



Title of initiative

Whānau Support - Tamariki Foundation Skills (Kawerau and Te Hapara)

Our organisation and delivery team

The Ready4Learning Trust is dedicated to building confidence in whānau and empowering them to see themselves as the first teachers of their tamariki. Our mission is to support children to develop and thrive by focusing on essential foundation skills necessary for both learning and life. Our work is centred on partnering with communities and support networks in underserved areas.

The organisation and delivery team consisted of Carolynne Masson, Andrea Ford, Jamie Cleeton-Grayndler and Danielle Croucher as well as the trustees Dr Linda Selby, Ros Stephens, and Jenni Dittmer. We worked in two regions – Kawerau and Te Hapara Gisborne.

What we did

Our approach to this equity challenge, was to design a collaborative, community-engaged project grounded in Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR aligns with our commitment to co-designing and leading change with local practitioners and community members, rather than imposing solutions from a distance. It assumes that everyone brings valuable expertise, especially those closest to the problem, whose insights deepen understanding and reduce bias. PAR upholds people's right to construct their own narratives, generate knowledge, and interpret their experiences. It typically unfolds through small, iterative cycles that address minor questions first, then progressively more complex issues, through reflection, evaluation, and critical analysis. In doing so, PAR can empower marginalized, disadvantaged, silenced, or oppressed groups, to shape new knowledge that reflects their cultural experiences, perspectives, priorities, and concerns.

As part of our journey we explored and implemented the Wayfinding leadership approach introduced to us by EPIT as it fitted well with our PAR approach.

Adopting this approach, we spent a lot longer at the initial scoping and planning stages – preparing the waka - than initially envisaged. This was especially so in Te Hapara as each time we met with a group, they would suggest others who would be in a good position to advise or contribute ideas. At these meetings we explained our project goals, how our trust works and then shared suggestions already made in previous meetings. We then gathered their voices to guide us about how to proceed and what we should be aware of. We also had hui to bring everyone together to create the plan to move forward.

Actions initiated from the group planning:

- Creation of Play Days. These were held in local parks and whānau from the community and ECE tamariki were invited to play. We had community support attending such as the Hippy programme, Barnadoes, Super Grans, Kaianga Ora, District Council play advocate, local ECEs and REAP in Kawerau..
- Creation of Pouaka Ako (learning boxes). These 'boxes' consisted of a wide variety of resources, activities and games that help develop tamariki foundation skills. Examples include bilingual books, playdough, poi, rakau, card games, puzzles, activity books, puppets, balls, skipping ropes, colouring pencils and scissors to name just a few. The boxes also included whānau booklets that explained each of the resources, how to use them, and how they might benefit childrens' learning.. QR codes were also included to support those struggling with English. Our 'advisory' groups provided suggestions for additional resources (e.g. poi andrakau), and recommended that the books need to be bilingual.
- Creation of a whānau liaison position (Jamie) who would show whānau the Pouaka ako contents and how to use them to develop essential learning skills. . She would answer questions from whānau and help build confidence in those we are working with. Jamie was also responsible for gathering feedback from whānau as to what activities were particularly useful, those not so popular, and providing suggestions for the contents of the next Pouaka ako.
- Provision of workshops for teachers of Early Childhood centres and early Primary classes about transition to school and the importance of foundation skills.
- Support for the school and main ECE in the Te Hapara area to gain funding from their local Iwi to provide Pouaka ako for their own parents.
- Collaboration with the Kawerau Teen Parent unit to create a Level 2 NCEA course "Provide and reflect on the value of play experiences for a mokopuna/child's development and learning". This had a positive impact on 15 of the young mothers enrolled. Due to the success of this programme, we have been asked to make this course available to the Gisborne Teen Parent unit.
- Establishment of a scholarship for the two whānau liaison people to offer some financial support and to grow their skills and confidence.
- Applied for and received local funding from sponsors to support this project and to ensure ongoing sustainability.

Continuous monitoring, review, and evaluation of our project was an iterative process, to help ensure its effectiveness in addressing the equity challenges faced by these communities.

