

# Proactive Inclusion: An International Learning Journey



Executive Summary  
for the Trustees of the Remura Rotary Club

Sue Hone  
2025 Recipient of the Margaret May Blackwell Fellowship

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Inclusion Panel Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia Annual Conference 5<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> May 2025  
Jennie Roberts (Provincial ECE Adviser), Andrew Roet (Director of Child and Family Services, Developmental Disabilities Assoc.,  
Dee Elliot (student), Oshrat Zemel (Inclusion Advocate and Educator), Lindsay Friis (Children Development and Support  
worker), and myself.

## Executive Summary

This summary presents an overview of the learning generated through the Margaret May Blackwell Travel Fellowship and outlines how that learning will continue to benefit early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand. It documents an international learning journey across Canada, Europe, and Finland, undertaken to explore inclusive practice for *tamariki kanorau-ā-roro* (neurodivergent children) and *tamariki hinegaro mamae* (children experiencing mental and emotional distress).



Micheal Guralnick (Emeritus Coordinating Committee Member), Mary Beth Bruder PHD and Chair of ISEI (Opening Keynote speaker), Ana Maria Serrano PHD (Keynote speaker) and Noor Van Loen (Eurllyaid representative and an organisers of the conference).

At the outset of the fellowship, the inquiry focused on identifying innovative adaptive and responsive learning environments. However, through engagement with educators, early intervention professionals, and education systems, a critical insight emerged: much of what is described internationally as “inclusive innovation” remains fundamentally reactive - support is typically given in reaction when children experience difficulty, disruption, or diagnosis, rather than being designed in readiness for diversity from the outset.

This realisation required a re-examination not only of international systems, but of the assumptions underpinning the original research question itself. The fellowship revealed that reactive inclusion is sustained by system designs grounded in colonial binary thinking, where difference is treated as deviation rather than identity. Across contexts, educators demonstrated skill, care, and commitment, yet were constrained by policies, funding models, and accountability structures that require children to struggle before support is permitted.

Experiencing Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing - both internationally and through reconnection with *te ao Māori* (the Māori worldview) the fellowship illuminated an alternative starting point. Indigenous epistemologies position belonging as inherent, diversity as expected, and learning as relational. These perspectives provided not only critique, but direction, informing the development of Proactive Inclusion as a design approach that anticipates difference rather than responding to it.

The report details how Proactive Inclusion is already being enacted through two sector initiatives: an intentionally designed transition-to-school programme (*He Ara Whakapiki Tamariki*) and a year-long social and emotional learning programme informed by *Kōwhiri Whakapae*. In both cases, environments, routines, and pedagogy are designed in advance to support variability, reducing the need for later intervention and exclusion.

