



# Grass Roots Project Report

## Connecting with whānau via digital Seesaw learning journals

version 1.0



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# Introduction

## Background

In 2016, Park Estate School was fortunate to receive funding from the Grass Roots Initiative which enabled us to explore how Seesaw digital learning journals might support our junior team (Year 1 - 3 students) to use iPads for learning and creating, and how our families could connect with their children's learning, giving our learners an authentic audience.

Our school is a decile 1 school in South Auckland. Our junior teaching team (three teachers) had tried several apps with our students yet had not been able to find an efficient way to manage students' learning, save their creations and share their learning with whānau - until we started using Seesaw.

## Objectives / Inquiry questions

Set out the objectives of your inquiry. If specific inquiry questions were developed to guide your inquiry, include these here.

Whānau connections are a priority for our school. We were interested in how we could strengthen learning partnerships via Seesaw digital learning journals. We wondered how having an authentic audience for their learning would engage our learners further and promote better learning outcomes.

Seesaw seemed to be a tool that our junior students could use easily and creatively, that our teachers could use to effectively manage students' learning and creations and that our whānau could use to connect with their children's learning.

## Background reading/Literature review

Educationally powerful connections with whānau are emphasised in ERO's 2015 report and support the direction of our inquiry to strengthen our learning partnerships with whānau:

*The 'tipping point' for leaders and teachers creating educationally powerful connections and relationships with parents and whānau was for teachers and leaders to understand that the purpose of these relationships was to extend learning across home and school. Students then experienced multiple and aligned opportunities to learn and practise. Instead of one-off school based learning, learning at home was actively promoted by giving students relevant learning opportunities and support.<sup>1</sup>*

In the limited timeframe available for this project our team did not have the opportunity to engage with wider literature specifically about engaging families with student learning via digital portfolios.

## Assumptions/theories/definitions

As a teacher, I brought my own assumptions and beliefs to this work, these included Ako - we are all learners, and learning is a reciprocal experience for students and teachers and the

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<sup>1</sup> (n.d.). Educationally powerful connections with parents and whānau .... Retrieved October 28, 2017, from <http://www.ero.govt.nz/publications/educationally-powerful-connections-with-parents-and-whanau/>

notion that learning is an active process and each learner brings their own prior knowledge and experiences. I value creative and collaborative learning. Positive relationships with students and whānau are crucial.

An assumption we held was the belief our families want to be engaged with their students learning and that this will have a positive influence on student outcomes. Our junior school has been using the Mutukaroa<sup>2</sup> approach to strengthen home-school partnerships and to engage our families with student learning. This involves regular parent and teacher conversations (first meeting is soon after enrolment and then every 20 weeks) where assessment data is shared and explained, highlighting what children are able to do and what the next steps in their learning were. Parents contribute to setting a learning goal for their children which they will support at home. We could see how Seesaw might strengthen this process.

Park Estate School is part of Manaiakalani Outreach<sup>3</sup>. Professional learning and development has been focussed on the Manaiakalani 'learn, create, share' pedagogy which 'puts our young people at the very centre of their learning'. Our Year 4 - 6 classes are 1:1 digital classes. Learning is visible on a class site and all students share their learning on individual blogs (using Blogger). We held the assumption that teachers would be on board and see the value in Seesaw digital learning journals and easily able to use this technology.

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<sup>2</sup> (n.d.). The Mutukaroa project - enabling e .... Retrieved October 30, 2017, from <http://elearning.tki.org.nz/Beyond-the-classroom/Engaging-with-the-community/The-Mutukaroa-project>

<sup>3</sup> (n.d.). Manaiakalani. Retrieved October 30, 2017, from <http://www.manaiakalani.org/>

