



CHILD RICH COMMUNITIES LEARNING CLUSTER 2025-2026

Learning and Outcomes Story: Waiapu Kids Merivale Whānau Aroha



**Child Rich
COMMUNITIES**

KIA WHĀNGAIA TE RITO,
KA PUĀWAITIA TE HARAKEKE

THE WELLBEING OF CHILDREN, WHĀNAU AND COMMUNITIES ARE CLOSELY INTERCONNECTED

WAIAPU KIDS MERIVALE WHĀNAU AROHA

SNAPSHOT	
Location	Merivale, Tauranga
Focus of mahi	Creating opportunities for tamariki and whānau to flourish through fee-free play-based early childhood education, whānau wellbeing and cultural connection.
Who's involved	Waiapu Kids Merivale Whānau Aroha tamariki, whānau and kaimahi, Anglican Care Waiapu, including Erin Batley (Centre Manager) and Pekehaua Amohau (Kaitūhono), alongside mana whenua, community partners and the wider Anglican Care Waiapu team.
Key outcomes	• Increased whānau confidence and participation. • Stronger cultural identity and belonging. • Greater opportunities for whānau voice to influence practice and decision-making. • Stronger relationships between whānau, tamariki and community. • Increased understanding of how relational, culturally grounded approaches support flourishing.

THE STARTING POINT

Waiapu Kids Merivale Whānau Aroha is part of Anglican Care Waiapu, providing early childhood education and wraparound support for tamariki and whānau in Merivale, Tauranga.

At the heart of the centre is a vision of Te Oranga Ake o Te Iwi o Te Ao - human flourishing. It is a place where tamariki learn and play, where whānau gather, where relationships are built, and where culture, connection and belonging are woven through everyday life.

Many of the whānau connected to the centre are young parents. Some are rebuilding trust after difficult experiences with schools, organisations or support services. Others are reconnecting with their culture and identity, often alongside their tamariki.

The team recognised that before aspirations and leadership could grow, people needed to feel welcomed, safe and connected.

For several years the centre had been intentionally expanding its focus beyond traditional early childhood education. Alongside supporting tamariki learning, the team were creating opportunities for whānau to connect with one another, strengthen relationships, build confidence and access support when needed.

"Whānau are seen as experts in their own lives and relationships thrive through aroha and connection."

The Learning Cluster provided an opportunity to deepen this work and explore what it means to genuinely move decision-making closer to whānau.

WHAT WE WANTED TO LEARN

The team joined the Child Rich Communities Learning Cluster because they wanted to continue growing Whānau Aroha as a place where whānau felt a sense of belonging, where relationships flourished, and where people felt confident contributing their ideas and aspirations.

The Learning Cluster provided opportunities to kōrero with peers, reflect on the challenges and opportunities in their mahi, and explore how child-rich community-led approaches could strengthen outcomes for tamariki, whānau and the wider community.

The team hoped to:

- Strengthen whānau engagement and participation.
- Create more opportunities for whānau leadership.
- Better understand how to gather and respond to whānau voice.
- Build stronger relationships between tamariki, whānau and community.
- Learn alongside others exploring child-rich approaches.
- Continue embedding a culturally grounded approach to wellbeing and belonging.

Waiapu Kids hoped to empower the communities they serve to have a stronger voice in shaping the direction of the centre and the opportunities available to whānau.

EXISTING STRENGTHS

Relationships sat at the centre of Waiapu Kids' work. The team had built a welcoming environment where whānau were already valued and supported. Trust, aroha and whakawhanaungatanga shaped everyday interactions. Underpinning this work was a strong values base centred on kinship, aroha and upholding the mana of everyone involved.

The centre was also on a journey of strengthening cultural identity and connection. Tamariki were taking leading roles in pōwhiri. Local mātauranga and iwi-developed curriculum frameworks were being woven into learning.

Some whānau were beginning their own journeys of reconnecting with kaupapa Māori and cultural identity alongside their tamariki.

"The whānau are keen to journey with their babies."

The team also recognised that flourishing tamariki and flourishing whānau are deeply connected, and that building trust and belonging takes time, often weeks or months rather than days.

THE INTENT

The intent was never simply to provide services for whānau. Instead, the team wanted to create spaces where relationships could grow, where people felt comfortable sharing their ideas and aspirations, and where whānau could play an active role in shaping the life of the centre.

As outlined in their Expression of Interest, the long-term goal was to shift towards a more community-led model, where whānau have greater agency, leadership and ownership of the direction of the centre and the services it provides.

As the team often reflected, this work is about building a village around tamariki and whānau.

THE JOURNEY

From asking to truly hearing

One of the most significant learnings emerged through conversations about aspirations.

The team had been asking whānau about their hopes and dreams for themselves and their tamariki. Yet those conversations often struggled to gain momentum.

"Whānau really struggled with that and didn't always find a way to articulate... it can sometimes be rather difficult to hope and dream when we're struggling for kai, when we're struggling for housing."

That insight shifted the team's thinking. Rather than asking bigger questions, they focused on creating more opportunities simply to spend time together. Shared kai. Walks. Conversations in the garden. Whānau gatherings with no agenda beyond connection.

"Having more casual whānau time as a group... in our whānau space in the garden outside doing walks and having that kōrero together."

As relationships deepened, aspirations began to emerge naturally. People talked about their tamariki. Their hopes for the future. The things that mattered most to them.