What we learned from our work

Learning from and about the process:

With the support of EPIT and our evaluator, Dr Louise, we successfully learned and implemented key elements of the Wayfinding Leadership approach. This prompted a significant shift in our perspective concerning "deliverables," leading us to dedicate more time in the initial stages to cultivating genuine relationships and strong connections (preparing the waka). We also came to understand the signposts (mapping what matters), waypoints (discoveries and destinations) and the importance of impact as contribution.

We actively created space for diverse stakeholders—including (but not limited to) iwi, whānau, schools, Ministry of Education, and Kaianga Ora—to contribute their input and share their stories. We engaged in **active listening** to identify collaborative and cohesive ways of working. This ensured the authenticity of our connections, which, in turn, fostered a strong sense of ownership among our stakeholders. A key part of our work has been from collecting stories, listening and working on ways to better work together with these two very different communities of Kawerau and Te Hapara.

There were moments in our journey that required us to “circle the waka.” This metaphor, representing a leadership decision-making process, is a call for a unified, deliberate approach. It encompasses the following key elements:

- **Pausing for Unity:** The team (*whānau/crew*) must gather and align before setting a new course or making a critical decision, ensuring a shared, collective commitment to the next action.
- **Consulting All Voices:** All roles and perspectives are brought together (circling) to ensure every voice is heard before a final direction is agreed upon.
- **Shared Direction and Responsibility:** The final decision is a consensus that defines the collective direction of the entire vessel (*waka*), ensuring success or failure is a shared responsibility (*Mahi Tahī*).

An example of this process occurred when we had successfully built rapport in the Kawerau community and identified Danielle as the ideal community liaison person. Danielle was keen to join the project, but monetary matters were a barrier. We had to work collaboratively with our trustees (and a lawyer) to develop a solution that worked for Danielle while still honouring our *kaupapa*. We ultimately created a scholarship pathway which ensured Danielle would receive remuneration for her mahi and gain valuable work experience that could be credited toward a qualification.

A key insight emerged from gathering whānau voice across both communities. As part of the *pouaka ako* project evaluation, questionnaires sought feedback on the resources, their contents, and their effectiveness in supporting whānau to see themselves as their children's first teachers. An optional question invited whānau to share their own experiences of school. The results were notable: approximately 85% of whānau reported negative experiences and memories from their time at school. For example:

“Schooling for me was horrible, I struggled in every way because I was not accepted due to my ethnicity, being bullied is all the memory I have of school”

“I had a terrible time – the teacher appeared distant and lacked enthusiasm which made it challenging to stay engaged and focussed”

This finding prompted a key line of inquiry, leading us to consider a potential correlation between negative whānau experiences and their attitudes towards school attendance as evident in the initial data we collected from schools regarding truancy rates.

In the Tairāwhiti region, engagement with the community and local agencies was notably easy, with strong enthusiasm for the initiative. We observed, however, an apparent isolation or 'siloeing' among some of these organisations. Our role became a valuable conduit, successfully bringing these stakeholders together. From the outset, we made it clear that our approach was not to be another external group imposing changes. Instead, we prioritised identifying and supporting the excellent work already being done in the community, for example with E Tu Elgin, while introducing new resources like the *Pouaka ako* and its contents. This collaborative and supportive emphasis helped promote broad acceptance and participation.

A valuable learning was to not assume every whānau member is fully literate. One Dad who attended a whanau evening struggled to complete a registration form. This prompted us to ensure our processes and resources accommodated this and did not form a barrier. For instance, in gathering feedback, we offered a variety of methods—including phone call, face-to-face discussion, text, email, and Google Form—to support individuals, such as a father needing assistance with the registration form. Furthermore, we provided QR codes on the *Pouaka ako* whānau booklets and kept the wording succinct, ensuring the information remained informative and engaging while maintaining accessibility.

Our key outcomes

Whanau engaged in the resources provided. We saw a significant increase in resource distribution and reach far beyond what we first anticipated. The high demand for the *pouaka ako* packs demonstrated genuine community engagement with the learning tools. Initially, we began with 20 packs per community per year, but to date, we've distributed over 90 packs in Kawerau and 120 in Gisborne, clearly showing the level of community enthusiasm. We now have a waiting list in Gisborne which highlights the value of the *pouaka ako* for the recipients.

