Embrace & innovate

In the second in her series on community-led responses to poverty, REBECCA MACFIE visits Porirua East, where a kindergarten group has blossomed into an all-ages health and development hub.

It's 8.30 on a Thursday morning, and a white van bearing the insignia of He Whānau Manaaki o Tararua Free Kindergarten Association sets out on its daily service. Nine infant car seats are fixed permanently into position.

Alongside the driver is an assistant*, equipped with an iPad for recording observations from the morning's pickup run. It won't be busy today, so one car seat has been removed to make space for me.

The first stop is a motel. There are no tourists or holidaymakers here, only homeless families. The driver knocks at the door of one unit, and returns to the van holding a 12-month-old baby who has spent his entire life here – his family has been in this "emergency" accommodation for two years. The assistant heads to another wing of the complex and comes back with a toddler and a one-year-old, who paws at cheeks that are raw with eczema. Warm smiles and gentle words are lavished on the children as they are strapped in.

The van continues on, around hilly streets and culs-de-sac lined with houses built in the 1950s and 60s. Nearly 40% of the homes here are state houses. Many are mouldy, damp and cold.

There's a pickup from what's referred to as an "OT house": a family with which Oranga Tamariki – the Ministry for Children has involvement. Another is from a street with several gang houses. Two children are collected from a house where the father has recently come out of prison. There is a delay when the driver and assistant go to the door – the parents are arguing – but the infants are brought calmly and tenderly to the vehicle. Details are entered into the iPad, which is connected to an information hub back at the office.

Almost all of Porirua East registers 10 on the deprivation scale, meaning severe poverty.

Kids emerge from other houses and run excitedly to the van, turning to wave to parents and siblings.

Every day, these children and others are delivered variously to kohanga reo, kindergarten or trained home-based educators who belong to an innovative service called Etu Ao, pioneered by Whānau Manaaki. Whatever hardships and stresses burden their families, the children will have a healthy breakfast and lunch, and a day of learning and exploration anchored in Te Whāriki, the early childhood curriculum. At 3pm, they will be picked up and returned home.

If they weren't delivered by the transport van – one of six operated by Whānau Manaaki – they would miss out on key developmental steps because their families couldn't, or wouldn't, get them

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WHĀNAU MANAAKI

1. Tamariki at Taitoko Kindergarten at the "bus stop". 2. Planting veges at Waitangirua Kindergarten. 3. A newcomer at Toru Fetū Kindergartensettles in with a teacher. 4. An educator from Whānau Manaaki's Etu Ao Pasifika home-based care service with an infant.

to early childhood education.

"We don't know the reasons," says the van driver, who grew up on these streets and lives here still; it's his home, and he loves it. "There's no judgment of the families. You just have loyalty to the kids in this job."

We are in Porirua East. Travelling north from Wellington, the motorway slices Porirua in two. To the west is the city centre and the suburb of Titahi Bay spreads towards the sea; to the east, out of view from the highway, are the communities of Cannons Creek, Waitangirua and Ascot Park.

The population of about 20,000 is 53% Pasifika and 23% Māori. Almost all of Porirua East registers as 10 on the deprivation scale. Don't be confused with the old decile rankings for schools, wherein a 10 denoted a school full of well-homed, well-fed and mostly fair-skinned children. A deprivation score of 10 means severe poverty, and the kids in the van are the faces of it.

COMMUNITY OF RENTERS

Porirua East grew in a massive surge of state-house construction from the 1950s to the 70s on land acquired from Ngāti Toa under duress by the colonial government in the 1840s. The houses became homes to Māori forced by land alienation and rural poverty to move to the city for work, and to Pasifika people imported for their labour.

In those days, there was a route to home ownership for working-class Pasifika and Māori families. The parents of local community leaders Caroline and Danny Mareko were among those who achieved housing security this way. They came from Samoa – their father was a wharfie and mother a cleaner – and with a concessionary mortgage from the Department of Māori and Island Affairs, they were able to build a family home in the greenfields development of Ascot Park. Caroline and her family still live in the house, and it remains the hub for the wider Mareko aiga.