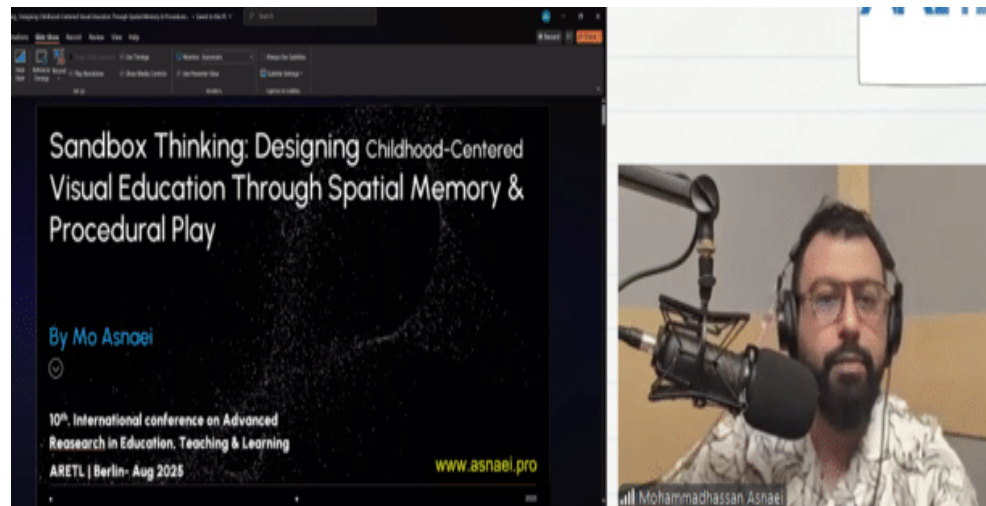


Jarred Qwustenuxun Williams.  
An Indigenous Chef who promotes and  
teaches Indigenous food sovereignty.  
ECEBC 8 – 10<sup>TH</sup> May 2025



10<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Advanced Research in Education, Teaching and Learning. Berlin 8<sup>th</sup> - 10<sup>th</sup> August 2025. 1<sup>st</sup> Group of 2

The fellowship has also enabled the establishment of an international collaboration combining *Kōwhiri Whakapae* with Sandbox Thinking to explore how mathematical reasoning develops through sandbox-based procedural play. This collaboration exemplifies the report’s central insight: that meaningful inclusion emerges through intentional design that bridges research and practice.



Mo Asnaei who I will be collaborating in the Mathematics and Learning Design project in 2026. We connected at the 10<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Advanced research in Education, Teaching and Learning 8-12<sup>th</sup> August 2025.

Looking forward, a key outcome of the fellowship is the future development of several academic papers, beginning with a discourse analysis examining how reactive and proactive inclusion are constructed and sustained within education systems. These papers will form the foundation of a master’s thesis, providing the rigor and

time required to translate fellowship learning into enduring contributions for the sector.

The following report is offered as an account of learning, growth, and responsibility. It demonstrates how the Remuera Rotary Club’s investment has enabled insight that could not have been achieved through the internet alone, and how that learning is being stewarded to create ongoing benefit for tamariki, whānau, educators, and education systems.



Math Beth Bruder’s opening address. She included the quote – “If you treat an individual as he is, he will remain how he is. But if you treat him as if he were what he ought to be and could be, he will become what he ought to be and could be.” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Lisbon ISEI Conference 2 – 5<sup>th</sup> September 2025

Posters presentations Internation Society of Early Intervention. Lisbon 2 – 5<sup>th</sup> September



A posters presentation Internation Society of Early Intervention. Lisbon 2 – 5<sup>th</sup> September 2025



Shane Pointe – is a proud member of the Musqueam and Coast Salish people. He is a highly respected Musqueam community member, ceremonial traditional speaker, and cultural educator. ECEBC 8 – 10<sup>th</sup> May 2025



# Proactive Inclusion: An International Learning Journey



Full Report  
for the Trustees of the Remuera Rotary Club

Sue Hone  
2025 Recipient of the Margaret May Blackwell Fellowship

Purpose  
of this  
Full  
Report

This full report fulfils my obligations as a recipient of the Margaret May Blackwell Travel Fellowship and has been prepared specifically for the Trustees of the Remuera Rotary Club. I approach this report as a steward of the learning entrusted to me through the fellowship. I hold a responsibility not only to account for what was learned, but to demonstrate how that learning will be carried forward for the benefit of others. Its purpose is to provide a clear, accessible, and evidence-informed account of what the fellowship enabled me to learn, how my thinking evolved through direct international engagement, and how this learning will continue to benefit the early childhood education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand.

While online research provides access to policy documents and academic publications, it cannot replicate the depth of understanding that comes from being physically present in early childhood settings, listening to educators and families, and engaging in extended professional dialogue across cultures. This fellowship provided access to lived experiences, ethical tensions, and system realities that are largely invisible in published material. It is these experiences that fundamentally reshaped my understanding of inclusion.

This report is written in plain language so that readers without an education background can fully engage with the ideas presented. Educational terminology is explained, real-world examples are provided, and references are included to show how international research and policy informed my thinking.

