2. **ENGAGING WITH COMMUNITIES**

**Community understanding of children’s learning**

The wider world of family and community is a fundamental part of the early childhood curriculum and is mutually supportive of the well being of whānau/families, local communities and neighbourhoods. Making children’s learning experiences visible ensures that parents and whānau gain an understanding of those learning experiences, which in turn empowers children to become self-directed learners.

*Families should be part of the assessment and evaluation of the curriculum as well as of children’s learning and development. Parents and caregivers have a wealth of valuable information and understandings regarding their children… Children’s learning and development are fostered if the well being of their family and community is supported; if their family, culture, knowledge and community are respected; and if there is a strong connection and consistency among all the aspects of the child’s world.*

(Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 30-42)

During the research process, many services investigated methods that were incorporated into the curriculum. This helped contribute to:

- forging, enhancing and maintaining links with the family/whānau and the wider world, in order to make children’s learning visible
- giving children increasing opportunities to see themselves as valued members and contributors of their community.

There is an abundance of research suggesting that meaningful relationships between services and families contribute to the quality care and education of young children and equally, that parental understanding of their child’s learning experiences is more enhanced when the learning has been made visible through ICTs (Hughes & MacNaughon, 2001, DeMarie & Ethridge, 2006, Boardman, 2007, et al).

**The projects**

Services focused specifically on developing relationships with family/whānau to convey children’s learning to parents and the wider community, with the aim of making children’s learning visible and to give parents/whānau an understanding of their child’s learning progress. These relationships were often one-way and required little or no response from the parents/whānau, but offered them a deeper understanding of their child’s learning through the visible nature of the communication using ICTs.
Outcomes

Services clarified that making children’s learning visible for families involves more than creating a display of images of children’s experiences. The practice of making children’s learning visible actually entails creating documentation that represents children’s thinking processes and explains their progression of learning, so it can be conveyed to parents in a comprehensive medium they can access and understand.

More than just play

When families are transitioning into early childhood education, much of the time is taken up with administration and management requirements and often the important aspect of the curriculum is overlooked. Presenting children’s learning experiences to parents/whānau in formats that have been created using ICTs, such as photographs, learning stories and DVDs, makes learning visible and provides parents with a comprehensive understanding of how their child is learning through play.

Making learning visible

Services found that the sharing of visual documentation, such as photographs and video footage was effective at helping give families/whānau a better understanding of their children’s learning. The investigations illustrate that the creation of photographs and movies using digital equipment also helps teachers to develop relationships with the children and to gain a better understanding of what interests them. Children become competent and confident users of ICT tools, such as digital cameras, and often request to take equipment home so that they can share and record learning experiences with their families/whānau.

Having noticed Faith’s interest in the camera and acknowledging the skill she had developed using it within the Kindergarten, we responded by asking if she might like to take the camera home. When the camera came back there were photos of Faith and her brothers and sisters, and a much-loved cousin, “baby Jordan”. We downloaded the photos onto the computer in the main room and ran them as a slide show... About a week later, Mum came in and saw the photos and explained that they were very special to the family, so we made some prints of the photos to take home.

(Maraeroa Kindergarten report, p.16-17)
The visual nature of these documents and online tools encourages parents and whānau to spend time viewing their child’s learning experiences, stimulating conversation between parent and child, and reinforcing learning experiences at home.

Saw Harry had been playing with slime at KIDSPACE. Teacher had been using tactile words to describe the experience. This allowed us to use the same words at home leading to strengthening his language skills.

(Parent blog comment, KIDSPACE report, p.14)

Feedback from parents and whānau demonstrated they were able to achieve an understanding of children’s learning through viewing the documentation. The visual nature of photographs and videos recorded on DVDs and blogs, illustrates to parents how their child is progressing and the language used to respond incorporates key visual expressions, such as see, watch and illustrate. It is the visual nature of documented learning experiences, created using ICT tools, that enhances parental and whānau understanding of children’s learning; and having an insight into their child’s encounters at kindergarten eases any anxieties or concerns they may have had.

“The DVD is awesome and is a great profile addition that really enables you to see what they get up to."

“I can see the pride he has in showing his DVD."

“...it illustrates more clearly the actual process of certain activities/play sessions, how outcomes were achieved.”

“I can see that he plays with more than just one or two children that he talks about…"

“L enjoyed seeing himself on the computer and wanted to see more.”

