

Connected with places and people: St Andrew's Chilton Kindergarten's place-based journey

To give their students a strong sense of belonging and responsibility within their community, an Auckland-based early learning service is working collaboratively with tamariki, whānau and kaiako to develop a hyper-local curriculum focused on their surroundings.



When St Andrew's Chilton Kindergarten introduced an inquiry-based, project-focused approach to the centre's teaching team, the aim was to deepen children's learning while keeping the curriculum flexible, responsive, and child-centred.

For the Howick Christian-based early learning service, part of the new approach is the introduction of a new initiative, 'connected relationships with places and people', designed to deepen children's curiosity and engagement with their local community.

"This shift moved us away from traditional teaching methods, fostering an environment where tamariki are encouraged to explore, question, and investigate," says head teacher Olivia Ng.

"By listening carefully to their thoughts and interests, we're creating opportunities for them to explore new concepts through inquiry-based learning."

Playful exploration

Describing St Andrew's tamariki, Olivia says they all come from diverse cultural and social backgrounds, each with unique interests and needs. As a result, the foundation of the kindergarten's philosophy is creating a nurturing, inclusive environment where children feel a strong sense of belonging, wellbeing, and emotional security.

So when kaiako noticed a growing interest from students in places they visited and the people they interacted with outside of kindergarten, it "sparked the idea to explore their relationships with the local environment and community in a more intentional way", says Olivia.

Prior to this initiative the centre had run 'our families', where tamariki and their whānau were invited to take a kete (basket) home and contribute a 'treasure' – a photograph, meaningful object, or story that represented their family's cultures or experiences.

"It's helped them develop a deeper sense of their own mana atua, their uniqueness and spiritual connectedness, while exploring the relationships between the spiritual, social, and natural worlds they are a part of."

Olivia Ng



Above: The children used blocks to create buildings and the environment around the kindergarten.

Left: Children at St Andrew's Chilton Kindergarten map out and explore their local places with head teacher Olivia Ng.



Olivia searched for St Andrew's Chilton Kindergarten on the map, then asked the children to share what they could see and hear around their space.

Wanting to build on its success, kaiako came up with 'connected relationships with places and people'.

"We observed tamariki increasingly engaging in imaginative play centred around local places," explains Olivia.

"They would pretend to be on buses visiting familiar destinations such as beaches, McDonald's, local parks, churches, libraries, and even a nearby mountain – places they had experienced with their families.

"This playful exploration reinforced the idea that tamariki have a strong connection to the places they frequent, providing a natural starting point for further exploration."

Starting nearby

The kindergarten shares its site with St Andrew's Presbyterian Church, a toy library, an opportunity shop, and the church garden and cemetery. These were the areas they began exploring first, and tamariki were encouraged to share their own stories and experiences related to those places.

"We've been drawing on *Kōwhiri Whakapae*, which talks about young children being empowered as learners when they feel connected to people in their environment, as well as to the places and communities around them," explains Olivia.

"Engaging with children about their relationships with whānau, community and local geographical features creates meaningful learning experiences.

"This approach also resonates with Wally Penitito's concept of place-based pedagogy, which advocates starting with what is familiar to children – the places they know and love – before expanding to broader concepts."

She says by focusing on their immediate environment, tamariki developed a stronger sense of place and their role within it.

"Tamariki started expressing curiosity about the geography of their local environment – such as the distance between their homes and the kindergarten," explains Olivia.

"Teachers responded by helping them map out the community and discuss familiar landmarks like parks, shops and the nearby Pigeon Mountain.

"This hands-on exploration reinforced the relevance of their everyday environment to their learning.

"By listening to their stories and experiences, we created a welcoming space that encouraged trust-building with teachers, peers and the local community, which deepened their sense of belonging and emotional security."

Olivia also notes how the curriculum helps new children from outside the Auckland area develop a sense of belonging.

Responsive and reciprocal

Drawing from *Te Whāriki*, the centre also placed a strong emphasis on responsive and reciprocal relationships.

"These connections are essential in fostering a child-centred learning environment where tamariki actively engage with their world," explains Olivia.

"*Te Whāriki* recognises that children learn best through relationships with people, places, and things."

To bring 'connected relationships with places and people' to life, the kindergarten collaborated with whānau, staff, the board of trustees, and the local community. For example, families were encouraged to take photos of



Children looked at photos taken during a walk around their area, and were asked to share what they noticed and what they knew.

places they love visiting within the local community and parents were invited to the kindergarten to share more about their families and their work.

“We had a mother – who works as a nurse – come in wearing her uniform. She showed tamariki the tools she uses, such as a thermometer and stethoscope. The children had a wonderful time learning about her role and using the thermometer to check each other’s temperatures.

“A particularly special moment came when a Japanese child and their parent shared the traditions and stories of Japanese Children’s Day (Kodomo no Hi),” continues Olivia.

“The mother told us the story and showed us the traditional koinobori (carp-shaped windsocks), which represent strength and good fortune.

“Tamariki were excited to learn about their friend’s culture and were equally excited for the opportunity

to share their own experiences with their friends. This cultural exchange not only enhanced our children’s learning but also strengthened the sense of community.”

Olivia says the initiative has had a lasting and profound impact on the children especially when it comes to fostering their curiosity, deepening community connection, and strengthening their responsibility to the environment.

Through these experiences, the children have become keen observers of the world around them, she notes.

“It’s helped them develop a deeper sense of their own mana atua, their uniqueness and spiritual connectedness, while exploring the relationships between the spiritual, social and natural worlds they are a part of.

“The collaboration has deepened the children’s connection to their whānau, creating a strong sense of belonging within the learning environment.”



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