better when someone played with me.” (Tamaiti)

We ensure successful learning pathways for all when we listen to tamariki and connect and collaborate with others in their lives to co-construct learning pathways.

We empower kaiako to be agile, innovative, creative and courageous by nurturing professional teaching dispositions, skills and attitudes.

We enable systems level change when we establish a culture of possibilities.
Influenced by the concept of a mosaic of data (artwork, interviews, observations) led to kaiako reflecting on when, where and how they listened to tamariki. Learning to recognise and respond to their enhanced agency shifted the balance of power in NE environments towards the child. As well as listening to children, relationships with whānau were hugely influential on children’s experiences during transitions and on their identity as learners. First impressions of a school, or an interaction with kaiako can have a lasting impact on whānau relationships. Underlying first impressions were past experiences both good and bad. Revealing and sharing these became part of the research journey.

“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 to allow this to happen and at different times to continue to develop that relationship.” (Kaiako)
Regular opportunities to share practices and knowledge with other professionals facilitate dialogue that is more than simply sharing information. This was particularly true with kaiako in the ELS sector. To effect a shift in pedagogy requires relational spaces where kaiako can discuss pedagogical approaches honestly and openly. We found that guided discussions derived from the data, created rich opportunities to share experiences and genuinely pose questions, frame issues and imagine solutions.

Listening to the child, re-positioning tamariki at the centre; collaborating with whānau and community contributed to the ways in which transitions were understood. These were conceptual, structural and practical.

Conceptually, the experience of transitions was understood as critical to learner identity and a sense of belonging. Structurally, the learner identities of 5 year-olds and their status as learners within the whole school was challenged as their voices infiltrated the discourse of what really mattered.

We came to understand that the structures manifested in practical ways. This research allowed kaiako to interrogate current practices and reimagine them.

One thing that this project has taught us is to slow down and mull over conversations and data and consider what it could be telling us. What it told us was, there was a difference in expectations being shared with our community about what starting school may look like. (Kaiako)

Slowing down allowed the time to listen to children, to whānau and to others. That in itself honed our purpose and encouraged kaiako to articulate what they were learning so as to co-construct fit-for-purpose learning pathways.

Nurture professional teaching dispositions, skills and attitudes

Teaching dispositions can often be overlooked as the focus of teaching is on children's learning. However, in our research, the more we examined our data, the more we realised that dispositions were very influential but that these needed nurturing to bring them to fruition. Our purpose was to empower kaiako to be agile, innovative, creative and courageous. Rather than responding in the same way, we wanted to support them to respond differently.

Our solution was a kind of wrap around process where kaiako were encouraged to be open and try something new. That required a shift in mindset – to becoming research-focused.

“People making friends with me and loving me and playing with me. (Tamaiti)”
It also meant collaborating with others in the project. That collaboration was empowering and boosted confidence. What began as a “tell us what we need to do” transformed into “Let’s try this”.

... we gradually began to understand a different way of working where the ideas and understanding came out of slowing down, taking time, discussing and letting the thinking happen. Some of our best ideas came from discussions around a range of topics where we exchanged stories, shared opinions and asked questions of each other. (Kaiako)

An important part of research is documenting what you see, hear and feel. This data created a rich source of material that supported us to understand tamariki and kaiako practices in the context of the organisational climate or school system. Three key elements segued into one another. When children’s interests were foregrounded it transformed kaiako practices, and as a result, highlighted both strengths and weaknesses in organisational systems. Understanding these interactions in the three different spaces (child, kaiako and organisation) was impactful and influential in various ways. For some, the shifts were dramatic and for others, it was about exposing the issues and starting the conversations.

“Understand children’s interests

“Understand kaiako practice

“Understand the system

We feel like we could run a research cycle again and how important it is to go through the process without trying to jump straight in and fix the problem. (Kaiako)
Documentation for kaiako is often regarded as onerous. The kaiako in this project, while admirably conscientious, were justifiably concerned about yet more paperwork. Learning a new technique of using a slide share as a tool to document over time was an effective method to capture data. Workshopping how to make sense of the data convinced them of its importance. ‘Understand before you plan’ was a mantra used by some kaiako. This meant slowing down, thinking differently and allowing dedicated time and space to design fit-for-purpose curriculum solutions that genuinely support creative responses required for intellectual ‘nourishment’. The research process nourished their knowledge base. Access to research coaches and allies through hui and guest speakers, and the shared experience of being part of a wider group of kaiako meant inquiry, facilitation and technology skills were developed, increased and improved.

