

A story about discovery: Kere and Daisy

Kere and Daisy's story

Any parent can find it difficult to decide upon the best school for their child. If your child has a special learning need, it can be even harder.

Mike and Suzie have two beautiful children: big brother Tia and little sister Kere, who is four. Tia is happily settled at the local school and Mike and Suzie would dearly love Kere to go there too. But Kere is on the autism spectrum, with needs that are high enough for her to qualify for funding under the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme. Mike and Suzie met with the principal of the nearby special school, along with one of her kindergarten teachers, specialists who have worked with Kere, and the regional manager of the Ministry's Learning Support Team. Together, they discussed what they know about Kere, their hopes for her and how best to achieve them.

Mike: Kere will have to get out into the 'real world' one day. How can she be ready for that if she's surrounded by other people with learning needs?

Suzie: She's so disconnected from the people around her. If she went to the same school as Tia, there would at least be one familiar face.

Early childhood educator: Kere's been really happy at kindy. She loves climbing and playing outside, even in winter! But she's never actually engaged with any of the other children.

Educational psychologist: I know Tia is an important part of Kere's world and plays a big part in helping her connect to the bigger world. But I think Kere needs more specialised help than she'd get in a regular school. I'd like to see her talking and able to follow a visual schedule before we put her in that situation.

School principal: It's true we can't offer Kere the neurotypical¹ role models she would get at the primary school. But I think we could do some great things around Kere's learning and communication and her overall comfort with being at a school.

Together, the group developed a plan. Kere would attend the special school for six months and together they would work on developing her foundations for learning. At the end of that time, the group would re-visit their decision and look at slowly transitioning Kere to the same school as Tia.

Connections to the emerging ideas about a system that learns

Rich records of learning

Prior to the meeting, Mike and Suzie had shared selected parts of Kere's record of learning with the teachers at the school. Her record included learning stories written by the teachers at the kindergarten and commented upon by her parents.

Kere's parents, teacher, support worker, and the educational psychologist had checked that their contributions were up to date and discussed what to share with the school.

Learning partnerships with parents and whānau

Parents, specialists, and the school principal share what they know of Kere openly and honestly, each bringing their own knowledge of an ākonga who is, as yet, unable to speak for herself. They respect each other's expertise and come to a joint decision on the pathway for Kere's learning. It is clear that this will be a sustained conversation, with decisions up for review in light of any change.

¹ Somebody who is neurotypical is someone who is not on the autism spectrum.

Kere and Daisy's story

Daisy is Kere's teacher. In Kere's first week at school, Daisy used an engagement-for-learning tool to add to her understandings about her new students. Her data included observing Kere's movements around the classroom and at lunchtime.

Daisy: Kere is constantly on the move, even when she's having her lunch! She isn't showing interest in any of the activities, or what the other children are doing. She carries one of Suzie's old phones with her everywhere and can't put it down without becoming anxious.

A breakthrough came when Daisy noticed that Kere seemed to pause in her roaming when she got to the sandpit. Daisy videotaped Kere's movements and confirmed her hunch.

Daisy: It was just for a moment, but Kere clearly paused and was calmer when she got to the sandpit. I wondered if the sand was meeting a sensory need.

Daisy noticed another pattern. Kere showed fleeting interest in a squishy frog the class used in a counting song. Could these two insights combine to help Kere engage with learning?

At circle time the next day, a plastic shell full of sand on the floor sat next to Daisy. Kere saw her teacher put one of the squishy frogs on the sand. Kere noticed, then looked away.

The next day, the shell was there again. And this time, Kere stood in the shell. It was just for a moment, but for Kere, it was significant.

Daisy: That was the first time I felt I'd 'got to' Kere - the first time she'd actively responded to something I had set up for her.

Gradually, Daisy began introducing a bowl of sand to each of the classroom learning stations. And gradually, Kere started paying attention to the activities at the stations - to match objects to pictures, to explore the properties of water, to experiment with sequencing. Then, one special day, Suzie called in to the school to share an exciting story.

Suzie: Last night at the dinner table, Kere looked at me and signed - and verbalised - "More"! Then she did it again, but this time she said, "More, Mum!" It's the first time I've ever heard her talk. She called me "Mum"!

The six-month point came along and Suzie and Mike said 'no' to the transition. Instead, they have kept working with the school to support Kere to attend, be still, and communicate. The school uses learning stories to give Suzie and Mike insight into Kere's learning at school. Suzie, Mike, Tia and Kere all enjoy reading and talking about the stories together, often adding comments and sometimes creating their own. The communication is regular and ongoing, both face-to-face and digital.

Connections to the emerging ideas about a system that learns

Assessment, inquiry, and evaluative capability

A purpose-built tool helps Daisy direct her attention to what she should be noticing about Kere's readiness for learning. Her data includes her day-to-day observations as she gets to know Kere. She follows up a hunch with further investigation, and recognises how Kere may be using the sand to meet a need. Daisy responds by introducing the sand to the classroom. She then develops the action further, as it becomes apparent that this strategy is succeeding in drawing Kere in to the learning.

Learning partnerships with parents and whānau

Kere's parents and kaiako are sharing responsibility for her learning so that it is connected across home and school. All Kere's learning takes place within an environment in which the adults care about her, appreciate her, and share in the joy when she achieves a new milestone.

Assessment, inquiry, and evaluative capability

All those with an interest in and concern for Kere's learning participate in evaluating her progress and the impact of the decisions they have made on her behalf. They use what they learn to come to joint decisions on what they need to do to further promote her learning and well-being.

Kere and Daisy's story

Kere is now seven years old and has moved from the base school to a satellite class in a local primary school. Both at home and at school, all those who care about Kere share in the joy as they work with each other – and with Kere – to discover the potential that always lay within.

Daisy: *As Kere has grown in confidence and become more settled, it's become apparent that she's noticed and taken in a lot more than we had realised. She had been watching the other students. She did know where her visual schedule was ... where her bag should go.*

Mike: *It means a lot to Tia that his sister now greets him by his name.*

Suzie: *We've almost seen the last of that phone! It's down to a small piece of plastic and she doesn't have to carry it everywhere. She knows she can put it somewhere safe and it will still be there.*

Teacher at satellite class: *Kere has begun moving through the Ready to Read books and she's shown a real interest in numbers and in music. We're working on weaving those interests through other areas of the curriculum.*

Educational psychologist: *Kere doesn't play with the other children, but she's increasingly tolerant of groups and does engage in parallel play. Big steps for Kere.*

Teacher aide: *Kere and I have started visiting mainstream classes. We don't stay long, but that's fine. There's lots of time.*

Principal: *She's a beautiful girl. She's such a learner.*

Connections to the emerging ideas about a system that learns

Responsive local curriculum

The curriculum Kere experiences is tailored to her individual needs and builds on her strengths. It stretches across multiple sites – from home, to the base school, and to the satellite class. She even participates, briefly, in a mainstream class. As the sites for Kere's learning have expanded, so does the community of people responsible for her learning. Her classmates participate in her learning as role models.