

# Manaaki Project: Our path, our connection

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This is a story of how a collaborative project supported children's transitions from early childhood education to school, bringing benefits for school and kindergarten ākonga.

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When the teaching team at Māngere Bridge Kindergarten first published their book, *Crossing the Border* (Hartley et al., 2012), each Auckland Kindergarten Association kindergarten was gifted a copy. Once we received our copy at Ferndale Kindergarten, I read it and was impressed with the work the team at Māngere Bridge had engaged in to support their children's transition from kindergarten to school. I found their accomplishments inspiring.

Ferndale Kindergarten joined the Mt Albert Kāhui Ako in August 2018 (see ["Building Bridges: Developing an ECE Presence in Kāhui Ako"](#); Bailey, 2019). The Kāhui Ako offered us support to work collaboratively with [kaiako](#) from local schools and ECE services, for the benefit of learners within our community. As the Mt Albert Kāhui Ako gathered, the dynamic, multi-faceted and complex threads that each of the involved parties brought with them began to weave together, forming a strong, flexible and vibrant fabric. I worked alongside the leadership team as an Early Childhood Education (ECE) representative, hoping to also weave in our ECE voice, all the time holding the inspiration I had garnered from *Crossing the Border*.

## Developing the Manaaki Project

With funding from the Ministry of Education, the ECE sector was able to forge its own path within the Kāhui Ako. The funding was used for a variety of professional development opportunities, including inviting the team from Māngere Bridge to present their research from their *Crossing the Border* book. We held an evening at Ferndale Kindergarten where we invited kaiako from our local ECE centres and schools to join us. This opportunity ignited a spark within our Kāhui Ako for our own possible transition initiatives.

At this time the Mt Albert Kāhui Ako employed Abby Hunt as an across-school leader with a focus on transition, while I was the representative of the ECE services within the Kāhui Ako. Abby and I engaged in hui, negotiating the exciting prospect of bringing together school and ECE ākongā within our community. The COVID-19 pandemic meant that the transition work became focused on a richly resourced online tool. The collaborative development and launch of the Year 0–3 Online Kete ([Mt Albert Kāhui Ako](#)) was a game changer for our ākongā as we navigated the challenges of home learning.

In the background, work was continuing to bring about the dream of a kanohi ki te kanohi (face to face) ākongā mentor programme. Through our research we saw the value of developing such innovations in our community, in having a significant positive impact for all involved. For the older school ākongā, a mentor programme would offer many opportunities to share the positive dispositions they have developed, including seeing first-hand the value of being a role model and representative of their school. For our Ferndale ākongā we saw that mentoring from older ākongā would foster positive modelling for transition, as well as provide support and a sense of connection. This vision became the Manaaki Project.

Jamie Brosnan (a Year 6 kaiako at Gladstone School), Abby and I worked through the logistics of offering Year 6 children the opportunity to become a mentor—a buddy in the kindergarten environment—during the school’s weekly options programme. As the complexities of this project began to take shape, it was apparent that the Māngere Bridge experience was unique to Māngere Bridge and their situation, just as our developing project was going to be unique to us. There was a need to be flexible and to have an understanding that the school and kindergarten structures have their own processes and constraints. Together we aimed to make this connection happen, finding mutually meaningful pathways. We were delighted when 16 school ākongā chose the option of joining the Manaaki Project to spend time with us in early childhood settings. These students had been offered a number of options, including tempting offers of adventures like visiting Snow Planet, and we were thrilled that they chose to be mentors in the Manaaki Project.

## The project begins!

With great anticipation, the Manaaki Project began on May 2021. Sixteen “Gladstone Buddies” were divided into two groups, half to visit with Mt Albert Kindergarten and half to Ferndale Kindergarten. The two teams alternated their visits between the two kindergartens, so the kindergarten ākongā connected with their alternate buddies every

fortnight. To support the project, kaiako from Gladstone School accompanied ākongā during the visits.

Over time the original model of the Manaaki Project adapted and flexed to accommodate the local (and global!) contexts more smoothly. We negotiated regional lockdowns, mask-wearing and all the challenges this unprecedented time demanded. With resilience and a mutual determination to keep this project going, we continue to develop the fabulous connection. The Manaaki Project continues to thrive in our learning environments today. We were able to capture some of the voices of our participating ākongā and kaiako, which we share below.

## Feedback from those involved

We saw numerous benefits for both kindergarten and school ākongā. Our kindergarten ākongā shared their thoughts about their Gladstone buddies:

*Vito:* I played with playdough with Rhylee, and with bikes and the trolley. She is nice and I like it when she sings the ABC song.”

*Mariam:* I liked playing in the sandpit with you because you liked making volcanoes. You played on the swing with me. Maybe we can play with the hula hoops next time?

*Gaia:* Thank you for coming to be my buddy. I enjoyed swinging with you. I enjoyed playing with balls. We threw them into the hoop and we bounced them. You were always kind to me. I love you.