The whanau greatly appreciated the resources provided. They expressed surprise and delight at not only the quality but the quantity of the *Pouaka Ako* contents. In particular, there were positive comments around the use of culturally responsive resources such as poi, rakau and bilingual books. They loved the whanau resource booklet provided as this gave them great ideas in how to engage their tamariki. For example:

Receiving learning resources for my child from Ready for Learning Trust has made a meaningful difference in our whānau. The resources have helped me feel more confident in supporting my child's learning at home, turning everyday moments into great. It's great to have tools that are fun but also respectful of our culture and values. Thanks to Ready for Learning Trust, I spent ages with my girl playing with the playdough, something I've not done since I was a kid myself.

It helped support me with parenting and gave me more confidence teaching my babies things that I know will help them excel when it comes to their schooling.

This success has led to the development of sustainable, locally led pathways and community ownership. The strong community ties we built have ensured the work will continue even after the initial funding cycle. In Kawerau, for instance, a community champion named Danielle has been engaged and will now lead the *mahi* (work) with R4L support, following the organic expansion through playgroups and other local contacts. A different but equally successful model emerged in Te Tairāwhiti/Gisborne, where the work grew from within a childcare centre led by manager Jamie. This local success has attracted partial funding from Ministry agencies, with Jamie set to lead the project's sustainability and growth.

Impact as Contribution

Contributing to Systems Change

The work of Ready for Learning (R4L) is contributing to a genuine systems change across three core areas, ensuring that learning becomes more equitable and truly reflects the aspirations, identities, and needs of the community. This represents a significant shift, moving beyond simply meeting deliverables to embedding fundamental change within communities and the agencies that support them. **Systems change** is clearly visible in two areas: the evolution of practice and the flow of resources. In terms of practice, the project has actively challenged and adapted traditional ways of working to lower barriers to engagement. For example, after learning some whānau members struggled with registration forms, R4L moved away from relying on formal literacy for administrative tasks and feedback, instead offering multiple accessible methods for whānau input like phone calls, face-to-face discussions, text, email, and Google Forms. Furthermore, the initiative is changing pre-school and early primary teacher practice by breaking down silos between ECEs and schools, sharing best practice, and fostering a community of *kaiako* who understand that school "readiness" is about more than just the basic skills, which are only the "tip of the iceberg." As for resource flows, the *pouaka ako* packs represent a new, valued resource that is flowing directly into underserved communities. These packs are more than just handouts; they are a tangible symbol of the value R4L places on playful, *whānau*-led learning. Some key findings from our questionnaires (via in-person, phone, email and google docs) showed the following.

- **Affirmation of Whānau Role:** The majority of respondents agreed that the *pouaka ako* helped them see themselves as *nga tamariki* first teacher, with many stating they hadn't considered this role before or now realise they are teachers in many ways.
- **Increased Awareness and Intentionality:** Some responses indicated a raised awareness of the time spent with children, with one person feeling guilty about phone use and another acknowledging the need to spend more time with their child, being easily distracted by chores.
- **Shift in Perception of Learning:** A few people noted they typically thought learning only happened at *kura* (school), and the resources helped shift this perspective.

- **Resource Necessity:** Respondents highlighted that without the pouaka ako, they wouldn't have access to these types of resources.
- **Increased confidence and support:** The whānau booklet and pouaka helped respondents feel more supported and a bit more confident in their role as their tamariki's first teacher.
- **Realization of importance of engagement:** Respondents realized the importance of spending time with their children (moko/babies) and actively engaging with them, rather than just providing a toy or being distracted by phones.
- **Provided new ideas:** One respondent who was already confident mentioned that the pouaka gave them new ideas for interaction.
- **Recognition of toys as learning tools:** respondents acknowledged that toys can be ways of learning.
- **User-friendly booklet:** The whānau booklet was liked for being easy to follow and read.

Contributing to Relational Change

Relational change is at the heart of the project's success, fundamentally reshaping both relationships and connections and the dynamics of power. R4L's deliberate focus on building high-trust relationships and engaging in active listening, rather than rigidly adhering to strict deliverables, was foundational to the work. This trust served as a valuable conduit, successfully bringing somewhat siloed organisations and stakeholders—such as *iwi*, *whānau*, schools, and Kaianga Ora—together in the Tairāwhiti region. This effort established genuine connections, ensuring the work was co-designed and locally relevant. Crucially, the initiative intentionally shifted **power dynamics** by making it clear that R4L was not "another group coming in to 'do stuff to them'." Instead, R4L prioritised identifying and supporting the excellent work that already existed in the community and being guided by local needs. This sharing of power is exemplified by the 'circling the *waka*' decision-making process and the empowerment of community champions like Danielle and Jamie, who have taken ownership of the work. Jamie's role as a Whānau Liaison, which also involved sharing best practice with other *kaiako*, further democratised knowledge and influence.