My  
Professional  
Context

I currently work as a Curriculum Adviser (Early Years) within the Ministry of Education in Aotearoa New Zealand. In this role, I support early

## What the Fellowship Made Possible

childhood leaders and teachers (kaiako) to strengthen curriculum design, inclusive practice, and professional capability across a wide range of settings.

My professional commitment has always been grounded in the belief that every child deserves to experience belonging, safety, and success in early learning environments. Before undertaking this fellowship, I believed I was practicing inclusion well. However, the international learning journey challenged this assumption and revealed the limits of what I - and many systems - had come to accept as “inclusive practice.”

The fellowship was undertaken with what I believed was a clear and focused research question: to identify international examples of *innovation in adaptive and responsive learning environments for tamariki kanorau-ā-roro (neurodivergent children) and tamariki hinegaro mamae (children experiencing mental and emotional distress – trauma)*.

At the outset, I believed this question positioned me to look for proactive practice. I understood “adaptive” and “responsive” to mean environments that were thoughtfully designed to support children who learn, communicate, or regulate differently. I expected to see examples of innovation where difference had already been anticipated and planned for.

As the fellowship began, I remained confident in this framing. It aligned with my professional experience and with much of the language used internationally to describe inclusive practice. I did not initially question the assumptions sitting beneath the question itself.

An Early  
Realisation:  
Rethinking  
My Starting  
Point

However, within the first weeks of my travels, that confidence began to wane. This was not because I encountered poor practice or a lack of commitment. On the contrary, I was surrounded by skilled, thoughtful, and deeply ethical professionals. What was challenging me was more subtle. Despite the care and expertise on display, something about the way inclusion was being enacted did not align with the proactive intent I believed I was observing.

At the time, I could not figure out what felt misaligned. I only knew that I needed to pay closer attention. This feeling of misalignment began to reshape how I interpreted what I was seeing and hearing.

This shift did not occur all at once. Rather, it emerged gradually through conference presentations, centre visits, and repeated conversations with educators and early intervention professionals. Again and again, I heard thoughtful descriptions of practice that was described as innovative yet always activated *after* children experienced difficulty.

Educators spoke with care and pride about the strategies they used once children became distressed, once behaviours escalated, or once a diagnosis had been confirmed. These practices were skilled, relational, and often deeply compassionate. At first, I recognised them as examples of the very innovation I had come to observe.

Over time, however, a question began to surface for me: *Why did all of this innovation require something to go wrong first?*

Across multiple countries, I noticed that support was consistently linked to thresholds. Children needed to be identified, assessed, labelled, or perceived as a risk before environments were permitted to

change. Funding, staffing, or specialist input almost always followed evidence of struggle rather than preventing it. Slowly, I began to recognise that what I was observing was not proactive design, but highly capable response.

This realisation was confronting, not only because of what it revealed about international systems, but because it required me to examine my own thinking. I began to see that my original research question, while well-intentioned, was still shaped by reactionary logic. I was implicitly looking for better ways to respond to children once difference became visible, rather than questioning why environments were not already designed in readiness for diversity.

In other words, even as I believed I was searching for proactive inclusion, my thinking continued to assume that children would arrive and then be accommodated. The environment remained the constant; the child was the variable.

When I recognised this, I became increasingly aware that the systems I was observing internationally were not entirely separate from my own thinking. The questions I was asking, and the innovation I was seeking, were still anchored in an assumption that difference arrives 'into' an environment, rather than being anticipated by it. This was an uncomfortable realisation, but an important one.

This moment marked a critical turning point. I began to understand that belonging cannot be something we retrofit once children struggle. Belonging must be designed for in advance. Environments need to be

Learning  
Through  
Lived  
Experience

ready and waiting for children, rather than adjusted once distress, disruption, or exclusion has already occurred.

