



COMPETENT COMMUNICATORS AT SCHOOL AGE

A Talking Matters internal impact evaluation

In collaboration with



WHAKATĀNE
Kāhui AKO

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This internal evaluation study, conducted in partnership with the Whakatāne Kāhui Ako and Development Impact New Zealand, explores the impact of the Talking Matters programme on children's language skills as they transition from early childhood education (ECE) to primary school. **Part one** of the study focuses on understanding whether children who participated in Talking Matters programmes are thriving as confident and competent communicators at school age and examines the sustainability of language-enhancing practices and learnings in ECE environments beyond the intensive phase of the programme. **Part two** captures experiences and reflections from primary and ECE kaiako, learning support coordinators and a speech and language therapist in the community about the transition to school process with a focus on language, with the aim to identify areas where Talking Matters could offer further support.

Study Design and Participants:

This exploratory case study involved eight new entrant teachers from two primary schools, eight ECE teachers from two centres that took part in Talking Matters programmes in the last two years, seven parents, two Learning Support Coordinators (LSCs) from the schools, and a speech and language therapist who supports this community of learning. Data shared by these adults enabled us to analyse the language skills of a small cohort of ten children aged five to six years who participated in the Talking Matters programmes when they attended ECE. Participants' reflections also allowed us to gain a better understanding of the transition to school process. Data was collected through focus groups, online interviews, and language assessment rubrics.

Key Findings (part one)

1. Impact on Language Readiness:

ECE teachers strongly agreed that the Talking Matters programme significantly contributed to their ability to prepare children for school, emphasising improved understanding of children's language needs and increased intentionality in interactions. The programme also enhanced teachers' confidence in using data to inform practice and in sharing knowledge and tips about early language with whānau.

2. Sustainability of Changes:

Many key practices learned through the Talking Matters partnership have become "business as usual" in participating ECE centres. These include more intentional conversations with children, a greater emphasis on relationships, and increased use of te reo Māori.

Key Findings (part two)

The Transition to School Process:

The transition involved coordinated efforts between ECE centres and primary schools, facilitated by Learning Support Coordinators (LSCs) who communicated each child's language and developmental profiles to receiving schools. The process included early visits and meetings with parents. However, challenges such as inconsistent information sharing and varying parental engagement were noted.

Relationships, Information Sharing, and Documentation:

Strong relationships between schools, ECE centres, parents, and children were essential for timely information sharing about children's language skills and needs. The "Transition Teacher" role, often filled by the LSC, was crucial for bringing intentionality to the process. There were concerns about the consistency and completeness of shared information and the need for better collaboration and joint professional development between ECE and primary school teachers.

Impact of Home Environment and Parental Engagement:

The home environment plays a significant role in children's readiness for school, with variations in language exposure and available resources. Parental engagement was variable, affecting the consistency of support for children's language development.

Early Language Learning Support

Early intervention is crucial for addressing language delays, with LSCs and teachers emphasising early assessments and targeted interventions. However, there are gaps in the availability and consistency of support services due to resource constraints and some barriers for timely referrals.

EXISTING EVIDENCE

**What we know about literacy
and language at school entry**

Language at school age and literacy: What we know¹



Early language is a foundation of literacy

The development of language skills in early childhood is crucial for facilitating a smooth transition to formal schooling. Early language competencies, including phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and narrative skills, are foundational for literacy and school readiness

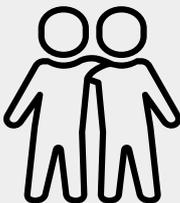
Van Hees (2018); Gillon et al. (2024).



Early language fosters wellbeing at school

Early language development fosters cognitive abilities such as memory, attention, and problem-solving, which are essential for cognitive engagement. Children with well-developed language skills are better equipped to understand and process new information, thereby reducing cognitive load.

Carroll & Carroll (2005); Gillon et al. (2024).



Early language enables connections and belonging

Effective language skills allow children to engage with others, express their needs, and build relationships, supporting positive school experiences. Language-rich environments in early childhood educational settings help children develop confidence and a sense of belonging.

Relyea et al. (2023); Timperley et al. (2003); Peter et al. (2015).



Language skills at school entry are an equity issue

Research indicates significant disparities in language skills among children entering school, particularly in low-decile schools. Barriers to smooth schooling include excessive screen time, parental work pressures, family stress, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

van Hees (2018); Gillon et al. (2024); Relyea et al. (2023).



Connections and relationships for school success

Strong relationships between ECE and primary school teachers are crucial for a successful transition. Lack of collaboration is identified as a potential contributor to a stressful transition. Cross-sector collaboration, knowledge of children's backgrounds, and engagement with whānau are fundamental for successful transitions.

Timperley et al. (2003); Peter et al. (2015).

Declining literacy and early language challenges.

Literacy is not only important for school achievement. Research has demonstrated a significant relationship between literacy and the ability to reason efficiently and critically, particularly in the context of solving novel problems. More literate individuals also enjoy better health and wellbeing, and live longer.

**“What’s happening with literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand?”
Hughson & Hood, 2022**

In the last decade, there has been growing concern about declining literacy rates in New Zealand with significant portions of students not meeting basic proficiency levels by age 15 (Hughson & Hood, 2022). Research has consistently shown that oral language skills at school entry are a strong predictor of later literacy and overall school attainment.

The latest report by the Education Review Office (ERO) on early language (Education Review Office, 2024) underscores the critical importance of oral language development in the early years, as it forms the foundation for later literacy, academic success, and social-emotional skills. The report emphasises that while most children in Aotearoa New Zealand are developing oral language skills effectively, a significant group—approximately 20%—are struggling, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and boys. The impact of Covid-19 has exacerbated these challenges, with teachers reporting significant delays in language skills, especially in social communication.

The report identifies that quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) can make a substantial difference in children’s oral language development, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Key practices that support language development include teaching new words, modeling sentence structure, interactive reading, and promoting positive social communication. However, the report also highlights that there is a gap in social communication practices among teachers, which needs to be addressed.

The findings suggest a need for targeted interventions, especially in low socio-economic communities, to ensure that all children have the opportunity to develop the oral language skills necessary for success at school and beyond. Additionally, the report recommends increasing participation in quality ECE, providing clear progress indicators for oral language, and enhancing professional knowledge among teachers.

The home environment also plays a significant role in shaping children’s language development and many factors, including socio-economic inequity contribute to disparities in children’s language development (Thomas, Meissel, & McNaughton, 2019). As a result, children enter school with varying levels of oral language skills and research shows that while some children catch up in certain areas, many continue to struggle with foundational literacy skills, which can impact their long-term academic success (Hughson & Hood, 2022).



VARYING ECE EXPERIENCES

There is a wide range in ECE services' ability to support oral language well, with **29%** showing little or no focus on this area .

EDUCATION REVIEW OFFICE



DECLINING LITERACY

The average reading score of New Zealand students declined by **23** points from **529** in 2000 to **506** in 2018 and **501** in 2022

EDUCATION COUNTS



AN EQUITY ISSUE

Socio-economically advantaged students outperformed disadvantaged students by 96 score points in PISA reading

EDUCATION HUB



A GROWING GAP

For children who struggle with literacy, the gap between ability and expected achievement gets worse as they move through their schooling

EDUCATION HUB



Existing research about what contributes to school-ready language and successful school transition

- Early language development is essential for cognitive, social, and academic success at school age
- Communication skills by age 30 months strongly predicts literacy skills and school success.
- The quality and quantity of language input from parents, caregivers, and teachers directly impact language development in the early years. High-quality interactions, like conversational turns and responsive communication, are critical for language growth.
- High-quality early education with intentional and effective language facilitation and responsive interaction makes a substantial difference.
- Strong, collaborative relationships with parents and whānau are crucial, involving information sharing, supporting children's interests, and maintaining ongoing communication.
- Significant disparities exist in language experiences among children from different socioeconomic backgrounds.
- The transition from early childhood education (ECE) to primary school significantly influences children's long-term academic and social outcomes.
- There is considerable variability in how well ECE services and schools support children, particularly those at risk of poor educational outcomes.

Warren, 2015; Finders, Wilson, & Duncan, 2023; Education Review Office, 2015

STUDY DESIGN

**Methodology, participants
and tools**

Talking Matters' Theory of Change

Our Vision of impact

All children in Aotearoa thrive as confident, competent and creative communicators.

Our Mission

Improving quality of life outcomes through rich early language.

