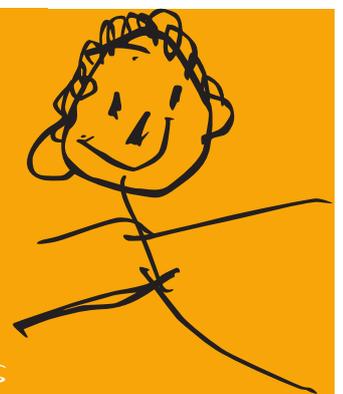


Early Education



Volume 67 Spring / Summer 2021

- TLIF Round 5: The use of tools for reviewing shifts in practice and learning outcomes
- Reflections on the role of teachers in contemporary ECE: Pedagogy, leadership and engagement with fathers
- The past, present and future of rural playcentres
- ECE and COVID-emotional factors for teachers and leaders
- Supporting Associate Teachers across the years





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Early Education welcomes:

- Innovative practice papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words and up to five keywords.
- Research informed papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words, and up to five keywords.
- Think pieces with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Commentaries on management matters with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

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I am strong in mind, heart, and body and we are all connected

Ki te kaha ahau me whakairo, me ngākau,
me tinana, he wairua tatou katoa

Monica Bay Waters, Kim Thomson,
Tracey Hosie, Kirsty Bargh, Sarah Berry,
Tara McLaughlin, and Lynette Wray

Introduction

Nestled within Upper Hutt, in the small community of Tōtara Park, is a special place of early learning where kaiako (educators) focused their shared interest in supporting mindfulness and social and emotional competencies to conduct a team-led inquiry. Tōtara Park Kindergarten's tamariki, whānau (family), kaiako, senior leadership and critical friends have journeyed together, with support from the Ministry of Education Teacher Led Innovation Fund (TLIF) to make evidence-informed, local curriculum based, positive changes to our teaching and learning. The end goal has been to empower tamariki with the knowledge and skills to navigate their responses to the complexities of life in healthy ways.

WHY were we motivated to take action?

Our team has been aware of the significant increase in the number of young tamariki, tamariki (children) and rangitahi (teenagers) who are affected by stress, anxiety, and mental health issues. New Zealand has one of the

highest youth suicide mortality rates among the 41 countries reported in the OECD (UNICEF Office of Research, 2017). As Kaiako in early childhood education, we wanted to lead the way in implementing intentional and locally appropriate teaching strategies that help tamariki gain the skills they need to help establish the foundations for lifelong social and emotional wellbeing. Our focus on early teaching and learning supports for social-emotional wellbeing is directly aligned with the Government's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy.

Sir Peter Gluckman's (2017) discussion paper on youth suicide in New Zealand highlighted the multiple contributing factors that must be considered including personal, social, and economic. The report emphasised the importance of "primary prevention starting from very early in life" (Gluckman, 2017, p. 1), which was described by Gluckman as "promoting resilience to the inevitable exposure to emotional stresses and building self-control skills in early childhood and primary school years, by using approaches that we already know about" (p. 1). Often these approaches are presented as packaged programmes or interventions with research evidence to show their effectiveness. While selecting from a set of known programmes is a viable option, we wanted to design and

implement intentional and locally appropriate teaching strategies that were targeted to help children gain the skills they need to help establish the foundations for lifelong social and emotional wellbeing. We considered the extent of the mahi ahead and agreed that this would be a hefty project to embark on, though the potential outcomes for tamariki were more than worth it!

WHAT did we do? The TLIF and team-based inquiry

Our first step was to secure funding in order to have the financial resources to allow for release time for the behind the scenes, professional development, resources and to obtain the relevant support required. Spotting the TLIF information on the back of the *Education Gazette* and combining this with kaiako's interest in the NZ based *Pause, Breathe, Smile* programme (Mindfulness Education Group, n.d.), we delved deeper into our possibilities, to create an idea for something innovative to implement within our kindergarten. We sought the support of researchers, Tara McLaughlin and Karyn Aspden from Massey University, to learn more about promoting children's social-emotional competence, provide support for our team-led inquiry, and to help us with the process of applying and reporting for the grant.