# Methodology & Design

## Methodology

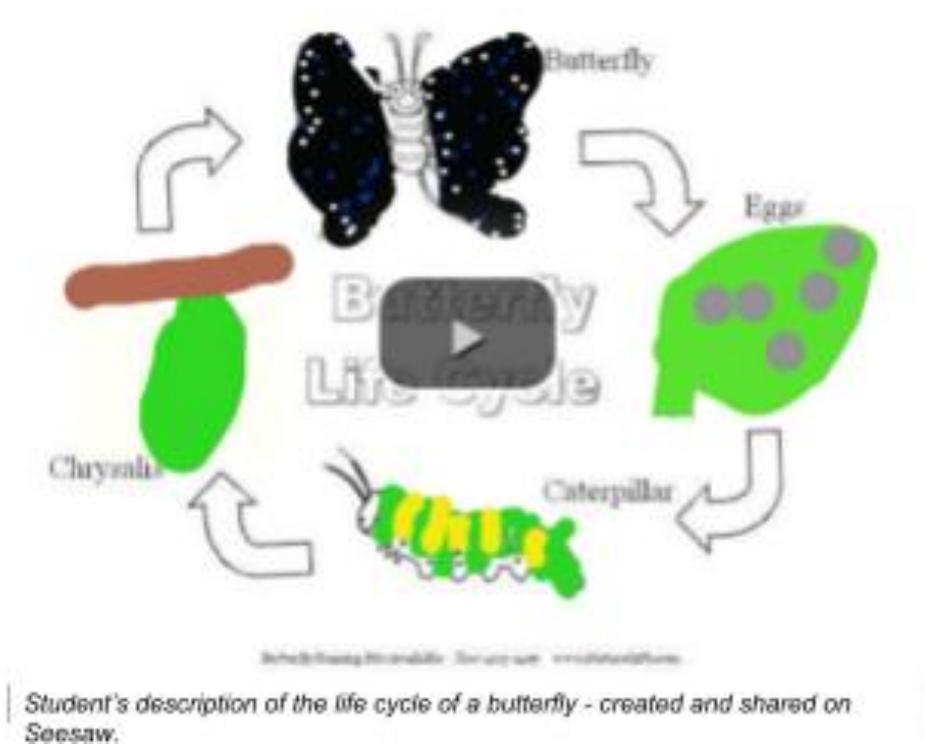
The methodology for this inquiry was mainly qualitative with a focus on the reported experiences and reflections of participants and did not seek to generalise findings. However, some quantitative data was included in the form of Seesaw for Schools generated Analytics.

## Project Design

Our project involved our school's Year 0-3 students (approximately 80, 58% Maori, 24% Pasifika, 11% ĒNZ European) being enrolled into Seesaw for Schools. At least seven teachers were included as users of Seesaw for Schools - this number fluctuated due to staff changes and new classes being established due to roll growth.

Seesaw is a digital learning journal into which students can easily add photos, videos (up to 10 minutes long), drawings, pictures from the camera roll, notes links and files. Students are able to use these features in variety of ways. More information on the features and how it can be used of Seesaw is available [here](#).

For example, in her learning about the life cycle of a butterfly, a Year 2 student has used Seesaw to draw over a photo, and then made a recording of herself describing the life cycle.



All student posts are 'verified' by the teacher before being displayed on their journal, as are comments on students work.

There are three ways you can opt into Seesaw; Seesaw is a free version which gives teachers and students 'the basics', Seesaw Plus is paid by a yearly teacher subscription with

added access to assignments and assessment, and Seesaw for Schools is a paid per student per year subscription which gives you additional access to school-wide analytics and management via an 'admin' dashboard.

Initially I was the only administrator of our Seesaw account and was responsible for enrolling students and teachers onto Seesaw. There are several webinars available via Seesaw for Schools as well as a suggested 'roll out plan'.

All junior classes have shared iPads to use, approximately 8-10 per class in 2016. This number increased in 2017 with 20 in room 2, 15 in room 5, 8 in room 7 and 6 in room 6. Teachers are encouraged to take an iPad home and become familiar with using an iPad and using Seesaw especially. I regularly share information about webinars and professional learning that was available to our teachers online (e.g. Seesaw Ideas).