This insight reframed the entire fellowship. Rather than asking where innovative adaptive environments existed, the more pressing question became: *Why do our systems expect children to struggle before they are supported? And further, what would it take to design environments where diversity is assumed from the outset?*

The most powerful learning from this fellowship came not from presentations alone, but from extended conversations with educators, researchers, and families whose daily work sits at the intersection of inclusion, trauma, and system constraint. These lived experiences revealed patterns that are often absent from policy documents and academic literature.

Canada:  
Commitment  
Without  
Structural  
Protection

I wish to acknowledge, with gratitude and respect, the *First Peoples of British Columbia* on whose *unceded lands* I was welcomed as a visitor and learner. Their generosity in allowing me to learn, present, and share knowledge in this place was deeply felt. During my time in Vancouver, I experienced particular joy in sharing our Aotearoa New Zealand teacher resource *Kōwhiri Whakapae* and in aligning my keynote contribution with the kaupapa of the ECE BC Conference - *acknowledging our roots, nurturing our future*. This moment powerfully affirmed the shared Indigenous understandings that connect land, identity, teaching, and responsibility to future generations, and reinforced the importance of approaching international learning with humility, reciprocity, and respect.

In British Columbia, I encountered a deeply committed early childhood workforce operating within a system that lacks a mandated curriculum and has no explicit inclusion policy. Through multiple interviews with educators and parents, a consistent message emerged: inclusion exists largely at the discretion of individual centres rather than as a guaranteed right.

Several educators explained that the “safety of children” policy is routinely used to justify exclusion. Children are removed or refused enrolment if they are deemed a risk to others, even when behaviour is clearly a response to sensory overload or trauma. One educator-parent shared that despite working in the sector and fostering children for many years, her autistic child was excluded from early learning settings, and the family was advised to use government funding for in-home care instead. This effectively removed the child from community participation and placed responsibility back onto the family.

Teacher preparation further compounded this issue. Basic early childhood qualifications include little to no training in neurodiversity or trauma-informed practice. Educators reported that professional learning in these areas is optional, inconsistent in quality, and often undertaken in personal time. One educator described working twelve-hour days with no non-contact time, no lunch breaks, and no opportunity to reflect or plan. Burnout was described not as an exception, but as a norm.

These conversations revealed that while educators understand what children need, they are constrained by systems that prioritise compliance and liability over relational safety and early intervention.

## Europe: Rights, Responsibility, and Early Intervention

My time in Europe, particularly at the International Society on Early Intervention conference in Lisbon, reframed my understanding of responsibility.

A recurring phrase throughout the conference was that children are “children of special rights, not special needs.” This distinction is important. When children are described as having “special needs,” responsibility subtly shifts toward the child and their family. When they are recognised as rights-holders, responsibility sits firmly with systems to respond appropriately.

Presenters repeatedly highlighted the gap between what research shows children need to thrive and what systems actually allow educators to do. Despite strong evidence around relational safety, early intervention, and family-centred practice, many systems continue to rely on thresholds, diagnoses, and delayed responses.

This reinforced for me that inclusion failures are rarely due to lack of knowledge. They are more often the result of system design that prioritises efficiency, compliance, or risk management over human development.

I also wish to pause here to pay tribute to Professor Heather Lynn Hall, who tragically lost her life in the cable car accident in Lisbon during the conference. Professor Hall was one of the presenters at the International Society for Early Intervention and a respected scholar whose work centred on children, families, and inclusive practice. She was also a mother of two.

## Finland: Trust as Infrastructure

Her presence at the conference, and the loss felt by colleagues and families across the international early intervention community, served as a sobering reminder that this work is ultimately about people, relationships, and lives - not systems alone. Acknowledging her contribution and her loss feels important in a report that seeks to honour the deeply human dimensions of inclusion, care, and responsibility that underpin this field.

Finland offered a powerful counterpoint. Inclusion there is not treated as an add-on or specialist response, but as an expected condition of early childhood education.