If, based on these principles.

ko toku reo toku mapihi maurea

Language is precious taonga

Whanaungatanga

We build robust relationships

Akoranga

Teaching and learning

Mana Motuhake

Whānau and practitioners are agents of change



We use these tools and strategies...

Goal Setting

Co-designing pathways for change

Capability Building

Peer to peer knowledge exchange

Data for Change and Improvement

Collection and analysis

Community Building

Enabling connections

Language Planning

Intentional enrichment of early language



To deploy these activities...

Cycles of learning and change for educators

Tools and strategies for practice change

Tiakina te Kōrero for whānau & whānau supporters

Whānau share rich early language with pēpi

He Waka Kōrero

Exploring language development through mātauranga Māori



We will achieve these outcomes...

Increased serve and return

Enriched language environments

Enhanced wellbeing



Which will generate...

Practice Change

Whānau, whānau supporters and educators

Systems Change

Decision makers and communities prioritise the early years

So ultimately, more children in Aotearoa experience language-rich environments (LRE) in their first 1,000 days.

STUDY OVERVIEW AND WHAKAPAPA

Starting in early 2022, Talking Matters partnered with several organisations in Whakatāne, including the Whakatāne Kāhui Ako and Eastbay REAP, to create and enhance language-rich environments for young children, particularly during their first 1000 days. Our goal was to work alongside educators, whānau, and community supporters to foster environments that support oral language development in both early childhood education (ECE) settings and the wider community.

As part of this initiative, we collaborated with a cohort of eight ECE services to develop customized strategies for practice change that address the specific language needs of each service. We used tools like the LENA technology to gather data and guide our interventions. This data-driven approach empowered teachers to make informed changes, leading to significant improvements in the language environments. After this initial kaupapa, we continued collaborating with the Whakatāne Kāhui Ako to identify further opportunities for language support. This study was conducted in partnership with the Whakatāne Kāhui Ako roughly two years after the initial partnership with ECE centres in Whakatāne.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How has Talking Matters contributed to enriching Early Childhood Education (ECE) language environments, and what is the sustainability of the changes made during the intensive phase of the partnership?
- Are children who participated in Talking Matters programmes during ECE confident and competent communicators at school age?
- What is the experience of the transition-to-school process for children who participated in Talking Matters, and what opportunities exist to offer further support?

The first motivation behind this study, was to explore, in practice, the premise in Talking Matters' Theory of Change which proposes that children's access to language rich environments in the early years (0-5) will contribute to them becoming confident, competent communicators at school age and beyond (our vision of impact). Accordingly, we explored the language skills of a small cohort of school-age tamariki who participated in TM programmes when they were in ECE to understand their language capabilities.

STUDY OVERVIEW AND WHAKAPAPA

ENRICHED LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT



INCREASED SERVE AND RETURN



ENHANCED WELLBEING



Figure 1: Talking Matters outcomes for education environments 2023-2034

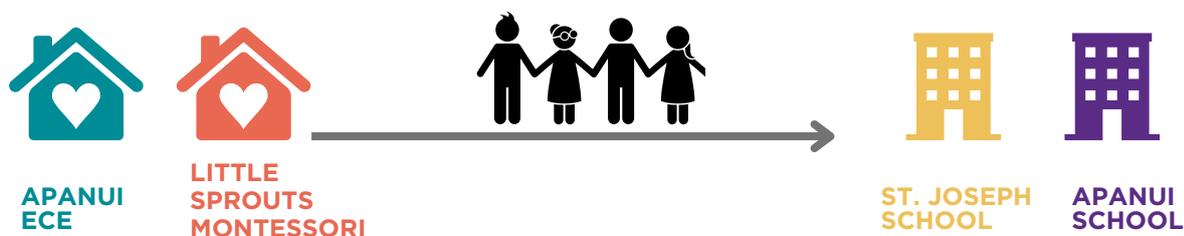
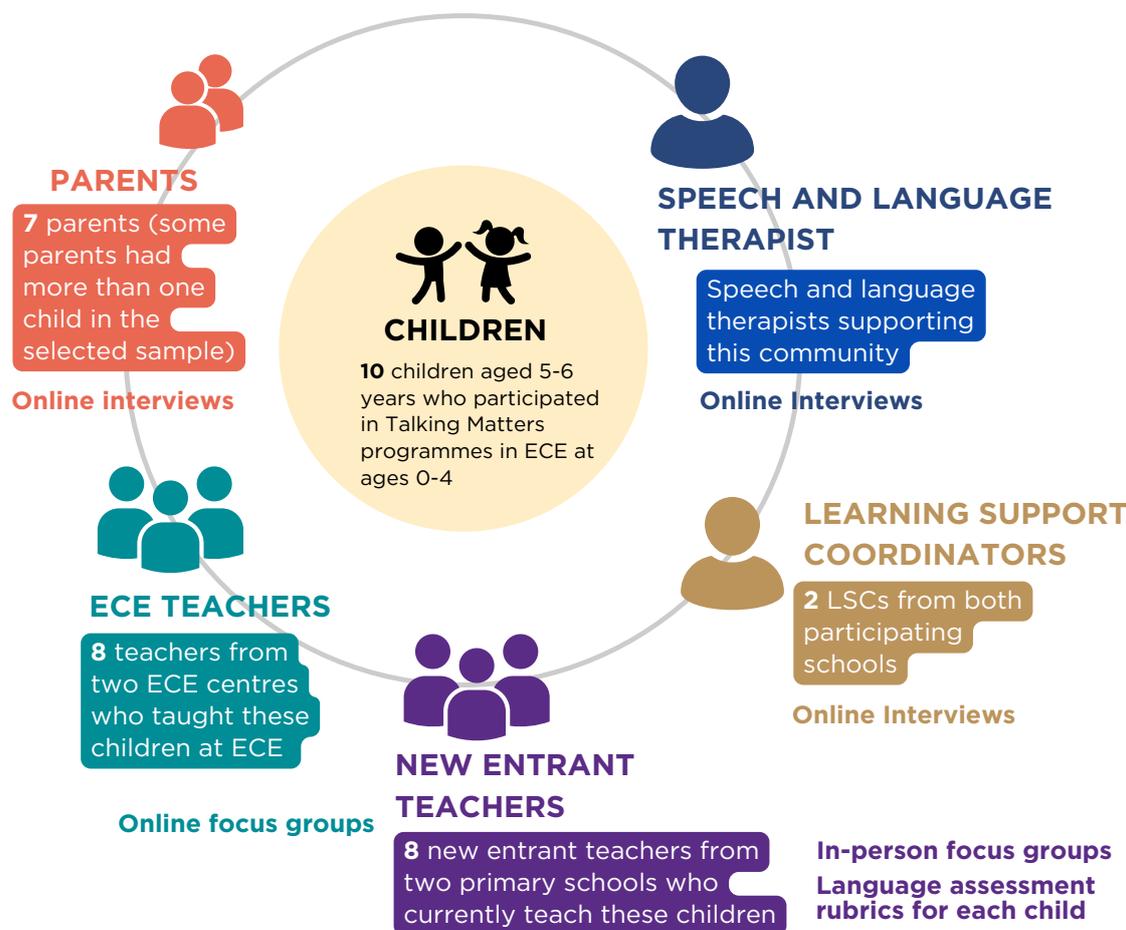
Language competency at school age, research demonstrates, sets tamariki up for success in literacy and learning in general and contributes to their socio-emotional wellbeing. Talking Matters' strategy to contribute to enriched language environments is to build the capability of the adults (whānau, teachers, and others) so that children experience more responsive interactions and more intentional communication

Talking Matters conducts pre and post programme surveys, based on participants' self-reflection which are mapped to intended outcomes through our outcome measurement system. We have generated evidence that our programmes contribute to enriching the language environments of early childhood centres that engage in our partnerships.

In the 2023-2024 year, our education partnerships contributed to a considerable improvement in all measured areas of the language environment of participating centres (figure 1). However, up until now, the connection between this rich early language and children's ability to communicate confidently at school age remained a causal link based on existing research rather than our own evidence.

The second motivation for this study was to identify opportunities for a more targeted contribution to the language aspects of the transition to school space. So far, Talking Matters mahi in ECE, although encompassing all tamariki in a centre, has largely focused on younger children (0-3). We believe there is an opportunity to offer more direct support for teachers to get older children's language ready for school.

Summary of participants and tools



We selected a small cohort of children who participated in Talking Matters’ programmes in early childhood centres in Whakatāne, and that have now transitioned to school. Because of the small population, children were selected in coordination with the ECE centres, based on their families’ availability and willingness to participate in the study. No language development criteria was used to select children and families.