But that pathway to housing security was swept away in the market-driven housing reforms of the early 1990s. These days, home ownership in Porirua East is under 40% and in the most impoverished corners, it's as low as 22%. In a community of renters, kids are shunted from pillar to post with startling frequency – Ministry of Education data shows 71 students in Porirua changed schools at least twice in 2020, depriving them of educational stability.

For a time there were plenty of local jobs, not least at the sprawling Todd Motors car assembly plant on the hill above Porirua city centre. At its peak in the 1970s, about 1500 people worked there – most of them Pasifika and Māori – but those jobs went in the bonfire of import protections in the 80s and 90s. The plant shut down in 1998.

These days, says Danny Mareko, there are few jobs close by and the cost of fuel to get to and from work soaks up a big chunk of locals' wages.

FOOD DESERT

Over the decades, Porirua East has been starved of investment. It became known as a food desert (or, as one researcher put it, a "food swamp"), with nowhere to buy affordable healthy food but an abundance of cheap fast food. Although for the past decade, there has been a thriving fruit and vege co-op backed by Wesley Community Action and, more recently, a small supermarket in Cannons Creek.

Whānau Manaaki "navigators" have seen parents who have never had a job move into paid work for the first time.

In 2018, the government tagged $1.5 billion for a 25-year programme to repair and rebuild 2000 state houses in Porirua East. But by then, says Will Pennington, who is leading the project for Kāinga Ora, the underground infrastructure was so run down that it wasn't possible to build a single extra home without first massively upgrading the water and wastewater system. Five years in, more homes have been demolished than built. That will change as construction ramps up, but for now, there are 34 fewer state houses than before.

At last count, 300 families were on the waiting list for social housing in Porirua. Most of the city's motels are being used for emergency shelter.

While the neighbouring suburbs of Whitby and Aotea – deprivation index 1 – boomed with the construction of grand homes and attractive amenities, the people of Porirua East have continued to suffer some of the most severe housing stress in the country, according to analysis by housing researcher Ian Mitchell for the Porirua City Council.

"The local community, living in eastern Porirua, is caught between ballooning house prices (up 98% since 2013), rising market rents (up 32% since 2013), and moderate wage growth (household incomes up 21% since 2013)," Mitchell wrote in a 2021 report.

A rational economic response to unaffordable housing is to lower costs by crowding together. In Porirua East, one in four Māori- and Pasifika-tenant households are in crowded homes, and one in 10 are severely crowded, reports Mitchell. The consequences spill over into heightened stress, a lack of privacy and quiet space for study, high rates of family violence and preventable diseases such as skin infections.

OPENING GATEWAYS

"If the family is not doing well, the children are probably not doing well," says Amanda Coulston, chief executive of Whānau Manaaki. She comes back to this self-evident truth as she explains the journey of trial and innovation that has taken her Porirua-based organisation from a mainstream kindergarten association to an integrated provider of whānau support – including running the fleet of vans that close the gap between disadvantaged infants and attendance at early childhood education.

A former primary school teacher, principal and trade unionist, Coulston has led the organisation since 2003, although back then it was called the Wellington Kindergarten Association. Its offices, ironically, are in the old Todd Motors car plant.

"We set out to do our best by children, and the model we wanted to follow didn't appear to be out there, so we just did it," she says. The first major innovation was in 2006, when the organisation was funded to develop a family support programme at Taitoko Kindergarten in Levin. Like Porirua East, Taitoko scores 10 on the deprivation scale.

The aim wasn't to "fix" poor families. It was about strengthening relationships, opening gateways through which whānau could engage in their children's education, and drawing on their strengths and cultures. The kindergarten became a community hub, with a playgroup for parents and babies, workshops and speakers, and health and social services. The idea was that whānau and teachers would learn from each other and kids would see the adults in their lives working together.