The project followed a rapid cycle inquiry methodology adapted from Timperley's spiral of inquiry (Timperley et al., 2014), which was outlined in the TLIF 2018 guide. The process included scanning, focusing, developing a hunch, learning, taking action, and checking, in rapid succession. The cycle began with our application for the TLIF in which we had already scanned, focused, and developed a hunch about the needs within our Kindergarten. During this phase, we discovered an article which explained that increasing recommendations from experts have suggested that combining social-emotional teaching and learning with mindfulness may have particularly powerful benefits for children (Lantieri & Zakrzewski, 2015). Lantieri and Zakrzewski (2015) describe that social-

emotional teaching and learning uses an outside-in approach with a focus on teaching children new skills to use in everyday interactions, while mindfulness works from the inside out, with the idea that each person has innate relationship-building qualities (e.g., empathy, kindness) that can be cultivated when children become aware of the connection between their emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations.

Both social-emotional teaching and learning, and mindfulness, have an increasing body of evidence that shown that mindfulness programmes (e.g., Bernay et al., 2016; Lantieri et al., 2016; Maloney et al., 2016; Rix & Bernay, 2014) and social-emotional teaching practices (e.g., Ho & Funk, 2018; Joseph, & Strain, 2003; McLaughlin et al., 2017; Rosenthal & Gatt, 2010; Webster-Stratton, 1999) can support tamariki to develop mindfulness capabilities and social-emotional competence that result in positive outcomes now and in the future. Together, the approaches provide children with a bigger toolbox of strategies to draw on as they navigate their worlds. Finding this research provided us with the foundation upon which to base our proposal; it was a point of difference—combining these two ideas together as one intentionally and locally designed, early childhood relevant approach to teaching and learning in the social-emotional domain.

To this end we focused our innovation on the integration of practices from evidenced-informed mindfulness programmes, social-emotional teaching and learning approaches, and the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). With the combined knowledge of our kindergarten association, our kindergarten teaching team, and our whānau community, and the support of our senior leadership and critical friends, we aimed to build on existing and effective approaches, while also selecting and adapting practices to ensure a good cultural and contextual fit for our kindergarten.

Once successful in receiving the TLIF award, we began a process of new learning which included undertaking training in tamariki yoga,

tai-chi, and the *Pause Breath Smile* mindfulness programme (Mindfulness Education Group, n.d.). We also worked with our critical friends to learn more about specific strategies to support tamariki social-emotional competence and key skills and knowledge that would support tamariki to be confident and resilient learners (Clarke & McLaughlin, 2018; McLaughlin et al., 2015; Ministry of Education, 2019). In the learning and take action phase of our inquiry we worked with critical friends and our senior leadership to develop our Tamariki Strong framework. The Tamariki Strong framework outlines key areas that the team has identified as important for tamariki learning and the actions that kaiako might take to support resilience and well-being. The Tamariki Strong framework is aligned with the learning outcomes from *Te Whāriki* and is organised around five key areas of practice related to social-emotional learning and mindfulness, including:

- emotional literacy;
- calmness and self-regulation;
- being present and focusing attention;
- connecting with others and showing manaakitanga (caring, respect, fairness, responsibility);
- resiliency, empowerment and agency in learning.

The framework has supported us to implement centre-wide practices and kaiako-specific practices.

For the purposes of our inquiry, we used the framework to further develop an assessment tool, which was used as a measure of tamariki social and emotional skills and mindfulness abilities. The tool was developed to be completed by both parents and kaiako at the beginning and end of the process so that we could gauge tamariki growth in these areas over time. This data gathering tool was able to show the growth of individual tamariki, and the relationship between whānau and kaiako measurements of tamariki growth. We also developed a kaiako self-reflection tool and a feelings word drawing protocol (cf. Einarsdottir

et al., 2009) to document changes in kaiako perspectives about their use and confidence with practices on the framework and the range of emotion words that our tamariki used from the beginning, middle, and end of the project. These tools were key measures for the checking phases of our inquiry.