We were funded to purchase three additional iPads with the intention of tethering these at various points around our school for whānau to use to connect with their children's Seesaw learning journals.

As we were able to purchase a subscription for our students for Seesaw for Schools, this provided us with Seesaw analytics data - for example; how many items were posted in student learning journals in each class, how many parents were connected, how many comments classes received etc. (see example below).



Data for this report was also generated from interviews with students, conversations with parents, discussions with teachers and observations on how students, teachers and whānau were using Seesaw for Schools.

We had intended to record and analyse our Mutukaroa parent and teacher meetings but decided against this due to staff changes and not wanting to cause any unease for our teachers and families.

### Data Generation/Collection

Qualitative data was collected by myself via face to face student interviews, conversations and emails with staff and families and observations of how Seesaw was being used by students, teachers and whānau.

Quantitative data was generated via our Seesaw for Schools for schools subscription.

## Data Analysis

### **Qualitative:**

I kept regular 'field notes' on google keep, docs and a blog and ensured I saved any Seesaw related emails. Student interviews were recorded on paper as notes (over two afternoons) or recorded on video.

I used a 'thematic analysis' approach to organise my notes. After spending approximately five hours reading through my notes and reviewing all my 'text', I highlighted what seemed interesting and/or useful. I was then able to group these and develop themes under which ideas could be organised. My findings are presented under these 'theme' headings.

### **Quantitative:**

Quantitative data is available to us on Seesaw for Schools via our admin dashboard and we have the option to download data from here (as CSV file) should we want to.

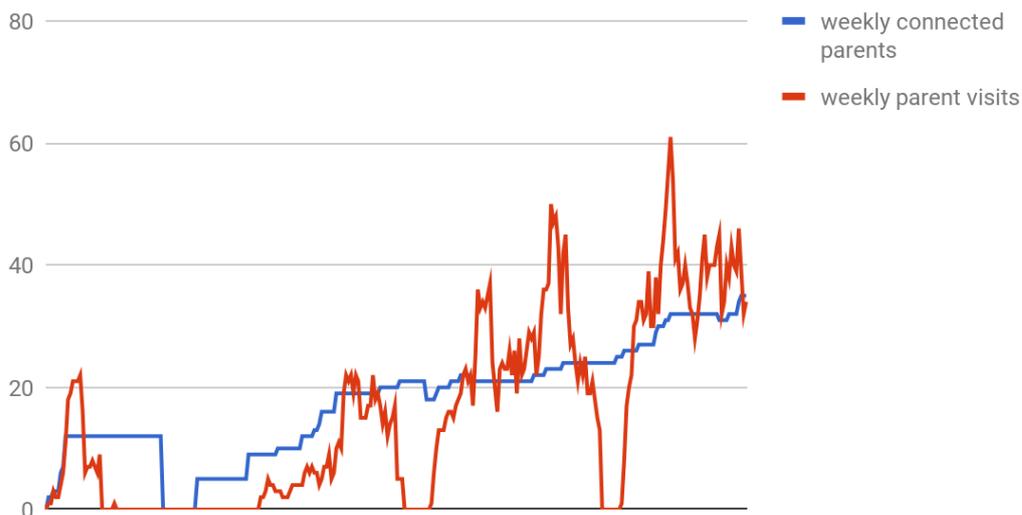
# Findings

My data was sorted into four key themes; connecting with whānau, a tool for teachers, documenting learning, and a tool for juniors.