*Rory:* Thank you for being the best. Playing on the swings with me was fun. We went down the slide together. You are funny and kind.

*Ochre:* Playing in the playground with Poppy is fun. I like the swings. I like that Poppy is kind and gentle. I like it when she sits with me at mat time.

Beau’s Mum, Emma wrote the following:

There always seems a buzz in the air in the mornings of “buddy day” and on pick up in the afternoons the kids are full of stories about what they did that day with their buddies. I’ve found it has helped Beau create strong connection to the school prior to starting. It has provided him the opportunity to meet the new entrants’ teachers before he goes to school, so on his first

day, he'll know them and have a level of comfort in a new environment. When we pick up his brother from the school now Beau loves to greet and chat with his buddies (both past and present) ... it makes Beau feel very special to have a connection with these older kids. When he starts school, I'm sure this be something he will take great pride and comfort in.

One day, I was in the local shopping mall, and Freddy stopped to chat to Beau and explain to me he was Beau's buddy and a bit about why he chose to be a buddy. This interaction really highlighted the ability for the programme to help create a strong sense of local community.

Every "buddy day," the Gladstone Year 5 and 6 ākonga arrived at kindergarten with an absolute focus on finding their kindergarten buddies. They knew once the connection was made they had the freedom of being together, exploring and delighting in each other's company. We asked the Gladstone Y5 and Y6 buddies about being a buddy:

*What has having a Ferndale buddy taught you?*

Patience.

To appreciate others.

Patience and not to always take the lead because they have their own choices.

That little kids enjoy playing and that is how they learn.

*"What do you think your Ferndale buddy has learned from you?"*

You can make friends with anyone, even older people.

Creative skills and being independent.

To complete something before moving on to the next thing.

Responsibility and being cool.

*Are there any changes you think could improve the Manaaki Project?*

No—I just really love it.

More group activities.

Nothing—I love the Manaaki Project.

Sing other songs—not just the ABC song.

We have evidenced a palpable shift in confidence as our ākongā transition from kindergarten. The first tentative school visits, often tinged with anxiety, were made much easier as connections with buddies from the Manaaki Project were reawakened.

For the five years the Manaaki project has been running it is evident this powerful ongoing connection promotes positive outcomes for ākongā at both school and the kindergarten. This relationship has continued to develop to a point where there is an ease of sharing knowledge and resources. Recently the Gladstone kaiako organised their ākongā to come to kindergarten, bringing some recently hatched chicks. A shared focus on nurture, caring and compassion further cemented our ongoing bond.

As Gladstone kaiako, Jamie Brosnan, shared:

Our ākongā enthusiastically participate in the project when they visit Ferndale, actively enhancing their communication, empathy, and patience as they aspire to be positive role models ... it has brought me great joy to witness students thrive within the Manaaki Project. They bravely step out of their comfort zones, reading stories aloud to their Ferndale buddies, absorbing knowledge from them and taking on small leadership roles in some activities.

The programme fosters many positive outcomes, including opportunities to grow in confidence and self-esteem; it enhances empathy and develops an understanding of what it means to be a good role model. Through our experiences, we have seen that being a mentor to a younger child at kindergarten has benefits for both ākongā. As we highly value the collaborative nature of [ako](#) in this project, we see the mentor and learner roles reverse regularly as ākongā work alongside each other. This co-learning relationship is captured in the [whakatauki](#): ko koe ki tēnā, ko ahau ki tēnei kīwai o te kete. Together we celebrate and uphold the weight of the kete we carry, making the

most of every moment we are together and assimilating this experience into our very being knowing successful transition will hold us strong.

## Positive relationships build strong communities

The Manaaki Project has gifted us an opportunity to welcome back ākongā who once attended our kindergarten. How powerful it is to have the time to [awhi](#) these precious ākongā, to bridge the years since we last spent time together in this space. It is also powerful to have the chance to get to know and welcome older siblings whom we often hear about, and to see the positive impact they have on their younger siblings. These established relationships beautifully bring the past and the present together, adding strength and richness to the project.

The New Zealand Curriculum has the expectation that the curriculum “... provides for coherent transitions and opens up pathways to future learning” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 58). Together with the support of Heidi Rose, our current Kāhui Ako “across school leader,” we hold the handles of this shared kete, within which lie many [taonga](#) such as potential, surprise and [aroha](#). Together, we hold a deep determination to uphold this valuable connection into the future, as it is here we realise the promise of developing resilience through transition.

## Acknowledgements

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## References

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Christine is currently the Head Teacher at Ferndale Kindergarten in Mt Albert, Auckland. She has been a kaiako in the Early Childhood Sector for over 30 years and has a particular interest in finding ways to implement how current research and understandings might be integrated into learning for mokopuna, whānau and kaiako to enable identities to prosper. Christine believes that professional learning and the promotion of new ideas are key to building strong learning communities.

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