Children’s ECE teachers, new entrant teachers and parents, as well as the primary schools’ learning support coordinators and a speech therapist who supports this Kāhui ako (community of learning), participated in focus groups and online interviews to share insights about the impact of Talking Matters’ programmes, the children’s language development and the process of transition to school. Children were not interviewed directly. Assessments were completed by teachers and parents.

Tools we used



Focus groups with kaiako

- **In-Person Primary school teachers Focus Groups:** These sessions aimed to gather detailed insights into the teachers' experiences and perspectives on the transition to school process, with a specific focus on language development and readiness.
- **Online ECE teachers Focus Groups:** Online focus groups were held with ECE teachers from Apanui ECE and Little Sprouts Montessori ECE. These virtual sessions provided a platform for ECE teachers to discuss the impact of the Talking Matters programme, the challenges they face in preparing children for school, and their views on the transition process.



Online Interviews with Learning Support Coordinators (LSCs)

Online interviews were conducted with the Learning Support Coordinators from both Apanui and Saint Joseph schools. LSCs play a critical role in overseeing the transition to school process. These interviews provided in-depth insights into the challenges and strategies involved in supporting children through this transition.



Online Interview with a Speech and Language Therapist

Specialist Perspective: A speech and language therapist familiar with and supporting the community of learning was interviewed online. This interview aimed to capture the specialist's insights on the transition to school process and the language development needs of children in this community.



Online Interviews with Parents

Parental Observations and Ratings: Online interviews were conducted with parents to gather their observations about their children's language development and their experiences transitioning to school. Additionally, online scoring tools were used to obtain parents' ratings on key aspects of their child's language development, such as oral expression, vocabulary usage, social language use and readiness for school.



Language development rubric

This tool, developed in-house by Talking Matters, was designed as an exploratory observational instrument by a Speech and Language Therapist. Primary school teachers used this rubric to assess the language development of children who participated in Talking Matters programmes and recently transitioned to school. The rubric covered key areas such as oral expression, vocabulary usage, sentence structure, listening comprehension, and social language use.

PART I

Talking Matters' contribution to school-ready language

In the first part of this report we present our findings about Talking Matters' contribution to school readiness with a focus on oral language. We capture perceptions of ECE teachers about how Talking Matters contributes to their ability to get children's language ready for school and what aspects of their learning have become embedded in their practice beyond the intensive partnership.

We also summarise the assessments of primary school teachers and parents about the language skills of children who took part in Talking Matters in ECE, now they have reached school age.

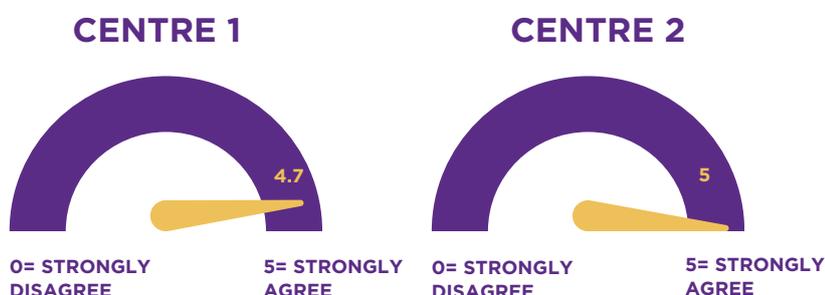
Key aspects of the Talking Matters delivery model in ECE:

- **Partnership Approach and teacher ownership:** The model operates on a partnership basis, giving teachers an active role in decision-making and co-design of practice-change strategies that are relevant and realistic for their team. Educators are seen as active agents in the change process, with motivation and buy-in being critical to success.
- **Support and Resources:** Talking Matters provides comprehensive support, including targeted capability building, practical strategies, resources, and technology, all covered by the program. Educators are given the tools to analyze their language environments, identify areas for improvement, and measure their progress.
- **Two-Cycle Process:** *Cycle one* Focuses on deep learning and exploration, where kaiako (teachers) engage in foundational online modules, data collection, and reflection over six weeks and in *Cycle two* centres focus on hands-on practice change, where kaiako select change ideas, set SMART goals, and engage in data collection and monitoring.
- **Long term learning and embedding change:** The intensive activities included in the partnership, such as LENA recordings and other forms of data collections, are designed to provide deep, hands-on learning experiences for teachers. These activities enable educators to incorporate a more intentional approach to fostering rich language environments and responsive interactions in their day-to-day practice.

How Talking Matters contributes to confident, competent communicators at school: ECE Teachers' perception

Teachers from the two participating ECE centres strongly agreed that the work they did with Talking Matters contributed to their ability to get children’s language ready for school.

“What we learned through our Talking Matters partnership helps us get children’s language ready to thrive at school ”



I think it's the skills of the team and the confidence that we have in our abilities to provide optimal language environment for tamariki. And being really aware of all the factors that contribute to a really strong language environment. Planning, so can be really inclusive, knowing that it's not just about the language we're providing, but about the relationships we have with tamariki and their whānau, knowing it's about understanding what every child brings with them.

ECE TEACHER, CENTRE 2

"You haven't reinvented the wheel, but you have brought us back to focusing on language. Let's really look at it and dig a little bit deeper. It was the kind of learning where we acknowledged, 'OK, we know that, but we need to take it a step further together, let's think about what we are doing and why we are doing it.'

"We've just been finding ways to ensure that we are keeping our language, our environments, really rich with language... We're able to use resources that we already have to be able to deliver that to our children, ensuring that they are getting the best when they move on, we know that we've at least given them the basics or more and get them ready for school".

"Having meaningful back-and-forth exchanges and reminding ourselves that it's not just about questions and to add comments. It's about feeding in language and adding exciting new words they may not have known before. Knowing that it's beneficial to continually expand their vocabulary and build it up as much as possible."

ECE TEACHER, CENTRE 1

The quality of the language environment in the two centres that participated in this study does not go unnoticed. Both primary school teachers and parents acknowledged language-rich experiences these centres provide for tamariki.

It all depends on the individual centre. And it's absolutely reflected in their school readiness. I think both (centre 1 and centre 2) really prepare the children very well. There's lots of oral language experiences. I was talking with a mum earlier. She mentioned her child coming home from one of the centres talking about insects, butterflies, and biscuits. They really are exposed to rich language. They weren't watering down the language; they were making it rich and meaningful."

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER, SCHOOL 1

"The teachers were amazing. They were doing whatever they could to support and motivate him. The level of support he got, teachers looking out for the key language indicators that he was not so confident in and then trying to help. Moving into school, that's when I really noticed the effects of all that support."

PARENT, ABOUT CHILD'S EXPERIENCE IN CENTRE 1

"It was really nice and reassuring that the kids felt like language was a natural part of learning. The teachers at that kindy are amazing. They would often say: We had such a great day with Ethan[1] today, we played with the trucks and we really focused on X and Ethan would try to follow up and explain what they were doing. It was so I could go home and follow up on that. That engagement during pick up was very meaningful"

PARENT, ABOUT CHILD'S EXPERIENCE IN CENTRE 2

[1] All names used in the report are pseudonyms

What sticks and why: Sustainability of Changes Post Intervention in ECE environments

“We have continued to apply our learnings from Talking Matters beyond our intensive partnership ”



In both centres, teachers agreed that the key learnings from the Talking Matters partnership have become “business as usual” in their practice, including:

- More intentional, richer conversations with tamariki.
- Emphasis on relationships as drivers of language.
- Enhanced attunement and listening.
- More meaningful use of te reo Māori beyond instructional language.
- An increased intentionality to learn about the home environment through strengthened connections with whānau.
- More intentional and effective data collection (e.g. in their internal evaluations)

Teachers identified some aspects of the Talking Matters kaupapa as ingredients that made the changes “sticky”, including the ability to work as a team towards shared goals, the effective use of data, and teachers’ ownership over the journey of change.

“We were driving it. The data showed us what was actually happening for children and it was clear that we were making an impact on positive outcomes for children, and we were the drivers of that change. No one else was coming in to tell us we hadn't done enough; we could see from the data what needed improvement and make decisions about what needed to be improved. As a team, we worked on those improvements together, all heading in the same direction with a shared goal. That was probably the key for us. And the way we did that work with you guys is how we've continued our inquiries in other areas as well, because it is more meaningful and sustainable”. ECE

ECE TEACHER, CENTRE 2

The aim of the activities undertaken during the Talking Matters partnership is to raise awareness and intentionality, and consequently, drive practice change. Kaiako believe that their experience with Talking Matters changed the way they think about language and how they communicate with tamariki in their day to day practice. However, some of the more intensive activities they aimed to keep up after the Talking Matters kaupapa (i.e. data collection about the language environment, structured observations, etc.) have become more informal/light touch or are no longer being implemented. Teachers also shared that there was room for improvement in onboarding new staff with the centre’s language strategies and suggested that more consistent follow up and opportunities for continuous engagement would be of value.