## Connecting with whānau

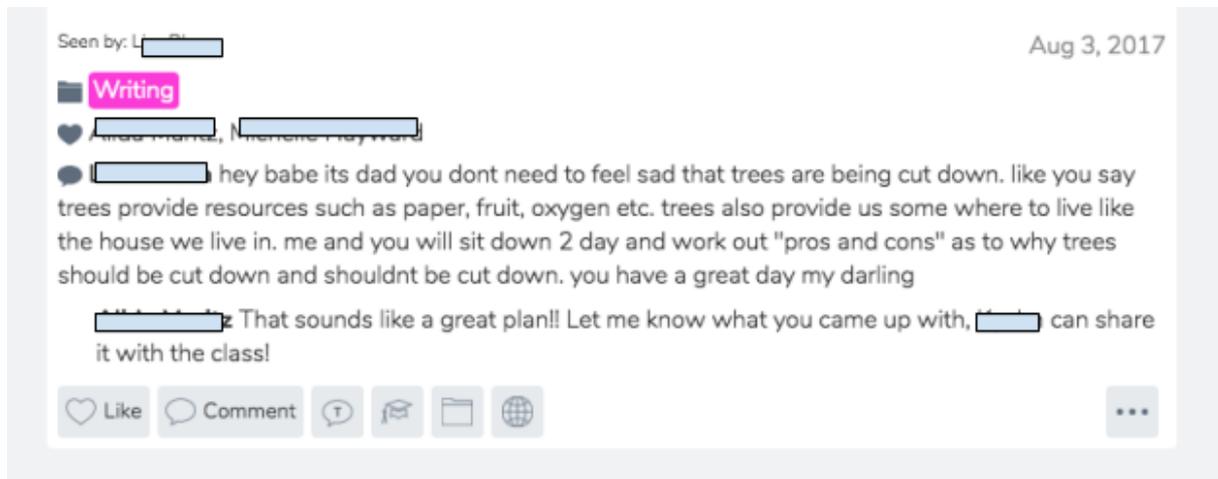
I first introduced Seesaw to our parents in November 2016. I ensured each student in our class had at least one item in their Seesaw learning journal first and printed out the Seesaw generated parent invites (see appendix). There were no whanau connections as a result of this invitation. During a Mutukaroa meeting, I showed a student's Mum her daughter's Seesaw learning journal and emailed her the link to connect and the mum connected that evening. At this time, a year later, we have 34 'connected parents' and 83 enrolled students. In Room 2, there are 26 students enrolled with 18 connected parents. These parents are 'liking' posts and leaving comments on their children's learning. Parents connect specifically to their child's journal (parents can connect to more than one journal, for example if they have two or more children in our junior school) - other learning journals are not visible to parents unless the teacher has shared that child's learning on the class blog.

Park Estate School Seesaw weekly connected parents and weekly parent visits - Nov 2016-Sept 2017



During a Mutukaroa meeting with one of our student's grandfather (his caregiver), the grandfather explained to me that he likes looking through his grandson's Seesaw learning journal as he can see what he's learning at school and reinforce the learning at home (i.e. they were doing similar maths problems together at home that we were doing at school).

A student's father was interested in her learning about trees, and left a comment saying how they could take this learning further at home (see below).



We can select items from students Seesaw learning journals and share them via a Seesaw generated QR code. During our Matariki celebration, families were invited to our school so children could share their learning. I had QR codes displayed that linked to students' learning about Matariki (photo below). We had iPads available for families to view the learning. At least 12 people used the iPads to view students work and four families wanted to know more about connecting to their own child's learning journals.



One of our teachers uses Seesaw as a way to connect with parents via the 'Announcements' feature within Seesaw. Messages can be sent via Seesaw to all connected parents, or selected parents. Our teacher uses this to remind parents of events such as Cross Country or to coordinate times for Mutukaroa meetings. Parents are also now using this feature to initiate communications with the teacher.