Educators operate within a high-trust system where professional judgement is valued, training is rigorous, and inclusion is structurally supported. While no system is perfect, Finnish early childhood education demonstrated what becomes possible when trust, coherence, and responsibility are embedded at a national level. One insight that challenged my own assumptions was the limited outdoor play time in some Finnish settings - an approach that conflicted with my belief in children freely moving between environments. This reminded me that no system should be idealised. However, the key difference was that inclusion was never conditional. Children were expected to belong.

I am grateful to the Senior Education Advisers from the Finnish National Agency for Education who generously gave their time to engage in extended conversations with me. Over several hours, we discussed the similarities and differences between our respective Ministries, curricula, and social commitments. These conversations highlighted a

## How My Thinking Changed

shared dedication to children and families, while also revealing how Finland's broader social structures consistently place family wellbeing, education, and inclusion at the centre of policy decision-making.

While every context is shaped by its own history and conditions, it was evident that Finland's approach reflects a deep collective commitment to creating a society that is resilient, collaborative, and oriented toward long-term wellbeing. This ethos was often described through the concept of *sisu* - a Finnish credo that loosely translates as perseverance or determination in the face of challenge. Encountering *sisu* in practice helped me understand how cultural values, social policy, and education systems can work together to support children and families over time.

Across all contexts, a consistent pattern emerged: inclusion remains largely reactive.

Reactive inclusion occurs when support is only activated after a child struggles, disrupts routines, or receives a diagnosis. This approach positions difference as a problem to be fixed rather than a natural part of human diversity.

Through my international learning, I came to understand that reactive inclusion is not accidental. It is rooted in colonial binary thinking—ways of organising systems around false opposites such as normal/abnormal, able/disabled, ready/not ready. These binaries continue to shape education systems globally and are reinforced through policies, funding models, and accountability measures (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2025).

## Encountering a Different Way of Knowing

This analysis helped me to name what I had been observing throughout the fellowship and provided the conceptual grounding for a shift away from reactionary approaches toward intentional system design.

It was at this point - when the limits of reactionary, Western system design had become increasingly clear, that I encountered ways of thinking about learning, belonging, and difference that offered a fundamentally different starting point.

At this stage of the fellowship, I had begun to understand what was not working. What I did not yet have was a clear sense of what might replace it. It was here that Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing began to offer not just insight, but direction.

Through my international learning, Indigenous perspectives repeatedly surfaced, not as alternative strategies for inclusion, but as worldviews that reframed the problem itself. These ways of being, knowing, and doing challenged the assumption that difference is something to be managed, corrected, or normalised. Instead, difference was understood as a natural and expected expression of identity, shaped through relationships, culture, and context.

As I engaged with these perspectives, I also became aware of something more personal. I recognised that these ways of understanding difference resonated with me not only professionally, but culturally. For much of my earlier life, I had been disconnected from my own culture, language, and identity. Like many people educated within dominant Western systems, I had absorbed ways of thinking that prioritised conformity, categorisation, and standardisation. Within this

framing, being different was often positioned, explicitly or implicitly, as something to be addressed or overcome.

It was only later in my life, through reconnecting with *te ao Māori* (the Māori world), that I began to learn different ways of understanding identity and belonging. Māori ways of being, knowing, and doing offered a perspective in which being different was not viewed as negative or problematic. It was simply being oneself.

Concepts such as *takiwātanga* (in one's own time and space) reshaped my understanding of development and learning. Rather than measuring children against fixed, linear expectations, these perspectives recognise that each person moves through the world in their own way, at their own pace, shaped by *whakapapa*, relationships, and place. Difference, in this view, is not deficit, it is identity.

This reconnection helped me see more clearly why inclusion so often fails within Western-designed systems. When environments are built around an assumed norm, those who sit outside that norm are treated as exceptions. Support becomes conditional, activated only once difference is rendered visible through struggle, diagnosis, or disruption. Belonging, in these systems, is often something to be earned.