Maybe something like a quick monthly email with tips or strategies from Talking Matters. Even though we know them, and have read them all, sometimes we could use a reminder, prompting us to think, "Oh, that's right, we need to be doing that. But it doesn't have to be too much, but just a little reminder. Just those little nuggets and gemstone tips and stuff.

ECE TEACHER, CENTRE 1

Parents' awareness about the Talking Matters programme

Some parents were meaningfully involved with the Talking Matters programme when it was being delivered in their child's ECE and shared the benefits they got from it, as well as their ongoing application.

One thing that we took away from his time with Talking Matters was reading more to our children, but not just reading the words and turning the page but also talking about the pictures in that book, etc. He started to recognise the words and try to read them. We also reduced our options and focused on a few books, and repetition, and I can see how that helped his transition into school."

PARENT OF ETHAN H.

In this whānau, the benefits from Talking Matters expanded to other children who did not participate in the programme directly.

"With our older child we did not have a bed-time routine. Now with Ethan and his younger brother, they are only 20 months apart, they share a bedroom, so they go to bed at the same time and we all read a story together. So both our kids are picking up on the lessons we have taken away from Talking Matters."

PARENT OF ETHAN H.

Other parents' involvement was less meaningful, and limited to giving consent and receiving the info-packs shared by ECE kaiako. Parents referred to busy schedules as the main reason for less involvement.

Effectiveness of Talking Matters ECE Programmes in Developing Confident, Competent communication Skills at School Age

So far we have examined how ECE teachers view the role of their partnership with Talking Matters in enhancing children's language skills for school. We also explored how changes are sustained beyond the intensive phase of the intervention. Teachers strongly agreed that the programme had a significant impact, with many learnings continuing to be implemented.

Next, we analyse the language skills of participating tamariki, based on the data provided by kaiako and parents. We invited primary school teachers and parents of the participating tamariki to share their observation of their language skills through a rubric assessment tool.

Children’s language skills: Teachers’ perspective

ORAL EXPRESSION



VOCABULARY



SENTENCE STRUCTURE



SOCIAL LANGUAGE USE



LISTENING COMPREHENSION



Overall, the scores indicate that children are performing well across all assessed language areas. Teachers indicated that the language skills of participating children were appropriate or advanced for their age (Fig. 2).

Teachers highlighted the strengths and areas for improvement in children’s language development, noting in most cases that the participating children are confident communicators, competent listeners, and capable of following instructions well. They also emphasised the children’s comprehension skills during Storytime and reading sessions, as well as their ability to engage in cooperative play and help peers express their ideas.

Teachers acknowledged the significant influence of the home environment in shaping children’s language skills, pointing out that rich learning experiences at home contribute to better language development and more confident communication in school.

FIGURE 2: TEACHERS’ OBSERVATION OF CHILDREN’S LANGUAGE SKILLS



“He is a confident communicator who articulates his ideas with clarity. He is an active listener and can follow given instructions”

“He will engage with all his peers, he always gets involved in cooperative play and listens to others. He often steps in and helps others express their ideas when talking to each other”

“Has got a great recall ability and literal and inferential comprehension during Storytime, reading, etc.”

TEACHERS’ QUALITATIVE COMMENTS IN LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT RUBRICS

Teachers shared that speaking too quietly and lacking clarity in sentence formation was an area to enhance for some children, who had a lower individual rating of 3/5 for oral expression and sentence structure.

Children’s language skills: Parents’ perspective

‘My child is able communicate their needs and ideas clearly’



My child has the words to name objects and actions in their every-day life.



“My child has the language they need to engage with others.”



“My child has the language they need to thrive at school”.



FIGURE 3: PARENTS’ OBSERVATION OF CHILDREN’S LANGUAGE SKILLS

Parents’ perspectives on their children’s language skills at school age (Fig 3) confirm the views of the teachers. Their responses indicate that they perceive their children’s skills as satisfactory and that they believe they enable them to thrive at school.

In addition to the scores, we asked parents about their child’s language development, specifically in the context of transitioning to primary school from ECE.

From their responses, it was evident that parents generally perceive their children’s language development as progressing well, especially after starting school. Most parents feel that their children are confident and vocal, often expressing themselves and their needs clearly and effectively.

“She’s pretty vocal, she speaks her part, and says what she wants. She can definitely communicate her needs. I think she’s really good in making herself understood, and how she wants things to be done”

PARENT OF MELANIE P [1]

“She’s a really good speaker. She was really good at kindy. We only speak English in the house, but she taught us heaps of Māori songs that she learned from kindy. She loved that kind of stuff. (...)She’s very confident at home, speaking to us, she’s always been really good at speaking her mind. We see that a lot .

PARENT OF ALI C.

Although the general responses about children’s language development were positive, parents were aware of areas where improvement or additional support was needed, i.e. expressing feelings, slowing down when conveying thoughts, etc.

[1] All names used in the report are pseudonyms

Language unfurling at school

Both parents and teachers noted that most participating children showed considerable progress in all aspects of language soon after starting school, including children’s fluency, vocabulary and social language skills. Participants acknowledged the importance of the language environment in the early years (both at home and at ECE), as a seed that was planted and then unfurls when children are exposed to an intentional learning environment at school.



“She started to talk more when school began, and she became chattier with other people and other kids. After she started school, her vocabulary increased a lot.”

PARENT OF MELANIE P

“And the improvement that he made over that year was phenomenal for him. So, from not being able to hold a pen, to fully writing his name and reading a book.”

PARENT OF CHARLIE M

“All I know is that since she’s been at school, she has improved a lot. She has wider vocabulary, understanding of words ... ”

PARENT OF MILA T.

Once at school, teachers identified factors like the “Learning Through Play” approach for new entrants, in combination with a structured learning environment and structured literacy and finally, a classroom culture that fosters belonging and inclusivity as some of the “ingredients” behind this rapid improvement of children’s language skills.

Learning Through Play

On the one hand, the play-based learning approach was emphasised as a powerful tool for language development. Teachers believed that it allows children to learn language skills in a natural and engaging manner, enables a softer transition from the play-based ECE environment and gives children a chance to socialise and get comfortable at school.



"We are a 'learning-through-play' school. That's really powerful for our children's oral language."

" Kids come in and play, which helps them transition. We have a lot of loose parts, like they do in early childhood. So at the beginning they can come and just play."

"It's a good balance, they are learning, and playing and still doing a lot of talking. There's still noise in our class. They're hardly on the mat very long, but they are learning every day".

NEW ENTRANT TEACHERS, SCHOOL 1

Structured Learning Environment and Structured Literacy.

Learning through play is combined with a structured learning environment that focuses on both academic and social aspects of language development. Teachers believe that the consistency and repetition inherent in this approach give children predictable learning routines that are successful in boosting their language development.



"Repetition, consistency, the structured literacy, there is something in it for kids that struggle because it's quite systematic, although it's not a silver bullet, but for some kids it is making a difference."

"The structured literacy approach is systematic and helps kids who struggle with language."

NEW ENTRANT TEACHERS, SCHOOL 1

Some parents commented on how effective this has been for their children:



"School has been fantastic, they have amazing resources, and the structured literacy has been great for him. All of that is helping, giving him the confidence to get better"

PARENT OF CHARLIE M

Classroom Culture and Inclusivity:

Teachers highlighted the importance of creating an inclusive classroom culture where every child feels valued and supported and how significantly this can enhance language development.

"It's the culture you create in your classroom. One of my special needs children, his speech isn't very clear, but because we've created a culture where he's part of us, the kids work with him, include him, and talk with him. His language has gotten so much better."

"Relationships are also really important. When the kids feel safe to share what they think they take risks. We measure their oral language by what they say. It's scary to take a risk when you're not a confident speaker. Creating a classroom environment where everyone's ideas are valued is important. But that's not rocket science; that's just good teaching."

NEW ENTRANT TEACHERS, SCHOOL 1

Teachers insisted on the importance of supporting children to feel safe and secure to "give it a go". This takes time and patience, as well as repetition and predictable routines.