To support our regular use of the practices described in the *Tamariki Strong* framework we used a process of peer observation, reflection and feedback within our teaching team. This process involved developing kaiako action plan goals for practices to focus on using video to document and reflect on examples of practice with another kaiako. This supported kaiako to reflect on their own practice as well as their peers with a focus on improving our understanding of ways to implement these practices and implement them with consistency as a team.

In the sections that follow we describe more about actions we took to support children's learning about mindfulness and social-emotional capabilities. We then describe and show some our findings from the data collected before and after the project. It worth noting, that during 18-month period of our project (April 2019–August 2020), New Zealand went into a COVID-19 lockdown for several weeks. During this time, the kindergarten was closed and we were interacting with tamariki and whānau through Storypark and zoom mat times. There were many aspects of practices that carried well into this new way to supporting tamariki and whānau and these are highlighted below.

HOW did we take action?

The *Tamariki Strong* framework outlines many specific teaching practices and key aspects of children's learning. Having a framework that we used to both assess children's current capabilities (from our perspective and the perspective of their parents) as well as to reflect on our own practice created a new space and focus for our team conversations. In supported meetings with our senior leadership and critical friends, we explored what we learned about

ourselves and tamariki from using our framework associated measures. As a team, we discussed areas in which we held different views of what a practice looked like or how a tamariki was progressing in their learning, we explored each other's ideas, and sought more information from whānau when we were unsure. This focused discussion made us more aware of things that were important for social-emotional and mindfulness teaching and learning and led to more consistency and support amongst team members.

In addition to our heightened awareness and use of practices throughout the day in our ongoing interactions with tamariki, we also identified and planned to implement some focused centre-wide practices that made a real difference in the feelings of calmness and flow within our centre. What follows next are descriptions of some of the key practices that have had positive impacts for tamariki, their whānau and kaiako—our community of learners.

Te Pere

Mat times begin with our te pere chime, which is a Tibetan singing bowl. Te pere means 'to ring' in te reo Māori and the beautiful sound supports tamariki with the transition from the busyness of an active kindergarten to the calmness of mat time sessions. The rangitira (leader) of the day takes pride in chiming te pere, a taonga in our place, and the group have learnt to sit in a relaxing 'owl' yoga pose, focus their attention, and place their finger on their nose when they can no longer hear the sound. This brings our awareness to the present and kaiako actively model this mindful practice alongside tamariki. Mat times are used at the beginning and ending of each day.

Greetings

During the morning mat time, supporting our rangatira to welcome each tamariki in the morning with their choice of greeting (e.g., handshake, wave, hug, hongī, high five or fist bump), provides a sense of kindness and contentedness, and empowers each learner to

make their own choice. Kaiako have seen how this process empowered our rangatira to support their peers and feel welcomed to the mat each morning. Individual tamaiti (child) were also empowered through their choice of greeting towards our rangatira for the day.

Deep Breathing

Three different breathing techniques have been introduced and used in the setting: mountain; hot chocolate; and butterfly breathing. Each of these are supported with visual displays and used throughout the day both spontaneously and in mat time sessions. Our rangatira choose a breathing technique and lead their peers, with kaiako, through the chosen technique. Kaiako can feel how this strategy helps to slow the pace of the day and focus attention on the present moment. Kaiako have also learnt to utilise this technique throughout the day to support tamaiti who have heightened emotions. As we talk tamaiti through the process, it helps to ground them and regulate their emotions. This then allows kaiako to talk with tamaiti about how they are feeling and to decide what they can do to feel better.

Our mantra

The introduction and daily use of a mantra was important to supporting a positive sense of self for tamariki and to foster positive self-talk. The team worked together to develop the following mantra: *I am strong in mind, heart, and body and we are all connected; ki te kaha ahau me whakairo, me ngākau, me tinana, he wairua tātou katoa.* This mantra is used collectively, daily and spoken in English, te reo Māori and NZSL (New Zealand Sign Language.) The shared words have been spoken and signed every day in our Kindergarten and continued to be a feature of our mat times during COVID lockdown. We often hear tamariki using the mantra in everyday play, speak it together as a group at the end of day mat time, and whānau tell us their tamariki often use the mantra at home. This shared statement has been a useful tool in setting a tone of strength, connection, and wellbeing for the community.