Contributing to Transformational Change

Transformational Change is evident in the shifting *Mindsets* that underpin the entire system. The project has successfully contributed to a new mindset regarding the capability of *whānau* as first teachers. Feedback from many individuals illustrates a shift in self-belief and confidence in supporting their children's learning at home. By offering practical, culturally responsive tools, R4L has helped turn everyday moments into opportunities for growth and connection. Furthermore, the project's own learning about the high proportion (approximately 85%) of *whānau* with negative school experiences prompted a crucial line of inquiry. This signals a necessary shift in the collective mindset of education providers to understand and address the historical context that directly influences school attendance and ongoing engagement.

- **Negative overall experience:** Multiple respondents felt school was "awful," "sucked," or "not the best of places," with some specifically disliking math or the pressure of too many tests.
- **Negative experiences and difficulty with learning:** Several respondents found school hard, felt misunderstood, hated it, or struggled with learning.
- **Mixed experience between levels:** Some enjoyed primary school but found college or high school difficult, attributing challenges to factors like being a teenager, hormones, or difficult teenage years.
- **Positive aspects:** A respondent mentioned loving sports, and another enjoyed junior years thanks to positive relationships with good teachers.
- **Lack of real-life preparation:** Respondents felt school didn't adequately prepare them for real life.
- **Academic pursuit:** One respondent finished school and later obtained a degree but attributed that to their own motivation, not supported by the school system.
- **Social and emotional challenges:** Experiences included being bullied, difficulties with friendships in college, and nervousness during tests or reading aloud.
- **Preference for primary school:** One respondent preferred primary school over college.
- **Teacher and peer interactions:** Respondents mentioned having some cool teachers but also some who were not nice and not liking other kids or teachers much.
- **Disruption due to relocation:** three respondents reported learning declined after moving to multiple schools during their childhood in New Zealand.
- **Lack of preferred activities:** One respondent noted that they loved art but rarely got to do it in school.

Sustainability and next steps

One of the main goals of our Trust is to create a sustainable model with the community having ownership and continuing the project over the years without our help or funding. We do this through implementing a PAR approach to our projects.

To do this we focussed on getting community buy in and ownership right from the start. Having the community suggest a plan for how to grow whanau capability as confident first teachers for their tamariki meant they owned the process. By liaising with so many different stakeholders as individuals and groups we could ascertain what support was already available and what was still needed.

Employing the right person as whanau liaison was a main factor in creating a sustainable model. Both Jamie and Danielle are from the communities they are serving. They have knowledge and understanding of the whanau they were working with and were also respected by the whanau. Both women demonstrated the Trust values of working alongside whanau rather than 'doing to'. They were also open to learning and taking on responsibilities new to them.

I believe working alongside Ready for Learning Trust as the Whānau Liaison has been a rewarding and growth-filled journey. I've had the privilege of building strong relationships with whānau, ensuring they feel supported and empowered in their children's early learning journey. A big part of my role involves connecting families with valuable resources, practical tools, and culturally responsive guidance to help create positive home learning environments.

One of the biggest challenges I've overcome in this role has been public speaking. In the beginning, presenting to groups and leading hui felt daunting, but with time, support, and experience, I've gained confidence and learned to communicate clearly and authentically. This personal growth has allowed me to connect even more effectively with whānau and support them with greater impact. Jamie Cleeton-Grayndler

A focus has also been on accessing local funding. This has meant the Kawerau project will continue without our funding and very little support as it is now self-managing. It has also meant we can now broaden the reach of the Te Hapara project to include all Tairāwhiti and the wider rural regions and up the East Coast in 2026 and 2027.