In contrast, Indigenous worldviews assume diversity from the outset. Belonging is not negotiated after difficulty emerges, it is inherent. This shift in perspective made visible what had been missing from much of the “innovation” I had observed internationally. The problem was not the absence of skill or care, but the starting point from which systems were designed.

## Proactive Inclusion: A Shift in Design

In this way, Indigenous epistemologies did not simply offer insights into more humane practice. They provided a pathway toward proactive inclusion. By dismantling deficit-based assumptions and centring relationship, identity, and belonging, these ways of thinking make it possible to design environments that are ready and waiting for all children.

This encounter marked a turning point in my thinking. It offered both a professional and personal resolution to questions that had been emerging throughout the fellowship and laid the groundwork for the development of Proactive Inclusion.

Proactive Inclusion reframes inclusion as a design responsibility rather than a reaction. Instead of waiting for children to struggle, environments are intentionally designed from the outset to accommodate diversity.

This approach draws on three key influences:

- Universal Design for Learning (UDL) or Inclusive Design for Learning (IDL), which promotes flexible environments that support multiple ways of engaging, understanding, and expressing learning.
- Trauma-informed practice, which recognises that emotional safety and predictability are prerequisites for learning.
- Indigenous epistemologies, which position belonging, relationship, and identity as foundational.

Together, these perspectives support environments where children do not need to prove their worthiness to belong.

Implications  
for the future.  
Academic  
Contribution

**Understanding proactive inclusion as a design responsibility carries with it an obligation to act. The insights gained through this fellowship cannot remain conceptual or confined to reflection alone. They invite application, testing, and contribution beyond the scope of this report. The following section outlines how the learning generated through the fellowship will be carried forward through research, collaboration, and practice, ensuring it continues to inform and strengthen inclusive education over time.**

One key outcome of the fellowship is the future development of several academic papers. The first is a discourse analysis examining how reactive and proactive inclusion are constructed, understood, and sustained within education systems. Drawing on UNESCO and OECD policy analysis, emerging research on decolonising inclusive education, and Indigenous epistemologies, this paper will explore how re-designing systems from a rights-based and relational standpoint could enable proactive approaches where children are expected, welcomed, and supported to thrive.

These papers are not intended as abstract academic exercises. Rather, they reflect my growing recognition that for meaningful and sustained change to occur, there must be a deliberate pathway between research, theory, and practice. Throughout the fellowship, I observed that while educators and leaders often have access to strong frameworks and reflective tools, translating these into consistent, lived practice remains a significant challenge.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, frameworks such as *He Pikorua te Tuāpapa* provide powerful guidance for reflection, relational understanding, and

identifying areas for growth. However, reflection alone does not guarantee change. Without intentional design support, reflective processes can remain conceptual, disconnected from the daily realities of teaching, leadership, and system constraints.

It is here that Proactive Inclusion (PI) offers a critical bridge. PI is intended to support the movement from reflection into action - from identifying what matters, to designing environments, systems, and practices that make those insights real. The development of these academic papers, and the decision to undertake a master's thesis, reflect my commitment to slowly and rigorously unpacking these ideas, testing their coherence, and ensuring they remain grounded in the realities of early childhood settings.

**In this way, the master's study functions as an act of stewardship - ensuring that the learning entrusted through the fellowship is carefully examined, strengthened, and carried forward in ways that create enduring benefit beyond the scope of this report.**

Additional papers will explore belonging as a relational construct, the role of metacognition in early learning (see the work of Dr Philip Hulbig, Curry College, USA), and the integration of Indigenous knowledge within inclusive design. Collectively, this body of work will form the foundation of my master's thesis, providing the time, structure, and academic rigour necessary to deepen this inquiry and strengthen its practical application. In this way, the fellowship learning is not concluded but deliberately extended, ensuring that insights gained through international experience are translated into frameworks and approaches that can be meaningfully enacted in practice.