The mantra was a particular favourite of a young girl who passed away after the project ended. She spoke this mantra often, and with her family. At her funeral service, her father spoke this mantra to her and then turned and reaffirmed it with those in attendance. This moment was filled with deep emotions, and for us, reflected the importance of the work we have done and will continue to do in partnership with the community to support competent, confident, and resilient learners. We share this part of our story with you in partnership with her family and in memory of a strong, loved, and connected girl who will always be part of our community.

Yoga

Yoga is offered regularly throughout the week with kaiako signalling a session is starting for those who want to join, with mats available for tamariki to use and also to initiate spontaneous sessions. We created yoga cards with our tamariki; these show tamariki in a range of poses, each named with the pose's likeness to an animal. Tamariki are empowered to take part through these visuals of themselves and their friends, using them with respect, care and delight! We have then seen these yoga poses being used at home, and teaching our yoga poses to family members became an important part of COVID lockdown learning through making the yoga cards available to whānau through Storypark.

Emotions (mat time with emotion cards)

We worked together to identify a list of emotion words that we thought were appropriate for supporting tamariki to know and use. Emotions words and images are shown in different displays around the setting in the three official languages of New Zealand. This visual aide supports tamariki to self-assess their own emotion and consider how they are feeling in different situations, as well as to broaden their emotional vocabulary. At times, kaiako also adapted and performed plays in which familiar stories that highlight different emotions, such as Goldilocks, the Three Billy

Goats Gruff, The Gingerbread Man or the Three Little Pigs, were re-enacted. Kaiako were able to emphasise their character's feelings and alter the ending of some stories to show how actions can support the feelings of others (see Duley et al., 2018 for example with puppets). After the play was completed, tamariki were enabled to explore and act out the story themselves, expressing the emotions of characters. As kaiako, we also sought to use more emotion words throughout the day, reading books about different emotions, asking children about how they are feeling, and talking about our own feelings too.

New daily routines

We as kaiako also changed a few key aspects of the daily routine to support these practices. For example, we initiated a shift in the kai routine which has resulted in flexible eating times for tamariki, play that was disrupted less, and an overall more peaceful flow of the day.

Manaakitanga Paetae

The practice of manaakitanga is celebrated daily at kindergarten in the form of a manaakitanga paetae (award). This was shared with tamariki by having a special award (certificate) that could be given out at any time. Kaiako highlight how individual tamaiti have achieved their paetae in ways that are aligned to their development. The actions of the child are described so that all tamariki hear that kindness, respect, fairness, care and responsibility are valued in this space.

WHAT did we find?

As described above, we used a project-developed tamariki assessment tool, kaiako self-reflection tool, and child drawing protocol to learn more about the emotion words that tamariki use. With parent permission, we gathered data from a cohort of 24 tamariki who were three-years-old at the start and would not leave for school during the project. All data were analysed for changes and trends overtime, amongst the team and with the support of the senior teacher and external partners. We also

sought anecdotal feedback and reflection from whānau and completed kaiako reflection journals.

Across data sources we saw gains in our own use and understanding of social-emotional and mindfulness practices as kaiako, and our reports and parent reports reflected children’s

growing capabilities also. For example, Table 1 shows the range of emotion words that children used during the drawing protocol at different points of time. Over the time of the project, we saw increases in the range of emotion words, the sophistication of emotions words, and the number of children who used at least one emotion word in drawing event.

Table 1. Summary of emotion words that children used across drawing protocol.