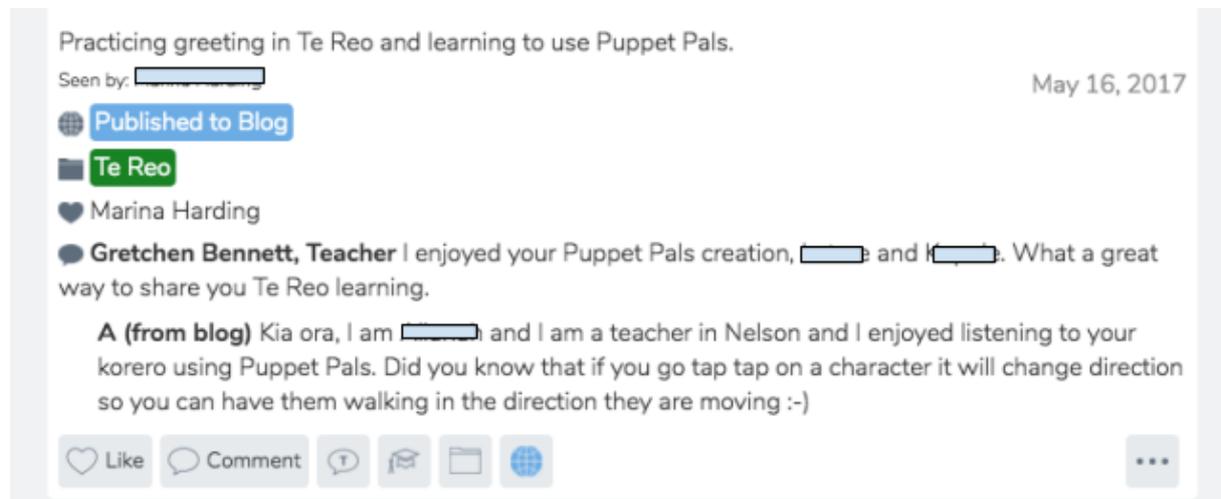
An iPad was tethered in the office foyer. We did this to see if we could encourage whānau participation, however, we found this was not successful as usually there were not staff with knowledge about connecting with Seesaw in this area and it was not actively encouraged. Also, parents seemed to prefer to use their own devices to connect with learning journals.

Two of our teachers shared how Seesaw was used in our junior classes at a cluster professional learning session and one teacher from another local school came to observe how a teacher at our school used Seesaw in her class.

### A tool for teachers

Conversations with teachers indicated all four of our current junior teachers who have been using Seesaw in a class with shared iPads have found it easy to use and see value in using it. All teachers have been able to use Seesaw in various ways within their learning and teaching programmes. Due to class changes (new class dues to roll growth) and staff changes, our current junior teachers (four teachers) have been using Seesaw in their classes for varying amounts of time. Our Room 2 teacher has been using Seesaw for the longest time (since the beginning of 2017), two teachers have used it for two terms, and one teacher for one term. All four teachers have attended an in-school professional learning meeting with a Seesaw focus which prompted an increase of Seesaw use by teachers, especially those new to our school. Three of these teachers have viewed Seesaw produced professional learning webinars (via their website).

In 2016 and 2017 I have been a 'Seesaw Ambassador', this means I have attended an online training seminar and have access to resources (i.e. previews of new features, a set of google slides to support professional learning and sharing Seesaw with others). There is also a Seesaw Ambassadors Google+ community I am a member of. One other teacher has connected with other teaching professionals using Seesaw. There is a Seesaw Teachers Facebook group and NZ Seesaw Teachers Facebook group where people share ideas and ask questions. This teacher has received comments on her Seesaw class blog from other teachers in New Zealand and South Africa.



One teacher (Room 2) has used Seesaw as a platform for her class blog. In 2016 this teacher taught in a Year 4 and 5 digital class where the students all had a Chromebook and an individual student blog and the teacher had a class blog and class site. This teacher has reported she has had far more connection with parents and comments via Seesaw learning journals and class blog then she ever did via last year's class blog and student blogs.