New pedagogical practices embedded and sustained innovations. The final stream of data coalesced around play-based learning and Te Whāriki the early childhood curriculum. Both were recognised as important to ensuring learner identity and co-constructed learning pathways for all tamariki. However, shared understanding of how and why remained elusive.

We have really benefited from the time together and listening to other people’s projects. Being off site really helped us to stay focused too. It was also helpful having someone to talk to, [who] could summarise our thinking and keep us focused and motivated along the way – the team at CORE provided this support wonderfully! (Kaiako)

As part of the world rejects set curricula goals in favour of interest-led learning, others are seduced by scores and measures of attainment. This is deeply challenging for all kaiako, but especially for NE kaiako where neuroscience suggests that playing supports cognitive development. Kaiako were interested in future-focused learning goals and curriculum designs that were responsive to context. One kaiako commented:

I have learnt that data can be as simple as a drawing and the research is something that we can achieve. The changes don’t have to be huge to make a difference. (Kaiako Reflection)

So we have kind of been talking in the car about our themes and observations in ECEs (sic) and we really noticed the ability for ECEs to go outside a lot more and that alongside our conversations

with children about what were their favourite things to do - play outside; being outside with my friends - made us think about possibilities. We’ve got a smaller syndicate next year so maybe we could possibly do some work around aligning our work and our teaching with ECEs and Te Whāriki principles. This came from that question of “What now?” and the action. (Kaiako interview)

There is a false assumption that learning through play is easy for kaiako. We found this to be untrue. Interest-led, play-based learning depends on the dispositions we identify as empowering for kaiako.

### Teaching dispositions

- **Courage**
- **Curiosity**
- **Critical reflection**
- **Warmth**
- **Openness**
- **Loving**
- **Respectfulness**

A combination of being open (an attitude), learning (increasing kaiako knowledge base), and upskilling (as researchers, as facilitators, as technology savvy) empowers kaiako to make sound pedagogical decisions.

Effective kaiako-led educational research fits into cycles of inquiry where evidence is the basis for decision making as well as for embedding sustainable practice. Our findings support this alongside a journey of discovering the power of nurturing the teaching dispositions we identified in our mini projects.

#### Establish a culture of possibilities - learn to critique, advocate, lead

I think realising, and kind of noting all the ideas and kind of information from observing and listening to conversations and things like that we actually have a huge amount of knowledge.... we need to use that knowledge to go ‘what can we do to improve or change?’ (Kaiako)

A crucial braid to our river was to enable systems level change within and across learning networks. Schools are complex ecological systems which can be difficult to understand. Of all the research intentions, this was, initially, the one that caused concern. To help we referred to this aim as being “revolutionary”.

Changing a system felt big and unmanageable but, over time, kaiako
realised that even small changes to their practice made a difference to the overall systems.

I think that because we’re in the classroom every day with the children, we have the biggest impact on making the changes that are going to then impact their learning and their wellbeing and responses. It’s not coming in through a slow system or change, it’s, we’re actually face to face with them every day. So by us making change it is going to benefit them (the children) straightaway because we are with them all the time. (Kaiako)

In the process of becoming teacher-researchers, kaiako learnt the fundamentals of creating change. The first and foremost was to establish a culture of possibilities based on critical thinking, advocacy, and leadership.

A theme to this report has promoted a research mindset based on critically reflective practices. Current policies, including the curriculum documents encourage this. Pedagogical documentation – real data – allows kaiako to deeply understand the why, what and how of their practice. Tātaiako26 and Tapasā27 address inclusivity and cultural capability. The Education Review Office28 guides also support professional pedagogical collaboration, discussion and critique.

“Learn to critique” became a means for kaiako to evaluate the extent to which a school vision matched the reality and, too, whether or not kaiako practices were fit-for-purpose. Data-led discussions, held regularly as part

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of the research project, were influential because they clearly illustrated the need to change the discourse.