Emotion Word	Number of Children Who Used this Word		
	Time 1 October 2019	Time 2 January 2020	Time 3 July 2020
Happy	9	22	22
Good/Great	4	4	4
Sad	2	3	4
Angry	2	0	1
Surprised	1	0	1
Silly	1	1	0
Better	1	1	0
Fun	1	0	0
Funny	1	0	0
Nice	0	1	0
Crying	0	1	0
Calm	0	1	0
Love	0	1	0
Scared	0	1	4
Excited	0	0	2
Annoyed	0	0	2
Hurt	0	0	1
Bored	0	0	1
Grumpy	0	0	1
Confused	0	0	1
Frustrated	0	0	1
Summary			
Range of Emotion Words	9 words	10 words	13 words
No Emotion Word Used	6	0	0

Note. Time 1 some children used more than one word to describe how they felt. Time 2 and 3 many children used more than one word to describe how they felt.

While we were pleased to be able to quantify and 'show' the changes in children's learning using our project designed tools, kaiako have relished in the positive feedback we have received from whānau. These have been valuable testaments to the effectiveness of our project as parents have highlighted the appreciation they feel for their children's social and emotional growth and mindfulness abilities. We delight in the knowledge that tamariki are able to take these skills and utilise them in all aspects of their lives.

For example, one parent described the learning for her child in the following way:

Her maturity levels have changed in the respect of her knowing she can do something and keeping on having a go. She has learnt a lot about controlling things and changing for next time to make the experience better.

[Child's name] has also really enjoyed teaching us how to use the 'finger mountains' for breathing and other techniques he has learnt at kindy. [He] is so proud of himself and gets excited when he can share what he has learnt at kindy with us at home. It has also been great seeing [him] starting to show an understanding of his emotions and naming these. I have noticed that he has started communicating with us more around how he is feeling and what he needs from us, he will tell me when he needs a cuddle from me if he is upset or angry.

Our personal reflections have also highlighted our own growth and learning from the project. For example, a simple but important reflection was noted by one of us: "Just acknowledging their emotion is an important step, and sometimes this can be all that they need". Another kaiako noted:

I feel that tamariki know that it is okay to talk about their emotions,

this is a way of being for everyone at kindergarten. It is a regular part of mat time to ask tamariki, "How are you feeling in your heart today?" and acknowledge that emotion with what they may need.

In addition to our focus on emotions our *Tamariki Strong* framework covered many areas of belonging and connection. One of us noted:

I acknowledge and encourage the importance of treating each other with kindness and promote positive talk between peers through role modelling and praise. From practices like these I am observing a real difference in how our tamariki are developing relationships with others.

Another Kaiako noted:

Oh, I absolutely love that tamariki have a strong sense of belonging here and that they feel safe and that this is a place where they can share their thinking. I use the terms grateful and thankful, and I'm always impressed at the sharing that occurs—tamariki are able to share their independent thoughts, some naming tangible items, others talk about people in their lives and what they do together. Discussing being grateful in a group has created an atmosphere of care, warmth and happiness.

WHERE does the story end?

We are happy to report that our innovation has made a difference to both the practices of kaiako and to tamariki learning and wellbeing. Through assessment via data collection, children's drawings and analysis, conversations with whānau, and kaiako reflection and assessment, we know that our project has resulted in numerous positive outcomes. There is a new, strong orientation to wellbeing and a more positive climate. Kaiako practice has been de-privatised and made more intentional,

consistent, and team oriented. The development and implementation of our *Tamariki Strong* framework has created new local knowledge and understandings about how to recognise and implement strategies that support all tamariki, especially those who experience anxiety and need social-emotional support. Kaiako share this information with whānau and colleagues and work collaboratively to enhance outcomes for tamariki. We continue to use many of the practices and our framework to continually guide our actions and thinking in an ongoing way.

For our team, the TLIF presented the opportunity to explore deeply a topic of importance with support and to identify the aspects of teacher practice and child learning that were important for our community. We embedded this within and across our implementation of Te Whāriki and used the tools we developed to guide us. We have shared our story in hopes that it may serve as inspiration for a deeper look at these important areas of learning. Consistent with our processes to identify what would work for us and for our community, we encourage other settings to be intentional in exploring and identifying what will work for your local community and seek the support needed to put in place your important and locally valued practices.

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