Having a Seesaw for School subscription, and therefore having an 'admin dashboard' has made overseeing and managing our Seesaw learning journals simple. Initially I was the only active administrator of Seesaw, though this year another teacher has taken over this role (i.e. adding new teachers, adding new students etc.) and has reported that this is a 'user friendly'

system to administer. Our senior leadership team (principal and deputy principal) also have administrator access as this allows them to view and comment on students work and has also been used as a tool to see the learning that is happening in a class (for example, prior to a walk through leaders can view the 'Class Feed' via the admin account and see recent learning to help build a picture of the teaching and learning programme).

One teacher has commented that it 'takes a bit of time' to approve the items children want to put onto their journals - especially if the recordings involved videos. Nothing is published on the learning journal unless approved by the class teacher. This teacher felt it was important to watch all of each video prior to approving. Another teacher reported that leaving comments on students' work was time consuming. There was a variance in what the students recorded, a variance in what teachers would approve and also a variance in how long it would take teachers to approve students' items.

### Documenting learning

Teachers are able to use Seesaw student learning journals to document student learning and easily share with colleagues during our target student monitoring meetings - all four of our current teachers do this. Teachers reported finding it helpful being able to locate exemplars of work this way. The learning saved in Seesaw learning journals can be saved into folders (e.g. literacy, maths etc.) and teachers can leave comments and feedback on the learning (both public comments - available to students and connected parents, and private - available to the teacher only).

As a Reading Recovery teacher, viewing my discontinued students' learning journals was a way to monitor their progress, e.g. students in Room 2 record themselves reading fluently, I was able to view a discontinued Reading Recovery student's reading and then share teaching prompts with the class teacher that might be of help. With another Reading Recovery student, we created an e-book in the Book Creator app and saved this to her Seesaw learning journal - so it was available to her class teacher so he could see what she had been learning in our Reading Recovery.

### A tool for juniors

All 12 students interviewed could demonstrate how they could use the Seesaw app on an iPad to take a photo and save it to their Seesaw learning journal. Our students who are still learning to read and write are able to use Seesaw - sometimes they require assistance finding their name when selecting their journal.

Students were able to create digital learning objects collaboratively as Seesaw allows learning to be saved into multiple student folders (when they save their work they can select several names if applicable). Children were also able to 'app smash', i.e., create a learning object in one iPad app and save it into another (Seesaw) - see this example where the students created and recorded their learning in the puppet pals app, then saved it into their Seesaw journal.



Two out of twelve students commented they did not like having their voice recorded.

Room 2's teacher gathered student voice on what students felt about receiving comments on their work in their Seesaw learning journals (see below).

How does it make you feel to see comments from teachers or other people on your work?

It makes me fell happy and excited.

Proud of myself.

Amazed.

It makes me want to write back on the comments.

It makes me smiling and crying a little bit.

I feel like a clown. I feel funny.

It makes feel amazing and excited.

umm I feel proud about my work.

ummm I feel happy.

I feel like a rock star.

I;m happy because people send me comments.

I feel like feeling good.

I feel excited. I feel like an emogi.

It makes me happy.

I feel like a star and I am proud of my work.

## Discussion

At Park Estate School, we see Seesaw as being a valuable tool which teachers have been able to use effectively to connect with whānau and strengthen learning partnerships. All students interviewed were excited to share learning (as can be seen in the 15 student comments above) and receive feedback from others. At least five parents have made positive comments about Seesaw to teachers in person and parents are engaging with their children's learning via Seesaw at a growing rate (see connected parents graph, above). Four teachers have also commented they feel excited having parents and family members connect with student learning journals. It is motivating having an 'authentic audience' not only for the student, but for the teacher too.

The success of Seesaw in our junior classes has varied from class to class and this seems to be, in part, a result of how the class teacher is implementing it. Room 2, our class with 18 out of 26 parents connected, has a teacher who has taught in a 1:1 digital class before and received facilitation in 2016 re learning, creating and sharing in a digital environment. This teacher has taken over the admin role for Seesaw and has been an excellent 'model' for our new and beginning teachers to observe and is very pro-active in supporting whānau to connect with their child's learning via Seesaw.