“B loved watching his DVD and showing it to us and his Grandparents.”

“I can see how much fun and joy he is having and it makes it more of a reality and I am really proud to watch him learning.”

“It sometimes is hard for me to visualise how he learns stuff and the DVD makes it easier to understand the context it’s in.”

(Parental feedback, Mayfield Kindergarten report, p.7-12)
One Playcentre found that as well as making learning visible, it is also important to make the philosophy and ethos of the centre evident to ensure that parents fully understand the context their child is learning in. ICT tools were used to create posters that parents could access while visiting the centre to enhance their understandings of the benefits of mixed age settings.

Parental feedback indicated that displaying the poster ensured this:

… parent community understands the positive values of mixed age sessions. In particular, older children developing empathy, compassion, consideration and nurturing of younger ones and that older children can learn to look after younger members which brings out the disposition of responsibility.

(Atawhai Playcentre report, p.7-15)

**Helping families with English as an additional language to understand children's learning**

Language and cultural differences can create additional stresses for families whose first language is not English. ICT tools have created a method of conveying children’s learning experiences that families with English as an additional language can understand. The creation of a DVD to communicate service information to families has seen positive results, with parents commenting that the DVD is:

…more helpful than the brochures [because of] …voice prompts and listening, rather than reading…Great!

(Parent, Sunshine Kindergarten report, p.13)

Parental/whānau understanding of their child’s learning is of particular importance to children from families with English as an additional language because it ensures that children feel valued and confident about their learning experiences and they settle quickly into the learning environment. Bridging the language gap helps to ensure that children have a sense of belonging, this in turn ensures they have the confidence to explore their environment and investigate learning opportunities.
Tian Yi arrived in New Zealand at the age of three years speaking no English. He initially started in the afternoon session attending three afternoons accompanied by his Grandfather. The team used the usual strategies to establish a relationship of trust so the he could get a sense of well being and belonging. Initially his Grandfather, who also had no English, would stay with him.

Although there is some merit in this strategy we often find it can delay integration into the programme as the child continues to be very dependent on the grandparent limiting interactions with teachers and peers. After discussions with Mum, (who works full time), Grandfather slowly separated over a period of a few weeks and was able to leave Tian Yi alone at kindergarten. Initially Tian Yi kept to himself and the team would endeavour to spend time with him daily using appropriate picture books, language prompts and lots of body language in an attempt to engage him in the programme.

Tian Yi was then introduced to the digital camera. His excitement was obvious by the smile on his face and the amount of photos he took. We seem to have had a breakthrough. There had been a particular group of children that Tian Yi gravitated to on most days. Unfortunately his lack of English and confidence made this challenging.

Critiquing his photos I realised that one boy in particular featured several times. I decided to use a photo story, mainly to support his English, giving language to activities and names of the other children…

The laptop was set up on the porch with a microphone attached and Tian Yi was encouraged to investigate. One of the first photos was of a boy called Bailey. Tian Yi, pointed excitedly and after a few stumbled words said Bailey…friend!” This came as such a surprise as he often appeared frustrated around Bailey and we had mistaken his frustration for dislike.

During the voice recording, several children came over to have a closer look. Tian Yi was suddenly the centre of attention. The photo story was played over and over and I sat back to observe the reactions. Because Tian Yi was smiling and laughing, his peers did the same. One little girl seemed to gain a deeper understanding of Tian Yi’s level of English and repeated the narration from the photo story and directed it to Tian Yi and said “Good boy!” Tian Yi’s popularity increased overnight…
This software gave Tian Yi such a powerful voice and clarified in some instances his understanding of English and our misunderstanding of his intent. For example, his desire to have Bailey as a friend, not a foe! From that day on the two went on many adventures together and the team were truly amazed at how quickly Tian Yi had accommodated the English Language. In this instance, technology was the enabler for Tian Yi to communicate and gain a sense of well being and belonging.