"It takes time and patience, knowing that they all reach those goals at different times. Which is something we all do. And lots and lots of language, reading, writing, listening, talking, and it's happening over and over again all the time. Lots of repetition and routine because they start to understand and feel more confident about learning and language".

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER, SCHOOL 1

REFLECTIONS AND COMMITMENTS

PART I: Talking Matters' contribution to school-ready language

In this section we analyse the study findings to answer two of the study's research questions, i.e.

- How has Talking Matters contributed to enriching Early Childhood Education (ECE) language environments, and what is the sustainability of the changes made during the intensive phase of the partnership? and
- Are children who participated in Talking Matters programmes during ECE confident and competent communicators at school age?

in order to make the findings easy to action, we have structured this section into findings (summarising what we learned), reflections (around what we think it means) and commitments (what we'll do about it).

1

Language Environments in ECE and Sustained Practices

FINDING: *The Talking Matters programmes contributed effectively and sustainably to teachers' ability to prepare children's language for school. Their engagement with Talking Matters generated an increased awareness about the importance of responsive interactions, and an improved confidence to create child-specific opportunities to participate in them. They are more intentional about getting whānau involved and in using reo Māori meaningfully. More consistent engagement and communication from Talking Matters post-intervention would be of value.*

REFLECTION:

The Talking Matters programme aims to create language-rich environments in ECE settings to foster confident and competent communicators. In this study, we engaged with ECE teachers to examine how Talking Matters has influenced their teaching practices and the language environment of their centres, and to assess the sustainability of the changes made during the intensive phase

The ECE teachers involved in the Talking Matters programme reported significant improvements in their ability to prepare children's language for school. Even though some of the more intensive activities undertaken during the programme are now less formal or have been discontinued, the experience teachers had during the Talking Matters partnership have resulted in long-term changes in their practice, such as intentional responsive conversations focused on children's interests, engaging with whānau to gain a better understanding about home environment and children's interests, as well as to share language tips and strategies, a more intentional use of reo Māori and a more effective use of data.

Teachers noted that there would be value in receiving tips and reminders from Talking Matters. They also acknowledged that onboarding new teachers into their language kaupapa was an area to improve.

REFLECTIONS AND COMMITMENTS

PART I: Talking Matters' contribution to school-ready language

2

Talking Matters' Impact on Language Readiness at school

FINDING: *The children included in this study who participated in Talking Matters programmes when they were in ECE, arrived at school with the language skills they need to thrive as confident, competent communicators. This is confirmed by their teachers and parents' observations that they are active listeners, cooperative in play and social engagement, and possess good comprehension skills.*

REFLECTION

Language development is complex and cannot be attributed to a single factor or intervention. Throughout this study, participants highlighted the multiplicity of factors involved in children's language skills at school, in addition to their experience in ECE, with the home language environment and whānau involvement standing out as key factors. Talking Matters' contribution was to support ECE kaiako to provide a language-rich environment for children to develop their skills before school.

Both parents and teachers observed that children who participated in the Talking Matters programme in ECE entered school with strong language skills. Parents noted their children's ability to communicate effectively, express their needs, and engage confidently in social interactions. Primary school teachers echoed these sentiments, highlighting that these children are active listeners, cooperative in play, and possess good comprehension skills.



The Talking Matters programme effectively contributed to enhancing children's language skills as they transitioned from early childhood education (ECE) to primary school. ECE teachers reported significant improvements in their ability to prepare children for school, citing long-term changes in practice such as intentional responsive conversations, increased engagement with whānau, meaningful use of te reo Māori, and better use of data.

Both parents and primary school teachers observed that children who participated in the Talking Matters programme entered school with strong language skills, demonstrating confidence in communication, active listening, social engagement, and good comprehension skills.

REFLECTIONS AND COMMITMENTS

PART I: Talking Matters' contribution to school-ready language

COMMITMENTS: WHAT WE WILL DO

- **Strengthen and make more consistent the engagement of whānau during ECE programmes. This could include**
 - *Initial Information Sharing: Provide an information sheet at the start of the programme to outline its purpose, benefits, and tips for oral language development at home, helping to set expectations and encourage early engagement.*
 - *Mid-Stage Reporting: Create a mid-stage report for families, detailing programme progress, focus areas, and tips for supporting oral language learning, ensuring ongoing involvement.*
 - *Resource Sharing: Distribute branded resources and share links to videos on language engagement to reinforce the programme's principles at home.*
 - *Active Engagement: Encourage ECE centres to involve whānau in specific oral language activities, such as morning waiata or garden projects, to integrate the programme into daily routines.*
- **Strengthen post-intervention support for teachers. Develop a monthly newsletter or similar communication with reminders, information, and easy-to-implement strategies and tools for ECE staff. Include simple tips and strategies teachers can share with whānau to maintain the momentum of the programme.**
- **Offer periodical Talking Matters “refreshers” online for new staff who join after the programme delivery period.**

PART II

Insights about language aspects of the transition to school process

In the second part of this report we delve deeper into the transition to school process, a vital milestone in a child's educational journey. We aimed to understand the process from different angles, so we engaged with ECE teachers, new entrant kaiako, learning support coordinators and speech therapists. The core purpose of this part of the analysis was to gain a better understanding of the language-related components of the process, identify opportunities for enhanced collaboration and areas where Talking Matters can offer support.

Description of the process transition to school process

The transition from early childhood to primary school is a critical period for literacy development. During this phase, children move from a primarily play-based learning environment to a more structured educational setting, where formal reading and writing skills are introduced and emphasised.

Considering the variability of experiences and oral language skills children bring to this stage, the transition to school process becomes a vital opportunity to effectively identify and addresses additional needs and provided targeted support. Such process requires close collaboration between early childhood educators, primary school teachers, language specialists and families to share information about children's strengths and needs.

For this study, we focused on the transition-to-school process for children in ECE. In our kōrero with participants, the transition to school process was presented as a structured and intentional approach aimed at easing children into the school environment. In both schools, a dedicated transition teacher (in both cases this was the school's Learning Support Coordinator- LSC) played a key role in the process, visiting ECE centres and building relations with kaiako, collecting vital information about children's language skills and needs, and sharing this information with the primary school teachers. All teachers acknowledged the importance of this role in enabling a smooth transition.

If a transitioning child has specific language needs these are likely to be conveyed by the ECE teachers to the LSC during those pre-school entry visits. It is also the LSC who leads the initial engagement with the whānau, organising school visits for children to get familiar with the new environment and build relationships with teachers and classmates. The transition also involves language assessments after the child has been in school for about a month, followed by regular assessments at six months and one year.

"I think our transition process is amazing. We've got great protocols in place. Parents enrol their children, and we find out when they're starting. Our transition teacher visits the preschool and takes notes, which we then read. They do three visits and then start school. If they need extra support, they might do a week of shorter visits. After that, they slot straight into what we do."

"Having a dedicated transition person who watches the children and gives us notes, makes all the difference."

NEW ENTRANT TEACHERS, SCHOOL 2



The general process of transition described by the two schools was very similar and included the following, with some small variations:

6 Weeks Before School Starts

- Visit to ECE centres: The learning support coordinator visits ECE centres to meet children and gather information about their language skills and social interactions.
- First School Visit: Children and parents visit the school for a morning session to get familiar with the environment and routines.
- Follow-Up Visit (2-3 Weeks Before School Starts): A longer visit until lunchtime, allowing children to experience more of the school day.

School start

- Settling In: Teachers help children adjust with playtime and support anxious children with a sensory room if needed.
- Initial Assessments: Teachers conduct assessments on literacy and math skills to understand each child's starting level.
- Building Relationships: Teachers focus on helping children make friends and feel included.
- Parent-Teacher Meeting: Discuss the child's progress, social interactions, and language development. Parents receive resources to support learning at home.
- Regular Check-Ins: The learning support coordinator provides additional support and follow-up as needed. Parents are encouraged to communicate any concerns.

Language aspects in the transition to school process

In the next few pages we unpack our findings about the transition to school process, with a focus on language, with the objective of finding areas where Talking Matters can offer further support.

The experience of several teachers confirms what existing evidence suggests: They observed a general decline in oral language at school entry as well as a widening range in these skills from child to child.

I've noticed that all language skills are dropping. There's just less. I think there's more children coming into primary school now, with less ability to say a sentence correctly, never mind read. The whole language has to come first, and if they come and they can't actually put a sentence together correctly, you know? It's hard. We have children only being able to say one word, to children saying two words, to children saying several sentences. So the range is huge, it's quite incredible how huge it is.