Two of our teachers are encouraging students to reflect on their learning in their Seesaw journal and teachers often display Seesaw journals on a TV screen in the class so learning and comments can be shared and discussed. Students are learning to make helpful and kind comments on other students learning.

Managing staff changes at our school has been a challenge. Time needs to be spent inducting our new teachers as to how and why we use Seesaw learning journals, making sure our expectations are clear about how Seesaw is to be used, monitoring how it is used and giving teachers feedback. When we did have a team meeting with a Seesaw focus, teachers set themselves a next step and we checked in with how that went.

It is also important that Seesaw is seen as a tool to be used alongside and within our school curriculum and our schools other professional learning - not another thing to do 'on top of' everything else. We have school expectations that Seesaw will be used during our Mutukaroa meetings with whānau, for example our new entrants make a drawing on Seesaw of themselves and record themselves talking about their picture. This is a good way to introduce parents to Seesaw and support parents to connect, as well as to see their child's learning and creating.

One teacher reported that it was time consuming making comments on students' learning recorded on Seesaw. We have discussed this as we also do not want teachers to spend a lot of time doing this, nor do we have the expectation that comments are made on all the work all the time. One excellent feature of Seesaw for Schools is that comments on students learning can be made in written form or as a voice recording. For many of our younger students who aren't yet reading, it is great that they can listen to the feedback on the learning they are sharing. The comments - written or recorded - can be useful to describe what the students are learning which can lead to families reinforcing this learning at home.

We have weekly monitoring meetings at our school to discuss our target students learning. Children's learning, which is documented within Seesaw journals, is shared. This might include a photo of a recent piece of writing from their writing book with a recording of them reading it out, a recording of a student solving a maths problem or a recording of a teacher working with a student in a guided reading lesson. These learning 'artefacts' prompt great

discussion around any gaps the student has in their learning, next steps for the students' learning and also teaching strategies the teacher might try. Seesaw journals also prompt casual conversations amongst staff, for example, recently I watched a video on a student's learning journal of him reading a text that was difficult. I was able to check in with the teacher that she had noticed and we had a good discussion re what the next steps for him would be.

Currently at Park Estate School, our Year 4-6 students are in 1:1 digital classes with Chromebooks and these students have individual student blogs to share their learning on and the teacher also has a class blog (via Blogger). Our Year 1-3 students have shared iPads in their classes and their learning is shared on Seesaw learning journals and Seesaw class blogs. Our digital facilitator suggested we consider using the Blogger platform for our junior blogs also. Their reasoning was that this would mean there was one 'digital portfolio' of learning for the student from Year 1 to Year 6. Also our facilitator suggested that by using Seesaw, the students had a limited audience of teacher, peers, family and friends (up to 10 family members can connect with a student journal on Seesaw) rather than the 'global' audience that a Blogger blog can afford. Another concern was that the teachers acted as a 'gatekeeper' as to what the children published to their journal on Seesaw, i.e. it needs to be approved by a teacher before it is published.

For our junior students, we have found Seesaw to be a great option for documenting student learning. All 12 students surveyed demonstrated they could use Seesaw to record learning into their journal. Our Room 2 teacher, who has worked with Blogger in 2016 and Seesaw in 2017 prefers Seesaw and has commented it's easier to use. As we are using Seesaw with our junior students, we think that an authentic audience of their whānau, their peers and their teachers is adequate and meaningful to our students and our student voice (see comments from 15 students above) reflects the excitement the children feel receiving comments from their 'local' audience. The Seesaw class blog can be shared 'globally'.

We have been wondering how much of our success with connecting parents with their children's learning via Seesaw is due to the fact that we are using it with our junior students. We are interested to see if the connection continues next year when our Year 3 students move into Year 4 and have an individual student blog hosted by Blogger.