We showed the first Photo Story to Grandfather when he came to pick Tian Yi up that day. The very next day he bought Tian Yi’s Grandmother in and pointed to the computer. On viewing the photo story, their body language indicated such a high level of delight and gratitude that I was a little overwhelmed. Grandfather kept shaking my hand and saying thank you. The following morning Tian Yi’s Mother, Vallen, dropped in to view the photo story. Her English is reasonable but she works full time and we had only ever seen her once before. She was so grateful that his English was developing. “We only speak Mandarin at home…We have been very worried about his learning English.”…

After the success of Photo Story, Grandfather started to come early to pick up Tian Yi but looked for helpful jobs to do around the kindergarten. He offered to cut the lawns, he fixed a broken part of the fence, washed dishes, swept floors. He often watched the teachers working with the children and then was observed doing the same with Tian Yi. This was observed one day when I had just made a calendar with a child who had less than 20 odd days until he was off to school. Grandfather then sat with Tian Yi and made a calendar working alongside his grandson learning the numbers together.

During this period, Grandfather and I had several significant conversation about his life in China from his youth, conscripted into the army, through to married life and being a humble ‘worker’ (as he called it) through to coming to New Zealand. I felt privileged that he wished to share his journey with me.

(Tian Yi, Sunshine Kindergarten report, Appendix 2, p.1-6)
Conclusion

Many services felt that their increased use of ICT in documentation resulted in better parent/whānau understanding of children’s learning progressions through everyday experiences. It also highlighted the role of play in children’s learning. Heightened parental/whānau interest was largely attributed to the capacity of ICT to tell a more visual story through photographs and video, and was found to be particularly powerful in instances where English was an additional language.

Children often shared the ICT-created documentation with their families and this gave parents a clear idea of the benefits of play activities that their child was engaged in.

While enthusiasm for the ability of ICT to communicate understanding of children’s learning is in many cases justified, it also requires a caveat. Making children’s experiences more accessible and real to families/whānau through digital technology is not in itself a guarantee that they will understand or appreciate the learning that is taking place. The need for teachers to be clear about the learning that they are aiming to encourage and astute about articulating this is as important as ever. Therefore, in this context of making learning visible, digital images are best viewed as an enhancement not a substitute for the written word.
**Improving dialogue and connection with communities**

Creating a reciprocal dialogue with parents, families, whānau and the wider community enhances opportunities to develop children’s learning through opportunities for sharing, communicating and collaboration.

*Observations and records should be part of two-way communication that strengthens the partnership between early childhood settings and families.*

(Ministry of Education, 1996, p.30)

**The projects**

The research undertaken by the services involved in this project aimed to investigate how ICTs could be utilised to further enhance communication links with the wider community, and to determine if a new communication platform could elicit meaningful relationships that would improve children’s educational outcomes.

Several methods of communication were used to create links and develop relationships with the wider community, but the most contemporary and perhaps one of the most successful was the creation of service and individual blogs. This Web 2.0 facility offered services an opportunity to store, revisit and share children’s learning digitally and securely, exploiting a variety of mediums including photographs, video footage, voice recordings, text and children’s learning stories, which were created using a range of software, eg PowerPoint, Kid Pix, ArtRage and Comic Life.

The foremost reason for services choosing to use a blog is because it creates the opportunity for readers to respond. It is not simply the process of sharing children’s learning that is significant, but that parents can contribute to their child’s learning through posting comments and adding stories, pictures and videos of learning experiences that occur outside of the traditional learning environment. As well as creating blogs, services also chose to communicate and share children’s learning through e-mail, sending DVDs and learning stories home, and creating wall displays of children’s photographs and printed learning stories to promote parental discussion at the service.

Some services took their investigation a step further than just making children’s learning visible by seeking a reciprocal relationship where parents/whānau, teachers and children were able to interact freely, sharing experiences and events that occurred within the service and beyond. This was intended to not only strengthen existing relationships but to create a dialogue that is meaningful and supportive of children’s learning outcomes through their emergent curriculum. Research questions were varied and broadly investigated how services could improve and develop relationships, with specific questions considering how a service blog can foster closer relationships with families and the wider community.
Outcomes

All of the studies that focussed on building relationships with their community through ICTs found that using ICTs to create new opportunities for communication enhanced and developed relationships with family and whānau.

Shared experiences

*We are able to talk to the kids about what has happened that day, show them pictures, then stories start, they explain everything.*

(Parent, KIDSPACE Early Learning Centre report, p.17)

Creating digital documents of children’s learning experiences that can be shared via a blog, wall display or e-mail has given parents and whānau the opportunity to be involved in their child’s learning process and enabled them to understand how ICT can be used for social, educational and cultural purposes. After viewing the documentation supplied by the services, parents often felt reassured that their child had settled into the early childhood setting and were at ease with the effortless way that they could engage in dialogue with the service and their child.