One of the kaiako shared a story about the wee boy who was upset about other children telling him that he didn’t belong in the space because he was from the Māori class. She told him about the changes that were being made such as teaching everyone about the name of the bilingual unit. He suggested that they could also call it the bilingual space too. (Coordinator reflection based on conversation with kaiako)

Advocacy is about overcoming barriers and across our projects we saw how the kaiako became confident passionate advocates for change. Advocacy skills are generally swept over lightly in pre-service training and in professional learning and development. They tend to be subsumed into effective communication skills and as part of building relationships. Clear, consistent messages are essential to good advocacy. In this research, the ability to articulate mini-project findings based on the evidence created shared platforms for systems-level changes.

The ‘Buddy Project’ at Kaiapoi North School was an example of this. Initially, Year 6 tuakana buddies were allocated 30 minutes, once a fortnight to connect with their new entrant/teina buddy. Based on the “What makes me happy at school” data and interviews with Year 6 tuakana, our kaiako questioned whether this was effective. Kaiako surveyed staff to canvas opinions and presented the data at a staff meeting:

The data collated from the staff survey suggested that improvements to the current system could be made and this was something the SLT could consider. (Kaiako)

Contact opportunities were re-structured so buddies could connect regularly and often both spontaneously as well as in timetabled slots. This resulted in manageable changes which, rather than disrupting a system, enhanced learning for all concerned.

As well as being a place to share research experiences, our hui became important sites to establish a culture of possibility. A point of difference in this research was an emphasis on sharing practices and knowledge with other professionals in the education community from the start. Throughout the project we supported kaiako to organise Kāhui Ako meetups because these were influential places to mobilise learning.

Meeting with the wider education community developed leadership capability. All mini-projects had an underlying question about what really mattered to tamariki, to whānau, to kaiako and the school and this question surfaced in whole school discussions and across...
learning networks. One Kāhui Ako ran workshops where expectations about what really mattered when starting school were scrutinised:

Kaiako (Kāhui Ako) We are hearing from ELS kaiako that they are under pressure from parents to teach academic skills but we don’t really want that … what [tamariki] really need are the social skills and the self-management, self-regulation skills.

Kaiako (Rātā Project) So it’s not coming from ELS kaiako, and it’s not coming from us...

Kaiako (Kāhui Ako) No, but parents seem to be really worried about it. (Kaiako interview at a Kāhui Ako hui)

The outcome of this workshop prompted kaiako to examine different sector priorities associated with starting school and how teachers taught these in their context. The salient point here is that when our transition-project kaiako shared their research on children’s experiences of what made them happy at school it stimulated huge interest. Many other kaiako wanted to try this approach so our kaiako worked strategically with Kāhui Ako Across School Leads to design a survey and a follow-up workshop, frame the discussion and skillfully facilitate a process to surface key ideas about what really matters when starting school.29 Our kaiako were able to influence change across the network through sharing the power of the child’s voice, the aspirations of whānau and the nature of pedagogy in ELS and schools.

Learning to critique, learning to advocate and learning to lead contribute to establishing a culture of possibilities. One way we have done this is through professional conferences as well as in local schools and ELS. Since the beginning of the Project we have taken opportunities to present (both face-to-face and virtually) at conferences and through professional learning and development sessions nationally, regionally and locally. These sessions were attended by well over 150 - 200 participants.

29 This project is ongoing.
On reflection

There is no doubt that by investing in applied research like this we learn more about how to transform experiences for the betterment of many tamariki, whānau, teachers and learning communities. While opportunities to engage in a research project such as this are, sadly, rare, teachers, education sector leaders and decision makers should take note – systems-level change is possible when kaiako are invested in, inspired by, and supported through robust change processes. Intense, focused, reflective discussions illuminated possibilities which in turn, created circumstances that allowed kaiako to thrive for the benefit of learners, whānau, communities and themselves.

The kaiako involved in the project expressed their gratitude for the time, space and support they had to truly inquire and delve deeper into their practice and make meaningful changes for tamariki.

Mobilising the findings

Our overall intention of this Project was to empower teachers, alongside children, to try something that makes a difference to children’s learning pathways at school. We were looking to support innovative and creative approaches that, under the korowai of this project, were nurtured to a sustainable state. A further intention was to create a ripple effect across networks of ELS and schools to support change-making, hence mobilising the learning. We saw the kaiako as leaders, innovators and ambassadors who, with CORE’s support around strategic direction, would mobilise what they have learnt through dynamic online and face-to-face platforms.