Educational researchers Margaret Carr

Driving forces: Whānau Manaaki CEO Amanda Coulston, centre, with siblings Caroline and Danny Mareko, who have led the development of early childhood and community support for Pasifika families.

HAGEN HOPKINS

and Jeanette Clarkin-Phillips found it led to greater engagement by families in their children's learning, and was the kind of programme that could help whānau "transform their lives" and "affect children's learning and lifelong learning dispositions".

The next development was for young men who were bouncing between dead-end training courses and the dole. At the same time, there was a dire need for more male teachers in early childhood education, so the programme – called YMen – provided paid six-month placements in kindergartens. It ran for five years until funding fizzled out; in that time, 32 young men went through the scheme, with 80% going on to tertiary study or permanent work, 12 of them training as early childhood teachers.

Coulston's philosophy is to "embrace the messiness" of innovation. In the case of YMen, that extended to personally subsidising the work, and periodically knocking on the door of no-shows to make sure they got out of bed and off to work, with an earful of advice that "failure was not an option".

Caroline Mareko, who had spent years as a primary school teacher and principal in the community she grew up in, joined Whānau Manaaki to help deepen relationships with Pasifika families. By the early 2010s, the organisation had opened New Zealand's first two purpose-built Pasifika kindergartens in Cannons Creek (although Pasifika language nests and early childhood centres have operated since the 1980s). At the same time, a community worker was deployed under a Ministry of Education contract to lift worryingly low rates of enrolment of three- and four-year-olds in early childhood education and strengthen their transition to school.

With each new outreach into the community, more needs became apparent. Parents working long hours in poorly paid jobs were forced to leave their young children with grandparents and relatives. Danny Mareko, who had worked for years in the social-welfare system, was one of a group of community members who believed there was an opportunity to lift the quality of care and education in these households, and increase incomes.

They put their ideas to Coulston, and the outcome was Etu Ao – a Pasifika home-based care service, which elevated informal babysitting arrangements into quality early childhood education, delivered in the language and culture of the home.

Mareko says "mamas, aunties, nannies and papas" in Cannons Creek and Waitangirua were recruited for a 12-week training course, at the end of which they graduated as qualified home-based early childhood educators. Etu Ao has now been running for 11 years, under the oversight of fully qualified early childhood teachers. It has influenced the lives of more than 1200 children.

The training has also been transformational for the home-based educators, says Mareko, who now oversees all of Whānau Manaaki's community engagement work. For many, it's the only formal New Zealand qualification they have ever had, and it introduces them to knowledge about child development and the importance of stimulating play and talk. Some have gone on to train as fully qualified teachers.

"If we are going to go into their homes, we need to be prepared to help. Don't walk in if all you're going to do is smile."

He has seen child-rearing styles shift radically as a result of Etu Ao. He recounts the story of one grandmother, described by her own adult children as "hard and strict", who developed under the Etu Ao training into a "loving and nurturing" educator.

"All of a sudden, she was putting all these rules around her adult kids – 'There's no drinking around here; this is the kids' playground'. There was no smacking. Her family responded by buying her furniture, making sure she was properly outfitted to run this care."

But Mareko says the deeper the relationships between families and Whānau Manaaki, the greater the responsibility. "I always said to [Coulston], if we are going to go into their homes, we need to be prepared for what we are going to find, and we need to be prepared to help. Don't walk in at all if all you're going to do is smile, because then you are just another person who has gone into that home and done absolutely nothing."

NAVIGATOR ROLE

When then-Māori Party co-leader and government minister Tariana Turia developed Whānau Ora, which devolves a small slice of New Zealand's social services budget to two Māori and one Pasifika commissioning agencies, it was a logical progression for Whānau Manaaki. One of the objectives of Whānau Ora is to get rid of siloed and fragmented government agencies working with families with complex needs – described as the "five cars up the driveway" problem. Instead, one person – a "navigator" – builds a respectful relationship with the family, helps them identify their aspirations, and works alongside them to remove barriers and achieve progress.