The global nature of the Internet means that children can share their experiences with people important to them worldwide. Manaia Kindergarten, for example, found that their service blog was accessed by many grandparents, both here and overseas, who “appreciated us posting on the blog to enable them to play a part in their grandchildren’s early childhood learning” (Manaia Kindergarten report, p. 20).

One child with developmentally delayed muscular growth, wanted to share the sewing she had painstakingly created throughout a session with her Grandfather in England. To communicate her efforts and show her Grandfather his name sewn with a love heart and flower, she wanted to post pictures of her work, and her doing the sewing on the blog. The next day her Grandfather had seen the pictures, shared the blog story and address with relatives, and commented on his amazement at her wonderful work and incredible generosity. Five other viewers, including friends and family in England responded to the little girl, along with her physiotherapist in New Zealand who was able to see her skills in action in an authentic setting and respond with encouragement.

(Manaia Kindergarten report, p16)

The ability for family and whānau to connect with their child’s learning encouraged them to document stories from home, which the child could share with the service. Such practices allowed children to see that their home life and service life were equally valued and respected.
Joel is a wonderful, quiet three-year-old boy. He loves to create, tell stories, and share his experiences from home. Joel socialises well with all teachers and children although he has found a select few ‘best friends’. Joel will often come to Next Generation in the morning with his Mum, Michelle. Together they will find an activity to get involved with. Most often they will create with the play dough together. Joel and his family have really become involved in the blogging world that the centre has created.

Joel started off by helping teachers select photos, put together stories and captions for the centre’s daily diary. Occasionally Joel would talk into the microphone, telling a story about a specific image captured. As Joel became more confident with this task, he also became more vocal.

On the occasions that Joel had contributed to the centre blog, Michelle would leave a comment for the teachers to publish. One evening the teachers held a workshop for parents who wanted to know more about blogs and e-portfolios. Michelle came along. Then Joel got chicken pox!

Joel really wanted to show his friends what he looked like but was unable to come to the centre. So Michelle and Joel put together some photos and a story onto Joel’s e-portfolio to share with everyone at Next Generation. Wow!

Michelle has started making use of free programmes that the centre has recommended so that she can add photos and stories about things that Joel may want to share with his peers. These have been put onto Joel’s e-portfolio and Joel has offered to share these memories with his peers.

Through the e-portfolio Joel has the opportunity to share two very important parts of his life, home and centre life, with his friends, his family and his extended family.

(Next Generation Childcare report, p.9)
Collaborative learning environment

A number of services talked of families continuing similar experiences and discussions at home after viewing a particular learning episode that their child had been involved in at the service. Equally, there were examples where a posting on a blog had encouraged parents to come in and contribute at the service.

Our intention has always been to encourage parents to contribute to their children's learning in the kindergarten. The blog has made this easier for many families. It has "blown us away" that parents have enriched our Kindergarten programme by being so involved through the use of our blog, in the every day kindergarten experiences. An example of this is the community’s interest in fishing. The children’s play has reflected this interest and they have shared this on the blog. Parents have noticed this interest on the blog and taken up the opportunities to contribute their knowledge and expertise in fishing through comments and by volunteering their skills at Kindergarten as a result. Children's interests have been challenged and extended through parent’s involvement in the blog.

(Manaia Kindergarten report, p18)

Giving parents access to children’s learning through online documentation offered parents the opportunity to add feedback to the service through children’s e-portfolios and blogs, developing a collaborative piece of work that both home and service could share and contribute to. Collaboration of this nature was often thought to be facilitated because of the immediacy with which these ‘any time, any place’ online tools allowed responses to be made.

Hayden, told a teacher all about his chickens at home. His knowledge of the chickens was extensive, however he couldn’t remember what the chicken food was called. This was all captured on video, evaluated and posted into his e-portfolio. Later that day Hayden’s Mum, Robyn posted to his e-portfolio. She was at home, and had videoed the chickens showing Hayden the chicken food and also talking to him on the video, reminding him what it was called so he could tell the teachers. After thinking about Mum and hearing her talk to the video Hayden started to miss her, so he phoned her for a chat. Again the conversation was captured on video and posted. Hayden has revisited these amazing videos often with both his parents and the teachers, cementing the learning in a meaningful way for him.

(Rotorua Girls’ High School Childcare Trust report, p. 16)