A set of web-based resources have been designed to illustrate the impact of our findings and to make them accessible to a range of audiences. They include:

- an animation of artwork by tamariki about “What makes me happy at school”
- a poster titled “Is your school ready for me?” describing a range of strategies kaiako and leaders can use as a guide
- stories of impact about the mini-projects designed to inspire others to innovate and transform practices
- short videos about the mini-projects where the participating kaiako talk about their innovations
- this report and the “At a glance” summary
- blogs, presentations and publications.

The kaiako in this project became champions for transformational change. Since the beginning of the Project we have taken opportunities to present (both face-to-face and virtually) at conferences and through professional learning and development sessions nationally, regionally and locally. These sessions were attended by 150–200 participants. By supporting and elevating the learning of these individuals, we aspired to create a cascading impact on not only the tamariki, parents and whānau, and other kaiako they teach with in their schools, but also on kaiako and leaders across the schooling and early childhood networks these lead teachers are part of. This ripple effect across Canterbury will be extended to include kaiako teaching in Māori-medium kura through the resources.
In summary:
Tamariki and kaiako as influencers, influencing systems

When you hear the word project or research it kind of sounds like a lot, but actually you are going about projects without realising you are doing projects...[as a result] I have actually done quite a lot of work because I’m aware of what’s happening in my classroom and I am responding to that or responding to the needs of the community and going - I think they need support in this. (Kaiako)

This research began by acknowledging that tamariki are experts in their lives – their views, their experiences and their aspirations are critical to their identity as learners and, consequently, to their ongoing learning success. This starting point became the pivot for a series of mini action research projects, designed and undertaken by our kaiako in their schools. Each of these projects addressed the overarching purposes of our research but the beauty of this approach allowed kaiako to contextualise their findings based on what learning mattered to them.

In the process, we observed how kaiako assumed a research mind-set that liberated them and led them to innovate and create new ways of thinking about transitions in the wider context of their school and community. Our research positioned kaiako as powerful influencers on the culture of their classrooms, schools and learning networks. Their attitudes, behaviours and skills determined the social environment as well as the physical one between four walls. Over time, words like research, mind-set and critical thinking, and reflective practice took on a depth of meaning not previously realised. Our kaiako demonstrated agility, creativity and courage in their research-based practices.

Our intention was to enable systems change across learning networks which we achieved by establishing a culture of possibilities through:

- critical reflective thinking
- clear advocacy to improve learning pathways for tamariki, whānau and kaiako
- leadership opportunities within schools and across learning networks.

The title of this project, Te hautū i te awa whiria o ako. Paddling the braided rivers of learning was aspirational. Throughout this journey, the imagery of the braided rivers was very apt. We understood how our research intentions were interrelated. Ensuring that learning pathways continue means listening acutely to children; empowering kaiako means trusting their pedagogical instincts; and enabling systems change requires a commitment to equity and the courage to let go of unhelpful organisational structures.

The overall impression of our research is one of quiet surprise. Surprise at how much we covered in two years, surprise at how much we learnt and surprise about how much more we have still to learn. Kaiako perceptions of themselves remain humble – they think they are ordinary. We see their insights as extraordinary. The last words of this report are left to kaiako:

We were surprised at how simple research can be and how powerful the impact is. If we can do it, so can you! (Kaiako)
Recommendations

Right now kaiako can:

- Take action to establish, build and strengthen reciprocal relationships and effective communication pathways with ELS, local schools and whānau. Network, share, and observe the practice of others. Listen to different experiences, perspectives and cultural expertise to inform your thinking and improve processes and practices.

- Support continuity in learning and experiences for tamariki and their whānau as they transition to school. Consider how the funds of knowledge, learner identity and the working theories tamariki and their whānau use to navigate new and existing learning pathways are integrated into the school.

- Put yourselves in the shoes of tamariki and whānau by deeply considering the experience of transitioning to school through their eyes and experiences. Take a walk through the school and the classroom environment to consider how it might look and feel for the many different tamariki and whānau in your community. How might they engage in this environment? What will be familiar to them? How will they belong?