Since 2015, Whānau Manaaki navigators have worked with 3200 Pasifika families in the Wellington region under contract to Pasifika Futures, one of the three Whānau Ora commissioning agencies.

It's complex, demanding, hands-on work – and the need from families far outstrips capacity. As one navigator* explained to me, it's about building trust, taking practical steps, creating opportunities and maintaining strong links with other social agencies.

About half of the families she works with are in emergency motel accommodation, and many are in crowded houses. It's not uncommon to start working with a family only to find the house is crammed with a dozen or more extended whānau, including students coming and going from school, workers to and from jobs, babies and grandparents.

It takes time and sometimes multiple visits to get in the door and form a relationship. Many of these families have been let down by agencies before, or fear having their children removed. Many are struggling under a mountain of complex issues – including poor mental health, debt and addictions – and have learnt to keep things under wraps.

By helping resolve immediate crises – no food or nappies in the house, for instance, or no driver's licence or suitable clothes for work – a family's overall level of stress can be reduced, creating more room to think and make decisions. The patient, steady support of Whānau Manaaki navigators has seen parents who have never had a job move into paid work for the first time; mothers under the thumb of abusive partners have been helped out of their isolation into supportive playgroups.

"The thing is that whānau are just looking for solutions, too," says the navigator. "But if you don't show the results, just like anyone, they're going be like, 'Nah, stuff you' ... But it's also having those straight-up conversations with them to say, 'Hey, last Friday you rang me and said you needed this or that, which is all good, but the thing is, we can't keep doing this, so what are you going to do?'

Whānau Manaaki's YMen project has helped ease the shortage of male teachers in early childhood education.

"One thing I know about all these families, regardless of what's happening, is they all love their kids, they love their family; they just don't know how to make it work because of whatever their background has been ... If you got the bash every day as a kid, you grow up to be exactly that. How do you change that? You want better for your kids, but how do you get there? But once you have trust, you can start having those conversations."

NATION BUILDING

Navigators are lifting the odds for families around here, but they can't do the impossible. They can lighten the burden of hardship on the homeless and overcrowded, but they can't fix a housing system that favours the rights of housing investors over the human right of families to decent homes. They can advocate and encourage and remove barriers, but they're not trained to treat depression or addiction, and they can't repair a mental-health system that has fallen into decades of disrepair. They can't dismantle the lucrative meth supply chains that inflict damage on children and families; they can't cure a pandemic that has hammered school attendance, heightened anxiety and lifted the incidence of child abuse.

At Whānau Manaaki, there's no shying away from the deep taproots of hardship and harm. They do what can be done, harnessing family strengths and skills, helping them take achievable steps forward, building on the ties that bind a culturally rich community.

"The community is sick of being done over with these one-off transactional relationships."

Caroline Mareko has seen "missionaries and do-gooders" come and go with ambitions to "save our people ... They say, 'Look at me, I'm doing good work.' But you have to be of the community to engage with the community. The community is sick of being done over with these one-off transactional relationships."

It's about values and motives, says Coulston. She says the 120-year-old kindergarten movement has always been about child advocacy, social justice, outreach and professional teachers. Those values have anchored Whānau Manaaki's growth into integrated community support.

She takes inspiration from the voice of Aboriginal activist Lilla Watson, who said of those who asked how to assist communities suffering the impacts of colonisation and racism: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

"This is not about saving the poor kids," Coulston says. "This is about nation-building. They don't need to be saved. They are highly competent, amazing people. There might be shit going on, and so you support them ... It's about people feeling successful. Success isn't about having money. It's about people feeling that they belong, that they can contribute, and that their identity is celebrated ... This is about mana and dignity. It's about each of us helping each other." ▮

For more on this topic, see listener.co.nz; Rebeca Macfie received research funding for this series from philanthropists Scott and Mary Gilmour. Part 3 of Hardship & Hope will appear in next week's Listener.

** Some names have been withheld to protect privacy.*

WHĀNAU MANAAKI