Acorns to Oaks School Readiness Pilot Programme:

Community collaboration in action

Overview:

The Acorns to Oaks School Readiness Programme was designed to address the need for equitable access to education for neurodivergent and developmentally delayed children. By providing targeted support to 12 children attending Kaitiaki Kindergartens who were identified as having developmental differences impacting their school readiness, we hoped to impact educational outcomes in the transition to primary school. A secondary objective was to influence cultures of inclusion in both the kindergartens and the primary schools.

Model:

12 children in the last year of kindergarten were identified by their kaiako at one of three Kaitiaki Kindergartens on the North Shore of Auckland. Parents gave consent to participate. A psychologist conducted a developmental assessment based on the Early Start Denver Model and Te Whariki Learning Outcomes and the NZ curriculum. Learning goals were set with whānau and implemented by the therapist in the kindergartens.

Prior to transition to school, the psychologist attended a transition meeting at the primary school with the whānau and school team to share goals and strategies and to support the development of a collaborative and proactive relationship between the primary school teacher and the whānau. Once the child started attending school, the psychologist observed the child and checked in with the teacher and whānau two times regarding social,emotional and learning engagement in the classroom- once at two weeks and once again at two months of attendance.

Outputs:

- Average of 15 x 30 minute intervention sessions per child were held at kindergarten as of 31 October (the number of sessions per child ranged from 6- 24, depending on weeks until starting school)
- 12 parent interviews for developmental assessment were conducted
- 12 child observations for developmental assessment were conducted
- 3 parent check in and training sessions held with each family

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- 3 school meetings and observations were conducted for each family
- As at 31 October, 132 hours of direct intervention were provided to 12 families who had not otherwise accessed 1:1 learning support.
- 5 different primary schools were proactively offered learning support strategies for neurodivergent students

Most Common School Readiness Goals identified by whānau and kaiako:

1. Increase participation in group activities and play
2. Increase following of instructions
3. Increase communication skills
4. Increase waiting for turn / sharing

Outcomes:

Research indicates that the most important indicators of school readiness are self-regulation, attention, functional communication, social participation and routine independence. All of the children enrolled in this pilot had delays in some or all of these areas which would likely impact on their ability to participate on equal terms with their peers in primary school. However, each of these children made measurable progress towards “school readiness” through intentional, targeted intervention and a very rich early learning environment.

The most striking outcome observed from this pilot was the increase in communication and language development, especially when kaiako adopted strategies taught by the Acorn therapist to prompt language use.

Parents reported that they saw differences in their child’s development and that they felt reassured when their child started primary school because they had a supporter and advocate from Acorn.

Key Learnings:

The development of this pilot programme would ideally have been done in multi-year stages to learn and adapt, as it is clear that the potential outcomes and impacts are significant for the individual children, whānau and teachers at primary school. Due to the existing high caliber of kaiako and inclusive values in the three Kaitiaki Kindergartens, the impact was less significant for the kindergarten teams themselves.

1. **Laying the foundation:** If we were starting this initiative with another kindergarten association or early childhood education consortium, we would use the first year of partnership to provide explicit workshop based training to the kaiako around the neuroscience of neurodivergence, trauma, and social/emotional learning, as well as workshops on universal design for learning strategies for scaffolding children with developmental differences. This way relationships between the Acorn team and the kindergarten team would be strong and trusting when the actual programme delivery began in the kindergartens. In hindsight, more time for whakawhanuangatanga and a shared understanding of neurodivergence and our approaches would have set up the intervention stage of the programme to be more collaborative.

2. **Time and Capacity:** One of the biggest challenges for the Acorn team was that the children presented with a very wide range of individual needs, most of whom would have benefited from more hours of direct play therapy. The time allotted in the pilot programme was not sufficient for the multiple modes of intervention required for high impact. More time for whānau support would mean that strategies and new skills would be more likely to be embedded at home. More time for communication with kaiako after sessions would lead to more intentional implementation of strategies and embedding of practises for individual children and then more generalisation of these strategies across kindergartens.

   To understand the impact on the children's transition to school, we will follow up with the primary school teachers and the whānau at multiple points during the first school year. At this time, seven of eleven children have transitioned to school; however, four of those transitioned at the start of Term 4, so the follow up will continue into the new school year for almost all of the children. This is out of the grant period, but integral to our learning and impact.

Closing:

Thank you for the opportunity to trial this programme. It has helped Acorn and Kaitiaki Kindergartens to reflect on our practises and to work towards developing a model for increasing equity and inclusion across kindergarten and primary school so that children with learning differences can thrive at school.