- Share your expertise and learnings about supporting successful transitions to school to grow what is known about how to create shifts in practice and understandings. Mobilise the findings of the school-based inquiry projects within schools and existing learning networks. Encourage others to do the same.
Over the next 6-12 months, kaiako and leaders can:

- **Deeply understand the experience of tamariki, whānau and other kaiako.** Set aside time to observe, discuss and seek others opinions’ around what is working (and for whom) and what needs to be worked on.

- **Shift your mind-set.** Don’t try to fix everything, trust yourself, take time to research and investigate rather than solving the problem or assumption and be willing to sit with things that might not be perfect, or even right.

- **Create resources and structures to support whānau to navigate the transition journey.** Create and provide a whānau tool kit for starting school to support whānau and reduce their anxiety. Ask whānau and tamariki who have been through the process to inform the design and content.

- **Create opportunities for more experienced tamariki to contribute to supporting new entrant tamariki.** Consider a buddy system where atuakana (older child) supports a NE tamariki, a teina (younger child), during their transition to school. This fosters leadership and allows for spontaneous opportunities to connect.
In the long-term, leaders and policy makers can:

- Create capacity to activate change by allocating paid release time for kaiako to undertake in-depth research and professional learning. Include the design and development of local resources with ELS kaiako, whānau and tamariki.

- Dedicate funding for professional development and learning for kaiako from ELS and schools to collaborate on jointly designed research and professional learning projects. Ensure these supports for kaiako enable them to grow capability and are sustainable by design.

- Provide professional learning resources and materials and make these highly accessible. Fund the use of different channels and platforms to mobilise learning (web-based, online, face-to-face and print-based channels and platforms).

- Empower and grow capability within the sector to find new solutions to systemic issues of inequity. Support efforts to work together with other stakeholders to first understand organisational inequities, and second plan to address these challenges.

- Introduce leadership and advocacy professional learning to ensure connectedness and collaboration within and between education networks. Undertake a stocktake exercise of initial teacher training to ascertain the extent to which leadership, advocacy and the benefits of collaboration are emphasised as part of professional practice.
Glossary

ākonga | student, pupil, learner
kaiako | teacher, instructor
Kāhui Ako | community of learning
kaupapa | agenda, ideology, principles
korowai | cloak
tamaiti | child
tamariki | children
teina | younger brother, younger sister, cousin of a junior line or younger, less knowledgeable child
tuakana | senior sibling or an older, more knowledgeable child
waiata | songs, chants
whānau | extended family, multigenerational group of relatives or group of people who work together on and for a common cause.
Appendices

Appendix 1: The Rātā Foundation Steering Group members

Rātā Foundation: Kate Sclater (2020 - ), Courtney Sheat (2020 - 21), Vimbayi Chitaka (2021 - )

Ministry of Education: Jo George Scott (2020 - )


Whānau Parent Representative: Henare Te Aika-Puanak, Ngai Tahu, (2020)

Canterbury Westland Primary Principals Association Representative: Pene Abbie, Paparoa Street School, (2020 - )