## International Collaboration: Mathematics and Learning Design

The fellowship also enabled the establishment of an international collaboration combining *Kōwhiri Whakapae* with Sandbox Thinking, through a shared inquiry into how young children develop mathematical reasoning through sustained, open-ended play.

This collaboration centres on a concept developed with Mohammadhassan Asnaei, which explores sandbox-based procedural play as a powerful context for early mathematics learning. Procedural play refers to children's repeated engagement with actions, sequences, and systems over time, such as building pathways, creating patterns, testing structures, or narrating how materials move and change. Within sandbox and other open-ended environments, these repeated actions support children to refine strategies, notice relationships, and develop increasingly sophisticated mathematical thinking.

The proposed project is designed as a 7-week inquiry cycle, deliberately aligned with the realities of early childhood settings, including kaiako planning time, rostered staffing patterns, and the movement of teachers across indoor, outdoor, and float roles. This structure allows multiple kaiako to contribute to noticing, recognising, and documenting children's mathematical thinking over time, rather than relying on isolated observations or single moments of assessment.

The inquiry begins by establishing a shared baseline through the resource *Casting a Mathematical Lens Over Your Setting*. This supports teams to reflect on existing mathematics provision, identify strengths and gaps, and develop a common understanding of what mathematical learning can look like within play-based contexts. From this foundation,

sandbox-based procedural play is intentionally embedded into everyday routines rather than treated as a separate or additional activity.

Across the evaluation phase, kaiako use a Notice – Recognise - Respond - Document cycle to gather rich evidence of children’s mathematical reasoning. This includes attention to spatial thinking, patterning, quantity, measurement, and children’s use of mathematical language. Evidence is gathered gradually through photographs, short narratives, drawings, child voice, and reflective teacher notes, allowing patterns in children’s thinking to become visible over time.

In the final phase of the cycle, kaiako intentionally extend children’s play through prompts, materials, or narrative invitations. *Kōwhiri Whakapae* is then used to support teachers to identify and articulate the mathematical concepts demonstrated during play, strengthening alignment between Te Whāriki and the Ministry’s maths progressions. This process supports kaiako to move beyond noticing that learning is occurring, toward understanding how learning is developing, for whom, and why certain strategies or behaviours emerge.

The international collaboration is intentionally positioned at the intersection of research and practice. Its purpose is not only to explore how sandbox-based procedural play enhances maths reasoning, but also to generate teacher-friendly documentation tools, case studies, and professional learning resources that can be used across early childhood settings. In this way, the collaboration mirrors the broader intent of Proactive Inclusion: designing learning environments and inquiry processes that anticipate diversity, value multiple ways of

thinking, and support educators to translate theory into meaningful, everyday practice.

## Ongoing Benefit to the Sector

The learning generated through the fellowship is already being enacted through new programmes of work that explicitly introduce Proactive Inclusion (PI) concepts into practice. Two recent initiatives illustrate how PI moves from theory into lived reality: a transition-to-school programme and a year-long social and emotional learning (SEL) programme. Together, they demonstrate how intentional design can anticipate diversity, reduce the need for later intervention, and strengthen outcomes for tamariki, whānau, and kaiako.

## Proactive Inclusion in Transition to School: *He Ara Whakapiki Tamariki*

*He Ara Whakapiki Tamariki* is an intentionally designed transition-to-school programme that reflects a fundamental shift away from assessing children’s “readiness” for school, toward designing school readiness around the learner. Grounded in *mana tamaiti* (children as inherently competent), *whanaungatanga* (learning and regulation as relational), and *Kōwhiri Whakapae* (strengths-based progressions rather than age norms), the programme embeds Proactive Inclusion from the outset.

Rather than waiting for difficulty to emerge, environments, routines, and expectations are designed in advance to support variability. Two connected learning spaces are used: the new entrant classroom and a dedicated transition space (*Te Whare Whakatipu* – the place where growth is nurtured). This transition space is not remedial or a holding area; it is a foundational learning environment where social and emotional learning, oral language, and early mathematics are

deliberately fostered through predictable routines, visual supports, and play-based provocations.