Steering a New Course

The wayfinding approach (Spiller, Barclay-Kerr, & Panaho, 2015) has enabled us to steer our course through continuous attention to context, relationships and emerging conditions. The positive impact of the project stems from the successful implementation of a high-trust, adaptive strategic model. Instead of keeping to rigid deliverables, R4L deliberately focused on building high-trust relationships, which allowed the direction of the work to be locally led and responsive to each community's unique needs. This flexible approach is, in fact, the root of the success—it ensured the resources were "genuinely embedded." The distinct growth models in Kawerau (community-led) and Te Tairāwhiti (childcare-centred) stand as powerful evidence of this responsive, trust-based approach in action.

The various ways in which the project has been able to contribute to whanau support has taken many different forms. Multiple actions (e.g. hui, korero, poaka ako, whanau booklets) have together contributed to whanau participation and growth in knowledge and understanding of how to support the learning of tamariki. Many of the "navigational signposts" helped us to chart our course and to make changes as needed to better engage and work with whanau. Applying a contribution lens to our evaluation has allowed us to make use of "signposts" along the way to show that we were on the right track. For example, whanau came to realise the importance of how play can be used in so many ways to develop essential skills. In the process, whanau were able to develop their confidence and skills in how to contribute to the learning of their tamariki as first teachers.

The many signposts identified along the way have provided some indication (and assurance) that we are on the right track. By deeply imbedding the project practices and resources within the communities, we are hopeful that the benefits of the mahi can be sustained and extended. Our learning and experiences this year have laid the foundations for the voyage ahead. This is especially important for ensuring that the initiatives can

become sustainable and that the whanaungatanga and friendship will create opportunities to expand the mahi to other regions.

Appendix 1: Hearing Whanau Voices

The following vignettes provide examples of how the project has positively impacted the learning and well-being of whanau.

Ready for learning resources helped me in a time of need, I am a nanny to twins and their mother went away for regional wakas when the pouaka were offered to me. I was able to play alongside my Moko and by reading the pauako books. Usually I would just give the kids toys to help occupy them, I would come back and see it as mess but this allowed me to stop and be present. I appreciate the mahi that has been put into these kete.

-Tash Gisborne

Kawerau Grandmother - Thank you so much for these Carolynne, I was taken back to my own childhood when I played with my own Mum. I have played with my moko and we giggled and laughed trying to balance our bodies on the balance board. My moko spent a long time too with the cutting thing, he doesn't really get to use scissors, and I had to be patient and try to teach him where to put his fingers.

Kawerau Dad - Well thanks for the pencils, my girls had fun drawing on the walls...haha, just joking. A big thank you for this second pouaka chock full of great things for my girls to play with. I sat down and enjoyed helping them cut out those shapes. We all loved the books and a special shout out of finding Reo Maori as we are looking at getting our girls into the Kohanga! Cheers, Alex.

Kawerau Mum - How good to sit with my kids with the rakau! We watched the videos and it really took me back to some happy times. It makes me think about how its the simple things our kids need, us, our time and not fancy computers or video games! The frisbee was also crack up and the dog even joined in on the fun.

Kawerau Mum and Dad - Bro this bag was choice. We all played heaps with the memory game, I didn't really think about how this helps with memory and learning but it was fun. We will look for more stuff like this to help our babies learning. The workbook and pencils were fun for our 4 year old to have a go with but the puzzle was tricky, but that's ok! I'm so nervous about him (4 year old) starting school so the booklet was handy and makes us think about how play is good for our kids.

Kawerau Grandma - I have shared custody of my moko (3 & 5). This pouaka was so cool, they had so much fun emptying the bag and seeing what was inside. We sat down together with the cutting papers, I got a spare pair of scissors so there was no fighting! They loved that! I really liked the books, such a cool message. I used to love going to school but back in my time it was very strict and I know it's different now. I do worry about my moko future and what the world will look like when they are fully grown. Ka pai on this pouaka whaea!

Kawerau Dad - my boy is ADHD (4) and very busy, boy did he love that wobble board and frisbee! Great for getting rid of some of his zoomies! The books were cool and although I have dyslexia, I liked sitting with him and reading the stories. The rakau and playdough went down well too! I think in terms of being ready for school I worry more about if school

is ready for him! He is a busy boy! My schooling was not the best memory, I always felt kinda dumb, stupid. I didn't realise I had a learning difficulty til I was an adult. I'm still proud of who I am but it would have been so much better if school had picked it up back in the day! I do think things like this do give us confidence to feel like our kids first teachers, I hadn't really given that thought, like you learn when you start going to school, I didn't see it as teaching my boy before he goes to school, food for thought eh?