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER, SCHOOL 1

A Speech Language therapist who works with this community of learning shared similar insights.

"What I'm hearing from our new entrant teachers is that there are more and more kids entering school with lower and lower language. And I'm going, why? When we've got a community with Talking Matters, with OLLi, with speech therapists looking at the bigger picture, with ECE teachers working really hard to support oral language, looking at how do we help to support this. Where have those kids been?"

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPIST, MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, BAY OF PLENTY

Diverse pre-school experiences and environments

Participants affirmed the importance of the language experiences in the early years as a key factor influencing the language skills children bring to school when they transition. Several teachers noted the considerable variability in children's language skills and linked these to their language experiences before school.

"Some children have had rich language experiences and a vast variety of experiences with their family. They come in with great language skills. However, it's our children who don't have that, our device-dependent children... What I'm saying is that you can tell the difference if they've had a rich oral language environment at home before they arrived here, or if they've attended preschool. Some of the children who have been to preschools still have significant gaps".

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER, SCHOOL 2

“You get some children who clearly come from families where there's a lot of talk, oral language, and reading of books. And then there are others who arrive with very little exposure to these activities. Some preschools will do a better job of addressing this disparity. For example, even with my own children, they attended one preschool before moving to another. The language environment at the second preschool was much richer and more extensive. They were introduced to a range of vocabulary that we had not introduced at home because we thought it was too complicated. However, they were exposed to it, understood it, and started using it at home. This experience made me realise that the quality of early education and the family environment both have a huge impact on a child's language development.”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER, SCHOOL 1

The use of devices, (for children and families in general) was a focus point in almost all the sessions we did with participants. Primary school teachers were particularly concerned with the amount of screen time children were exposed to at home

“Another thing I've noticed is that since smartphones became common, it's changed our interactions with parents during pick up and drop off. Also, before parents would come and say to kids: “how was your day?” But nowadays they are just standing there with their phones. I often see parents walking out holding their child's hand, looking at their phone. So it makes me think, how much oral language is happening at home?”

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER, SCHOOL 2

Some teachers and a speech therapist who have worked in several communities note that, from one place to the other, the differences in the language experiences children have before school and consequently, the skills they bring at school entry, are very notable. There are also big differences in the support teachers get and their access to language-related PD.

I taught in a small rural town for years. So just coming here, the kids' oral language to me was just so much better. (...) Based on what I saw, I can only make an assumption that those rich learning experiences were not there, because they're not spending time with their children reading books, etc.

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER, SCHOOL 2

Large cities were a breeze to work in. They had relievers, they had no staffing issues, they had access to so much professional development. Then I went from city to a small town to run my PD, and they were so thankful because they didn't have to spend the time travelling long distances. They didn't access PD because it is always so far away from them. So I think part of it is access and equity and it has a huge impact.

SLT, MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Access to Specialist Language Interventions

Teachers observed that with this wide range of language experiences comes an equally wide range of needs, and early intervention and support for children who need it make a huge difference for children's learning outcomes.

Both ECE and primary school teachers acknowledged the importance of specialist intervention and the quality of the service they have received.

"I had never really worked with a speech therapist before, but I am at the moment, I've learned really cool stuff from her (...). I've found her support to be great. I'd like to work with speech therapists more, to be honest".

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER, SCHOOL 2

"For those that need the specialist knowledge, for example, the sounds a child might actually need need to know before they can make that next sound, and so on. It wasn't until we got our speech language therapist that we could start seeing improvements on some of our tamariki. Because we're targeting what they need".

ECE TEACHER, CENTRE 2

However both ECE and primary school teachers suggested that early intervention may not be the norm.

"I just wonder why children so old have never received speech therapy or any intervention. Like, with one of my children you can hardly understand what she's saying, and she's six, which affects her in all areas of school."

"Yes, early intervention is key. And diagnosing is one thing, but helping is another. The system needs more resources. You've got the diagnosis. Then what? We can only do so much. Our teachers here work so hard. All teachers do, but what can you actually do? You get the diagnosis and then you're left to figure it out."

NEW ENTRANT TEACHERS, SCHOOLS 1 AND 2

The perception that the system is stretched and not enough resources are available was a theme in common between ECE and primary school teachers. Some kaiako suggested that support is only available for children with very high needs and that there are often delays in accessing it.

In our interview with a local Speech and Language Therapist, she suggested that understaffing has historically been an issue in the region, but that this is no longer the case, as the department is nearly fully staffed now. This suggest some teachers may be assuming support is not available, or will be very hard to access based on historical shortages. The SLT we interviewed offered some important observations about the process of referral and some factors she believes get in the way of early access to support.

"If the needs are extreme, then we can get a bit of external support but usually, there's a lot of teacher time involved. Even if it's extreme, it isn't a guarantee we'll get help. Low levels of oral language are a concern, but the tolerance for that is pretty high. You don't get help unless they can't talk. I had a little boy with special needs. He couldn't put words together but could communicate basic needs. He was not eligible for funding because he could catch a ball, use scissors, and ask to go to the toilet. The bar to get help is quite high. And they need to be quite old before they can have access to this kind of help".

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER, SCHOOL 1

The referral process

The referral process is sometimes perceived as laborious and complex. It takes time and intentionality to put a request for support together and often, with teachers stretched, this falls onto the back burner.

Hesitation to refer and challenges bringing whānau on board

ECE kaiako may sometimes hesitate to refer a child for specialist support because they feel the child needs to be given the space to develop “in their own time”. The SLT noted that only a few referrals tend to come from ECE, and that they are much more frequent from GPs and Plunket. She suggested that a referral can sometimes be perceived by teachers as equivalent to saying that there is “something wrong with the child.” Families sometimes may perceive it as a suggestion that they are doing something wrong. Bringing up the referral with whānau can be complex and takes knowledge and confidence to talk about early language development.

Teachers, as a rule, are really hesitant about putting a request for support through to the Ministry, for children with complex needs. We'll get referrals from doctors, no problem. We'll get referrals from GPs, no problem. Sometimes that's how we hear about the most challenging ones. Those are the children that are very, very obvious. But it's the ones that maybe need additional support in the centre. It's up to the teacher to talk to the parent without making the parent feel defensive, like they've done something wrong. (...) So we get very few requests for support directly from early childcare centres.(...) The way I see it, the medical model is not strength-based. The medical model is very much, "There's something wrong; we need to fix it." That's where we get the brunt of our referrals from. The education model is more strength-based

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPIST, MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, BAY OF PLENTY

This is in line with the finding in a recent ERO report on oral language (Education Review Office, 2024) that suggests that teachers’ confidence to work with language specialists is an area to be improved both for ECE and new entrant teachers.



A tiered system of intervention

The speech therapist we interviewed shared some important insights about the Te Tūāpapa o He Pikorua framework which is a tiered approach to intervention established in 2020 to inform all Learning Support Services provided by the Ministry of Education. It is a system “for identifying supports which increase in intensity, depending on the needs and the context” **(Ministry of Education, 2024)**

FINDINGS

According to the Ministry of Education, He Pikorua is designed to operate in partnership with educators and whānau and aims to enable practitioners to intervene early, support systemic responses as well as targeted and individualised approaches within educational contexts (Ministry of Education, 2024). The framework comprises three tiers: (1) Te Matua - Universal, which strengthens inclusive environments, cultures and practices, (2) Te Kāhui - Targeted approaches to enhance participation, learning and wellbeing and (3) - Te Arotahi - Tailored, which provides more specific supports for unique needs and contexts.

“Tier 3 when we’re looking at it from a Ministry of Education perspective, is where our specialist expertise comes in. So those might be the kids with really significant speech sound disorders which potentially will impact literacy. It will be the children with different syndromes that are already at risk for having low language. Here we are providing the expertise to support that particular child because it’s at a Tier 3 level. But that child gets all the Tier 1 and 2 stuff as well”.

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPIST, MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, BAY OF PLENTY

The framework intends to wrap layers of support around tamariki and kaiako, under the premise that the language needs of most children will be met by these universal and targeted interventions, so that intensive, tier 3 intervention is not the only option.

“Historically in the Ministry of Education we were only operating at a Tier 3 level (child gets referred to a speech therapist and gets a specialist programme). And what we realised is that many of those children did not need a specialist programme. They just need really good support around them.

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPIST, MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, BAY OF PLENTY

The He Pikorua framework is being implemented within a complex ecosystem that poses some challenges. Several teachers shared that they are often too stretched to meet the demands of “partnering” with specialists to deliver programmes and strategies.