A daily programme provides consistency while allowing flexible entry, recognising that regulation precedes instruction. For example, each day begins with familiar arrival routines, visual schedules, and shared regulation practices such as waiata or breathing (*hā ki roto, hā ki waho*). These routines establish safety and belonging before academic expectations increase. Mat time is short, scaffolded, and optional in how children participate, ensuring that engagement does not rely on compliance.

Proactive Inclusion is particularly visible in how the programme supports tamariki who cannot yet meet traditional expectations. Rather than removing expectations, the programme maintains clear and predictable learning intentions while increasing scaffolds: offering multiple ways to participate, using visuals rather than verbal instructions, building movement into learning, and prioritising co-regulation over behaviour management. *Kōwhiri Whakapae* provides a shared professional language for noticing learning, enabling teachers to identify where learning is already present and to teach forward rather than waiting for readiness.

A second example of ongoing sector impact is a year-long SEL programme that uses *Kōwhiri Whakapae: Social and Emotional Learning* as the organising framework, informed by the broader Proactive Inclusion approach. This programme supports teams to embed SEL through a sustained change process rather than short-term initiatives.

Proactive  
Inclusion in  
Social and  
Emotional  
Learning:  
A Year-Long  
SEL Programme

## From Framework to Reality

The programme is structured around four learning phases across the year: connected relationships and caring for others; emotional awareness, regulation, and spiritual connectedness; agency and adaptability; and social inclusion and action. Each phase is enacted through a consistent observe–reflect–respond–record cycle, allowing teams to trial small changes, gather evidence, and refine practice over time.

Proactive Inclusion is evident in how the programme anticipates learner variability. For example, rather than responding to emotional dysregulation as it occurs, environments are redesigned to include calm spaces, visual emotion supports, predictable routines, and culturally grounded practices such as *karakia* and *waiata*. Kaiako intentionally scaffold co-regulation strategies before expecting self-regulation, recognising regulation as a prerequisite for learning rather than a behaviour to be corrected.

Throughout the programme, *Kōwhiri Whakapae* supports kaiako to describe learning using strengths-based progressions (Te Korekore, Te Pō, Te Ao Mārama, Te Ao Hōu) rather than deficit language. This shifts professional conversations from “what children can’t yet do” to “what learning is already visible and how it can be extended.” In practice, this has resulted in greater consistency across teams, increased confidence in responding to diversity, and reduced reliance on exclusionary practices.

Together, these programmes demonstrate how Proactive Inclusion functions as a bridge between research and practice. Frameworks such as *Kōwhiri Whakapae* and *He Pikorua te Tuāpapa* provide powerful

## Closing Reflections

reflective tools; Proactive Inclusion supports the translation of those reflections into intentional design decisions about environments, routines, and pedagogy. The ongoing benefit to the sector lies not only in individual programmes, but in building collective capability to design learning environments that are ready and waiting for all tamariki.

The Margaret May Blackwell Travel Fellowship provided far more than professional development. It created space for deep reflection, challenged long-held assumptions, and affirmed the responsibility we hold as system designers. Margaret's work in health and early learning shaped her career and supported the wellbeing and safety of children in the worst of circumstances. Her legacy lives on and I am eternally grateful that she had the foresight to invest in the future.

By being the administrators and investing in this fellowship, the Remuera Rotary Club enabled learning that could not have been achieved through the internet alone. It enabled connection with passionate professionals around the world, exposure to lived realities, and the development of new frameworks that will continue to benefit tamariki, whānau, and educators for years to come.

I am deeply grateful for the trust placed in me and for the opportunity to bring this learning back to Aotearoa New Zealand. I offer this report in the spirit of stewardship and gratitude, recognising the responsibility that accompanies the Remuera Rotary Club's investment in learning that serves future generations.

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Image taken from Te Whāriki online. Prioritising Inclusion with a focus of education for all.