Appendix 2: Explanation of terms for Ministry of Education decile rankings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>European / Pākehā</td>
<td>The number of students enrolled that affiliate as European/ Pākehā, as per Statistics NZ Ethnicity New Zealand Standard Classification 2005.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Māori</td>
<td>The number of students enrolled that affiliate as Māori, as per Statistics NZ Ethnicity New Zealand Standard Classification 2005.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific</td>
<td>The number of students enrolled that affiliate as Pacific, as per Statistics NZ Ethnicity New Zealand Standard Classification 2005.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>The number of students enrolled that affiliate as Asian, as per Statistics NZ Ethnicity New Zealand Standard Classification 2005.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MELAA</td>
<td>The number of students enrolled that affiliate as Middle Eastern, Latin American or African, as per Statistics NZ Ethnicity New Zealand Standard Classification 2005.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>The number of students enrolled that affiliate as Other ethnicity, as per Statistics NZ Ethnicity New Zealand Standard Classification 2005.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>The number of international students enrolled in the institution.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 3: Table summarising the school-based mini projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Project focus</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Rāwhiti         | *Me ka moemoee aa, ko au anake;  
 Me ka moemoee aa 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.  
 In response to the perception that those children who had not had visits struggle the most with starting school, the kaiako used multiple data sources to review and change the enrolment process. | Enable systems change  
 Changes to the enrollment process led to transition to school being responsive, inclusive and transparent to all including tamariki, whānau and ELS. A new website was designed collaboratively to ensure that up-to-date, relevant information was available to new tamariki, their whānau, ELS in the area and current students. |
| Ilam            | Transition Triumphs:  
 Kaiako noticed that in some cases both parents and children were having a hard time with transitioning to school so kaiako looked at two aspects of their transition processes: information sharing and play-based approaches to the start of the day. | Enable systems change  
 Development of information gathering forms that allow whānau to share their aspirations, concerns and other insights into their tamariki. Wrapped around this was the starting school party process and conversations with parents. This has been taken up by the rest of the school to support transitions from class to class moving forward.  
 Successful pathways for all tamariki  
 Partnering with whānau, children and ELS they come from has built pathways focused on the success of children. Also a play-based start of the day where children have access to familiar, non-threatening resources to explore has led to happy and engaged children starting school. |
| Kaiapoi North   | It was the data that did it!  
 One project informed another when new entrant teachers explored their question, “How can we ensure that 5 year olds are building happy connections within our school community?” An inquiry into increasing connections to local ECE centres and a revamp of an existing buddy system created data sets that were a catalyst for change. | Successful pathways for all tamariki  
 Establishing and valuing the relationship with local EL teachers, and the voices of ākonga and parents has opened the door to regular open days and school visits. An integral part of the transition programme, the New Entrant Buddies (NEBs), works alongside new entrants to ensure a successful pathway. |
| Kaiapoi Central | Discussion on the Doorstep...  
 Recognising the school enrolment pack was a pivotal part of the transition programme and a first experience for whānau in the process, kaiako reviewed this and amended it to reflect the needs of tamariki and whānau into the new enrolment pack. As the new entrant teachers distributed the enrolment packs to the local EL centres, a discussion on the doorstep with a centre manager of shared (or not so shared) expectations in the preparation for school led to a syndicate leader reflection. | Empowering kaiako  
 This means nurturing professional teaching dispositions, skills and attitudes.  
 The distribution of the enrolment pack led to the discussion that highlighted the discrepancy of the understanding of what the priority skills are for tamariki transitioning to school. New entrant teachers responded and took this issue to the local Kāhui Ako to seek consultation with local primary and EL teachers to build a shared understanding of expectations. |
Appendix 4: Indicators

New entrant kaiako:
- design and embed effective transition processes into their school curriculum
- develop curriculum based on ākonga interests and building on what they already know and can do
- feel confident about their role in supporting continuity in learning and experience for all ākonga new to school
- have a growing repertoire of strategies for working with ākonga, parents and whānau to personalise the transition to school process and experience
- know ākonga strengths, interests, culture and capabilities, and their parents’ and whānau aspirations for them and use this information to design curriculum to suit each ākonga
- understand the connections between the early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki and The New Zealand Curriculum for schools
- develop meaningful relationships with their local early childhood services and work closely with their early childhood colleagues to support successful transitions for ākonga and whānau
- draw on a range of theoretical and research informed information to inform their practice
- use the information provided from early childhood services and make links between how ākonga learn and the key competencies of The New Zealand Curriculum
- confidently articulate the value of transition to school processes to whānau, other kaiako, and their school’s leadership team

Akonga:
- Like school, are happy to be there
- Demonstrate a sense of belonging and comfort at school
- Willingly engage and become involved in school life and learning in increasingly complex ways
- Recognise the ways their identity, language and culture are affirmed
- Make connections between home, their early childhood service, school and beyond
- Confidently demonstrate their capabilities and knowledge to their kaiako
- Form positive relationships with their school peers and kaiako
Parents and whānau:

• Share aspirations and co-construct and design a plan to support a successful transition for their tamariki.

• Build a relationship with teachers to then be able to share experiences, concerns, celebrations

• Are comfortable at school and contribute in ways that are meaningful to them

• Are confident that their tamariki is known, understood, and recognised by the kaiako

• Are empowered to share their culture and culturally appropriate practices which are important to them and their tamariki

• Share artefacts of prior learning with New Entrant kaiako, for example profile books, digital platforms (Story Park, See Saw, Educa)

• Know how and where to access information around transition to school and seek support as needed