“I thought it was interesting that the speech therapist said that when possible, they try to get the teachers and teacher aides to do the work because we’re here all the time. And I was thinking, yes, but I literally don’t have the time. I’m squeezing this in whenever I can, but it’s really stretching me. I don’t understand why a professional isn’t working with these children, especially when a six-year-old cannot be understood.

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER, SCHOOL 2

I've got year 2 students who are a little further along, but with 23 or 24 children in the class, to actually being able to help those children that you would like to. It's hard to spend more time with those children who need it. Our programmes are crowded, we simply don't have the time (...). We teach them one hour each of reading, writing, and maths for a start. It's taking up a lot of time.

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER, SCHOOL 1

Additionally, some teachers feel that they are being asked to deliver tools and strategies that they are not properly trained for and that, in general, they are getting less support from Speech Therapists than before.

The level of support that therapists are able to give now is much less than it used to be. Previously, speech therapists would come and teach the child every week. Now, you're very lucky if they come once a term and they give a programme for a teacher aide to deliver. We're even asked to assess what the children can do. There's a test sheet and you need to listen to the child. I had to record a child's speech on my phone because I couldn't pick up the sounds clearly. Then I'm supposed to interpret it and send it back. It's not a very good policy. We're not specialists in that field and have no training.

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER, SCHOOL 1

It is important to consider that the Te Tūāpapa o He Pikorua framework is fairly new and it may take time to fine-tune its implementation and bring everyone on board. More support for the teachers to gain a better understanding on the model and its implementation without it becoming an extra pressure may be necessary.

There needs to be more people supporting schools and not just speech therapists, but teacher aides, more people supporting teachers to be able to support their kids. But at the same time, there will never be enough, so actually there needs to be a really clear understanding of how any intervention model works, and the professional development of the training around that takes time.

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPIST, MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, BAY OF PLENTY

The importance of relationships: Connection and collaboration between ECE and schools around children's language

Both ECE and primary school teachers participating in this study, as well as the interviewed Learning Support Coordinators, who are in charge of the transition to school process in both schools, acknowledged the importance of strong relationships and robust communication between ECE centres and schools as a crucial factor for a successful transition. Good, effective communication about children's language skills and needs is a crucial step that enables primary school teachers to meet these needs when children transition.

Teachers from both schools acknowledged the key role of the Transition to School teacher (a role performed in both schools by the Learning Support Coordinator, LSC) In our conversations, LSCs and teachers shared that the quality of the language-related information they received from ECE varies. The views about how effectively this information ends up informing classroom practice are variable. Some teachers believe that they receive sufficient information about children's language at ECE, but most think there is room for improvement. This is not a reflection of the LSC's work, which was highly regarded by ECE teachers and primary teachers alike, but a consequence of other challenges that are getting in the way.

New entrant teachers we spoke with agreed that they are under pressure to deliver in many areas that often compete for limited time. So in some instances the information compiled by the LSCs does not fully transfer to the teachers, or it comes in a format that is laborious to interpret (e.g. learning stories). Some teachers suggested the idea of a language snapshot or profile, where children's language skills and needs were clearly outlined.

In the last few years, the only time I ever had anything come from preschool was for a severely autistic child. Our Learning Support Coordinator does have contact with them, but I sometimes wish I would hear more from the preschool. Maybe a profile sheet that says these are some concerns with this child, and this is what we do to support them. If they came with that little snapshot, when you see those behaviors or learning behaviors, you think, oh, OK, there's already something here. And work with that.

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER, SCHOOL 1

Others believe it would be beneficial if they were resourced to build more meaningful direct relationships with ECE centres and children before school entry.

Relationships are the core of what we do, and it's important to start those relationships early with the little 5-year-olds. The earlier you start, the easier it is. I would love more contact with the ECEs. Even if I just had a profile sheet with a few bits on there, it would be something. I wouldn't be looking at that and thinking right, that kid has that label on. No way. But if I saw things and thought they're red flags and could see that, actually this came before as well, it would sort of empower me to jump on it faster.

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER, SCHOOL 1

Another issue that teachers identified as an obstacle is the breakdown of language data sharing between ECE and primary. They observed that sometimes the information held by ECEs (e.g. language delay diagnosis) is not shared with primary schools and they believe this may be related with parents' concerns that it could create a stigma for their children, or want to give them a "clean slate" when they get to school.

It's to do with privacy, because we share information between primary and intermediate and high school because it's in our system. But with ECE parents need to consent to share the information. And the parents with children with real issues often want their child to start afresh and have a clean slate, so they won't sign.

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER, SCHOOL 1

ECE teachers shared some of their unmet aspirations and concerns in relation with the transition to school process. Some teachers believe that the effort they put capturing children's previous learning experience and language skills and needs was not landing effectively in the primary school learning environment.

We often have transition teachers visit the centre, asking about the best ways children learn and any sort of information about the children. But some have shared with me that they are not sure why they write it down because the teachers don't even read it. So I guess it's like sometimes with transition to school we feel like we're doing a lot but it's not received at the other end.(...) The link seems to break, and they just start fresh. We know they are too busy, or there might be other barriers in place. Some of those teachers don't even get or even have time to read that information, so that relationship feels kind of one-sided.

ECE TEACHER, CENTRE 2

ECE kaiako would also like to increase their knowledge about what is expected of children when they reach school, so they can better prepare them to transition smoothly. Part of the equation are insufficient opportunities to meet and share with primary school teachers.

Sometimes, you send these children to school and then you just don't really know how they're getting on. It would be nice to support these children before they go to school by letting them know what to expect. Like, this is what you're gonna do, just so that they are as prepared as possible. It would be helpful to explain what's expected of them at school for their sake, so we can say. We have these meetings with primary, but sometimes I still think it's not enough.

ECE TEACHER, CENTRE 1

The idea of more shared professional development and meeting opportunities between ECE and primary school kaiako was also brought up by the Learning support coordinator in school 1.

We had this thing going on with ECE that went really, really well because we met every term and even more often than that. Maybe we might have even met twice a term. But we got to talk to the early childhood teachers a lot. We got to unpack things with them and that was really, really useful. We have a meeting coming up this Wednesday evening that will be the first time we've probably come together as new entrant teachers and early childhood teachers in about a year and a half.

LEARNING SUPPORT COORDINATOR, SCHOOL 1

The same kaiako remembered that in the past there was one person across schools and ECE coordinating the transition to school process, and suggested this type of support was extremely effective.

She used to communicate with all the ECEs. If there were children needing specific transition plans, she'd contact the school, and we'd set up the plans. Most children transition smoothly with visits, and some need extra help. If we know about these issues before school starts, we can ensure a smooth transition by preparing and contacting the resource teacher for learning and behaviour, or whatever. (...)The most crucial aspect, which I can't emphasise enough, is relationships—relationships with ECE, the home, and the student. I couldn't speak more highly of that

LEARNING SUPPORT COORDINATOR, SCHOOL 1

What some children struggle with when they transition to school

One of the aspirations many ECE teachers shared was having a better notion of what was expected of children when they transitioned to school so they could more effectively equip them for a “soft landing”. Here are some of the things primary teachers said tended to be a “clash” for tamariki transitioning from ECE to school.

Following Instructions:

Children sometimes struggle with understanding and following multi-step instructions. This includes difficulties in maintaining attention and responding appropriately to verbal directions in a classroom setting.

Physical Skills and Coordination:

Fine motor skills necessary for tasks like writing, cutting, and other classroom activities can be underdeveloped. This can lead to frustration and reluctance to participate in certain tasks.

Children come to school with all sorts of grips. I know it's a minimal thing, but once they develop the pencil grip, it's harder to change, and they struggle

LEARNING SUPPORT COORDINATOR , SCHOOL 2

Adaptation to Structured Learning Environments:

Some teachers suggest that some tamariki struggle to adapt from less structured learning environments in ECE to more structured learning activities in primary school can be challenging. Children may struggle with the increased expectations for focus, task completion, and adherence to schedules. Some primary teachers associate this issue with varying expectations for participation in structured activities.

For example, for many children at ECE mat time is optional. So he's finding it really hard when I say it's time to come to the mat. He fights it. At tidy-up time, he says, "Oh no, I'll do it later." It's learning that we work as a team in the classroom. It's not, "You can do what you like when you like." We are a team, and if it's clean-up time, we all clean up together. Setting those expectations is important.