Gisborne Mum of 3 - You know what surprised me? Sitting down and actually playing with my kids! Like most times I'm hanging washing, cooking kai, I don't really actually sit there and take time to do this! It was cool to read the booklet and realise how much i can actually help my kids learn and grow! I was a big fan of the books, books are dear to buy, we don't have many. I quite liked school but I did get into trouble a lot, I'm hoping my lot are a bit better behaved!

Kawerau Granny of 4 grandchildren age 2-6 - Man those rakau brought the memories back, just wish we had more of them! My grandies loved those puppets too and there were plenty for them to share! They did fight a bit over the balance board and tried to get me on there, no chance I said! We played together with the matching memory and that was a lot of fun seeing the grandies compete and try to remember where the dinosaurs were! They also spent heaps of time with the playdough and the jigsaw puzzle.

Kawerau Mum (1.5 and 4) I don't take Jakob to any kindy, he has autism and I feel judged a lot. Jakob really liked the playdough and squishing it through his fingers and we laughed a lot at me trying to balance on the wobble thing. He snuggled next to me while we read the books together, how cool it's in Te Reo. I do worry about school and how he will be. I know he can stay with me until he is 6 but even then I'm not so sure. School was a sad place for me because my whanau moved around heaps. Thank you for the toys and stuff it means a lot.

Kawerau Auntie (has custody of 2 children) - Wowee what a great bag of toys and resources, we just loved unpacking them and there was a lot of excitement in my whare when I brought it home! The boys made a beeline for the dinosaur match game, what a big hit that was! The frisbee was also a great hit, I had to teach them how to use it so they could see it soar. Next up the balance board, we made it into a timed competition to see who could balance on there the longest and surprisingly it was the youngest! I love the fact we can use these again and again, such a good thing to have in my whare. The boys are excited about going to school, I had a great time at school, it was life that got hard!

Gisborne Gran -) found the scissors and cutting really hard, I was surprised at this but then again he only does daycare 8 hours a week so he may not do it there and doesnt at home. He really enjoyed that dino match game and we had nice time reading the books together. We both still do the space puzzle from the last box so I'm thinking puzzles are his thing which is good because they're not too expensive to come by and really help his learning eh? Playdo was a huge hit and I tried not to stress when Charlie mixed all the colours together!! I really like the fact you have Maori resources there, Charlie didn't enjoy the rakau but I did!!

Gisborne Mum - These were so cool, we all had fun with them too. I was stoked with all the stuff and my boy was stoked about the dinosaur matching game, we sat and named all the dino's he loves the T-rex, it was funny trying to say all the dino names, tricky! Thanks whaea we appreciated this, we know this stuff isn't cheap. Books were good too! I hated school, I do feel a bit nervous about my boy, he's a big boy too and I hope he don't get bullied for it!

Gisborne Mum - Bailey really loved all these wonderful resources, I was actually blown away by the quality of these, thank you! He especially enjoyed the cutting activity and he and I sat together while he carefully cut around the lines, he's normally such an active kid so it was cool for me to see this side of him. We had big fun and giggles including Dad on the wobbling board, actually I think we adults had more fun than Bailey! We got baily to stand and eventaully tried to balance on just one leg, he got really good at it. He loved the dino match game and again I read the whanau booklet, I didn't know that things like this and jigsaws help with learning, how cool. Bailey is looking forward to school but like most mama's I'm a bit worried, it's a place where there are so many other kids, adults etc. School was OK for me, but I had lots of brothers and sisters and cousins to look out for me.

TEEN Parent Unit Principall viewed the videos this morning and am very impressed. You both have done an amazing job. I love how calm and clear you are. Interactive, with good explanations and props. I like what was said in the first video, " Play is the mahi of our tamariki". The demonstrations using the cardboard box were also very engaging. Well done, team. I can see this being a brilliant resource that I can implement with our young mamas as part of their parenting programme. Well-structured and motivational!

As I was viewing the videos, our counsellor/parenting teacher popped in and liked what she saw. She would also love to have access to view the materials alongside me, if that's possible.

I am looking forward to the school holidays so I can plan how to implement your resources.