What shifted:

- More meaningful conversations with whānau.
- Greater understanding of whānau aspirations.
- Increased trust and openness.

Why it mattered:

The team learned that before people can share their hopes and dreams, they often need to feel safe, connected and known.

Growing together

Throughout the Learning Cluster, the centre continued strengthening opportunities for tamariki and whānau to connect with culture, identity and place.

Pōwhiri became an important way of welcoming new whānau, with tamariki taking leading roles. Shared waiata, local curriculum and learning grounded in mana whenua knowledge created opportunities for whānau and tamariki to learn together.

For some whānau, this was also a journey of reconnection. Some were engaging with kaupapa Māori and cultural identity in new ways, learning alongside their tamariki and growing in confidence together.

The team saw how these experiences strengthened belonging, pride and connection.

"Practice is shaped by a strong sense of connection to place and people."

What shifted:

- Greater participation in cultural learning and activities.
- Increased confidence engaging with kaupapa Māori.
- Stronger connections between tamariki, whānau and community.

Why it mattered:

When identity is affirmed and celebrated, people are more likely to feel they belong.

Building our village

A phrase that surfaced often throughout the Learning Cluster was **"building our village."**

"It's about widening those relationships... building our village."

The team recognised that flourishing does not happen in isolation. Creating opportunities for whakawhanaungatanga became a key part of the work. Hui, shared experiences and informal gatherings all helped strengthen relationships between whānau and create a greater sense of collective support.

A significant step was the creation of the Kaitūhono role. As a hoa haere, the role creates more opportunities to walk alongside whānau, helping strengthen connections, navigate challenges and celebrate successes. The impact could be seen in stronger relationships, growing confidence and greater participation across the community.

What shifted:

- Stronger relationships across the community.
- Increased participation in whānau gatherings and activities.
- Greater sense of belonging and collective responsibility.

Why it mattered:

Strong communities are built through relationships, one connection at a time.

Acting on what was heard

Another important learning was that listening alone is not enough. Whānau needed to see that their ideas, experiences and aspirations were being acted upon.

"You've heard that, you've picked it up, you've actioned it... that information has gone back through all of the organisation."

Whānau could see that what they shared was being listened to and acted on.

What shifted:

- Greater responsiveness to whānau voice.
- Increased participation in decision-making.
- Stronger trust between whānau and the organisation.

Why it mattered:

When people can see their voice making a difference, trust grows and participation becomes more meaningful.

LEARNING THROUGH CHALLENGE

The Learning Cluster highlighted some of the realities involved in this work. Many whānau were navigating housing pressures, financial stress and experiences that had impacted trust in services and organisations.

The team also reflected on how long it can take for trust, participation and leadership to grow. Meaningful engagement often requires patience, consistency and a willingness to move at the pace of whānau.

The journey reinforced that lasting change grows through relationships built over time.

TURNING POINTS

Several moments stood out throughout the Learning Cluster journey:

- Recognising that aspirations do not always emerge through formal questions and surveys, but through relationships built over time.
- Seeing whānau voice influence decisions beyond the centre and into wider organisational practice.
- Deepening cultural learning and local curriculum development through partnerships and local knowledge.
- The creation and strengthening of the Kaitūhono role as a dedicated hoa haere, walking alongside whānau.
- Realising that creating opportunities for connection, whakawhanaungatanga and belonging often lays the foundation for leadership and participation.

WHAT CHANGED?

For tamariki

- Stronger cultural identity and sense of belonging.
- Increased opportunities to participate and contribute.
- Greater connection between home, centre and community.
- More opportunities to see their culture, language and identity reflected in everyday experiences.

For whānau

- Increased confidence sharing aspirations, ideas and experiences.
- Stronger relationships with the centre and other whānau.
- Greater participation in hui, conversations and decision-making.
- Increased access to support, networks and opportunities.

"Greater whānau confidence in sharing aspirations... increased participation in hui and decision making... strengthened relationships and sense of belonging... and tamariki flourishing."

For the community

- Stronger relationships across the wider community.
- Increased trust and collaboration.
- Greater awareness of the strengths, knowledge and aspirations that already exist within whānau.
- Stronger connections between culture, community and wellbeing.

For practice

- More relational approaches to gathering whānau voice.
- Increased confidence in community-led approaches.
- Greater responsiveness to whānau aspirations and experiences.
- Stronger integration of local mātauranga, tikanga and cultural identity.
- Increased understanding that trust and relationships are essential foundations for meaningful participation.

LOOKING AHEAD

The Learning Cluster reinforced what the Waiapu Kids team already sensed through their everyday mahi: relationships create the conditions for change.

When whānau feel welcomed, connected and valued, aspirations emerge more naturally. When culture, identity and belonging are strengthened, confidence grows. When whānau voice is heard and acted upon, trust deepens.

Looking ahead, the team remains committed to continuing this journey. They want to keep creating spaces where whānau can connect, contribute and lead, while strengthening the cultural foundations

that support flourishing for tamariki and their whānau.

"Moving decision-making closer to whānau is not just a practice change. It is a commitment to equity, mana-enhancing practice and recognising whānau as kaitiaki in their own lives."

The vision of Te Oranga Ake o Te Iwi o Te Ao remains at the heart of the work: a future where tamariki, whānau and communities flourish together through connection, belonging and the ongoing work of building a village around tamariki and whānau.

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