NEW ENTRANT TEACHER, SCHOOL 1

Some children are really shy with that or haven't had that experience before. It seems like at preschool now, it can be optional what you choose to do. Some children might never go to a mat time because they don't want to choose that. I think with readiness for school, there needs to be a time when they know this is a really important part of being part of a classroom.

LEARNING SUPPORT COORDINATOR , SCHOOL 1

REFLECTIONS AND COMMITMENTS

Insights about language aspects of the transition to school process

In this study we identified key language-related factors for a successful transition to school, drawn from the perspectives of ECE teachers, primary school teachers, learning support coordinators, and insights from a speech therapist in the community. These findings emphasise the importance of a well-coordinated, supportive, and informed approach to ensure a smooth and successful transition for children entering school.

1

Language Environments in ECE and Sustained Practices

FINDING: Inconsistent information transfer from ECE centres to primary schools can lead to primary teachers being unaware of critical background information about a child's language development.

REFLECTION:

Effectively sharing information about language development, in a way that provides a holistic picture of each child's abilities is an important factor in a successful transition to school. However, inconsistent information transfer from ECE centres to primary schools can result in primary teachers being unaware of important background information. The quality of shared information fluctuates, and ECE teachers often lack clarity on what is relevant to share, while some primary teachers do not have the capacity to review all the information they receive.

2

Early and Targeted Interventions

FINDING: Identifying language and developmental delays early and implementing targeted interventions are critical, but delayed referrals, sometimes inconsistent specialist support, and hesitancy to refer children for additional support can impede timely intervention.

REFLECTION:

Identifying language and developmental delays early and implementing targeted interventions are crucial for ensuring that children receive the support they need to thrive academically and socially. However, barriers such as delayed referrals, inconsistent specialist support, and hesitancy to refer children due to fears of stigmatisation can impede the effectiveness of these efforts. Teachers and caregivers may avoid making referrals out of concern for the child's self-esteem or parental defensiveness, which can delay crucial support. Additionally, limited access to specialists, particularly in remote or underserved communities, exacerbates these challenges, leading to inequities in educational outcomes. Addressing these issues requires a systematic approach that reduces stigma, improves communication between parents and educators, and ensures consistent access to specialist support.

REFLECTIONS AND COMMITMENTS

Insights about language aspects of the transition to school process

3

Parental Engagement and Support:

FINDING: Active parental involvement is crucial for children's readiness for school, but engaging parents can be challenging, especially when they are reluctant to share information or have had negative experiences with the education system.

REFLECTION:

Active parental involvement in their child's education, including reinforcing learning at home, is crucial for children's readiness for school. However, engaging parents can be challenging, especially when they are reluctant to share information about their child's needs or have had negative experiences with the education system. The level of language development support at home varies widely, with some parents providing rich language experiences and others relying more on digital entertainment. This variability, along with a lack of parental awareness about the importance of early language development activities, can significantly impact children's language skills and readiness for school. There is a need to increase parental awareness of early language development activities and to provide support that resonates with diverse family experiences.

4

Collaborative Practices and Professional Development

FINDING: There is a need for more effective connection and collaboration between ECE and primary school teachers. Teachers expressed the need for more spaces where they can share experiences and challenges, and align their approaches to language development, ensuring continuity in how language is supported. This would help children adapt more easily to the linguistic expectations and communication demands when they transition to primary school.

REFLECTION:

In this study, the efforts of a dedicated transition to school teacher was framed as crucial to ensure an effective connection between ECE and primary. However, teachers on both sides craved more opportunities to come together directly to connect, share experiences and find opportunities for meaningful collaboration. Teachers mentioned that joint professional development was a space where they could see this connection flourishing in the past, but felt that lately the opportunities were few and far between.

REFLECTIONS AND COMMITMENTS

Insights about language aspects of the transition to school process

5

Resource limitations and inequitable access.

FINDING: Adequate resources, including access to speech therapists and teacher aides, are essential, but there is often a shortage of these resources, particularly in smaller or remote communities.

REFLECTION:

Adequate resources, including support staff like speech therapists and teacher aides, are essential for providing necessary support for children with additional needs. Teachers celebrated how much children's language skills improved when they received the right support. However, there is often a shortage of speech therapists and teacher aides, and limited access to educational resources. Teachers and specialists who worked in smaller or more remote communities in the Bay of Plenty noted the stark inequity of access to language support across locations.

Key communication skills expected of children when they reach school.

When children reach school, there is an expectation that children will have certain communications skills to participate fully in classroom activities. Children are expected to be able to greet their teacher, interact with peers during playtime and express their needs and participate in class, including answering questions. Additionally, it was an advantage when tamariki were able to write their name and recognise it on their personal items, which helps them manage their belongings and fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility. Finally, the ability to engage in communication and learning experiences that require some structure and being in the same space for extended periods (e.g. mat time) was key. Teachers said that this was one of the most important aspects of children's readiness and that it varied widely, due to the diverse settings of ECE, with varying levels of structured activity and play.

REFLECTIONS AND COMMITMENTS

Based on the findings from this study about the transition to school process, several opportunities emerge for enhancing support for older children, their parents, and their teachers. Currently, Talking Matters focuses primarily on children aged 0-3, and even though we include older children in our ECE programmes, we do not currently offer direct support around the language aspects of the transition to school process. The following recommendations aim to map some areas where Talking Matters can further contribute in this space.

COMMITMENTS: WHAT WE WILL DO

1. Collaborate with teachers and speech therapists to support early interventions

- Develop resources that support parents and kaiako identify and address language delays before children transition to school, in a way that is mana-enhancing and helps remove any stigma associated with additional language needs.
- Collaborate with speech therapists in the community to offer workshops and resources for effective language development strategies.

2. Support effective Information Exchange about Children's Language

- Work with primary school teachers, learning support coordinators and ECE kaiako to effectively create and share language profiles that contain vital information about the language skills and needs of tamariki in a format that is easy to read and apply in the new entrant class.
- Support the Whakatāne Kāhui Ako to facilitate regular meetings and communication channels between ECE and primary school staff to discuss children's language progress and needs. Enhance joint PD opportunities.

3. Support Whānau Engagement

- Support parents to engage meaningfully in their child's transition to school, with a focus on language. Talking Matters has already prototyped a parent support programme that uses primary schools as hubs. This programme can be expanded to offer more targeted support for parents of transitioning tamariki. Further support could come from a combination of printed "take home" resources and workshops that can be delivered collaboratively with ECE and primary schools.

REFLECTIONS AND COMMITMENTS



Talking Matters work is based on principles that include collaboration, joint ownership of the kaupapa and the integration of multiple sources of knowledge. This way of working represents a significant strength in a space like the transition to school where so many factors are at play. Additionally Talking Matters is able to support both parents and kaiako, bringing together the key adults influencing this pivotal moment in the education journey of tamariki. These elements put Talking Matters in a privileged position to contribute significantly in this space.

This study was a small, exploratory case study aimed at understanding the contribution of the Talking Matters programme to children’s language skills at school entry and gaining insights into the transition to school space. The primary purpose was to fine-tune our intervention strategies, rather than to achieve academic rigor. While the study’s design and scope have certain limitations, these do not undermine its utility. The findings provide valuable qualitative data and practical insights that can inform future improvements to the programme and better support children and educators during this critical transition phase.

LIMITATIONS

Non-representative Sample: The study’s findings are based on a non-representative sample, which limits the generalisability of the results. The sample may not adequately reflect the diversity of the broader population, including variations in socio-economic status, cultural backgrounds, and regional differences. This limitation means that the conclusions drawn from this study may not be applicable to all settings or groups.

Non-standardised Language Rubric: The study uses a non-standardised language rubric that relies on teachers and parents’ perceptions to assess children’s language skills, rather than testing tamariki directly. This approach can introduce bias, as teachers’ evaluations may vary based on their individual experiences, expectations, and familiarity with each child’s background. The instrument has not been peer-reviewed.

Lack of Control Group and Uncontrolled Variables: The study did not include a control group, which limits the ability to compare the language development outcomes of children who participated in the Talking Matters programme with those who did not. Additionally, the study did not control for other variables that could influence children’s language development, such as variations in home environments, parental involvement, or access to other educational resources.

In this study we:

- Obtained informed consent from all participants.
- Ensured all participants (especially ECE and primary school teachers) felt safe and empowered in the research process, so it was not perceived as an external assessment of the quality of their teaching but as a tool to improve our ability to enhance children's language outcomes.
- Maintained confidentiality and anonymity of participants, to the extent required by them.
- All children data was aggregated. All children names used in this report are pseudonyms

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