### Limitations

As a qualitative study, the findings of this report cannot be generalised. This report reflects a small-scale inquiry. Though Seesaw is available on most devices, in this study, we have only used iPads (students) and MacBook Air (teachers).

The qualitative data used for the study was obtained by myself via student interviews, conversations with staff and observations of student use. As a Seesaw fan, I am aware my own bias in favour of Seesaw may have been of influence.

Time has been limited and I have not had opportunities to cross check with existing studies looking into strengthening learning partnerships via digital learning journals.

I had intended to interview more parents and caregivers to gather information about how they were using Seesaw and their thoughts but did not get this completed.

### Implications/Recommendations

Seesaw is a valuable tool for teachers and students to share learning with families. Strengthening learning partnerships with whānau is a school priority and Seesaw has been a valuable tool to connect with families. We have renewed our paid subscription for Seesaw for Schools as having access to the qualitative data, school dashboard and administrator account is worthwhile.

Seesaw is an effective app to manage workflow in junior classes with shared iPads (Seesaw can be used with shared devices and in 1:1 classes, different login systems are available). Consideration needs to be given on how iPads will be managed and stored. Our school currently uses Meraki (a device management system) to manage our iPads - should we want a new app on our iPads, we do this via a Meraki dashboard and it 'pushes out' apps to our iPads. Systems need to be established to ensure the iPad's software is up to date and that the Seesaw app is up to date. Teachers need to ensure children have clear guidelines and routines for caring for and using iPads responsibly. Having tethered iPads available for families was not worthwhile.

Consideration needs to be given to class environment and where students will go should they want to make voice or video recordings. We found our students preferred quiet, more private spaces (i.e. the cloak room or a quiet spot outside the classroom). Routines need to be established to ensure children know what they are doing and can use the iPad responsibly and safely.

Seesaw is continually developing and staying connected with the developers (i.e. by social media, checking Seesaw emails) is important. Seesaw is very responsive to requests and suggestions from users. For example, students learning can be tagged with 'skills'. After a suggestion, Seesaw were quick to make a NZ curriculum skills template available. Seesaw contains a translation tool and another request I have made is that Pasifika language be included.

Currently when sharing learning via a Seesaw class blog, teachers are unable to introduce the item with a heading and a blurb re what the learning is - that can only be done via a comment. This would be a good feature and I have made this recommendation to Seesaw also. Another recommendation for the developers would be to allow students to save work in progress and be able to come back to it and complete it before sharing with parents. In shared device setting, this is not currently able to be done.

Setting up Seesaw for Schools is not difficult and step by step support is available via Seesaw. Time is required. Having a teacher responsible for loading the classes at the start of the year, managing the enrolment of new students and teachers, and keeping classes up to date is recommended. We ensured our admin staff emailed all new enrolments (name, class, year and NSN number) to our Seesaw administrator to ensure new students were included on Seesaw promptly.

Systems and processes for inducting new staff as to how and why Seesaw is used are important. New teachers need time to become familiar and confident using the technology. Observing how other teachers are using Seesaw in their classes is valuable as is attending online professional learning. There are many online communities where support and ideas re using Seesaw can be found. It would be a good idea to have monthly meetings with a Seesaw focus to share how teachers are using Seesaw to learn, create and share and set goals and next steps. This assists with motivation and accountability.

Time invested into supporting whānau to connect with their students Seesaw journals is important. Teachers supporting families in person was successful at our school. This happened during Mutukaroa meetings and also at time convenient before or after school. Management need to be supportive of teachers prioritising time for these valuable connections to be made. It would be interesting to investigate further how our families are connecting with Seesaw - whether it be via the free app on a smartphone or tablet or by email notifications. Consideration needs to be made to the fact that some families have limited or no wifi available.

Our tethered iPad in our office foyer was not used by parents to access Seesaw and I would not recommend this.

Parent invitations to connect with their child's learning can be generated from within Seesaw. These are fairly wordy (example attached in appendix) and our teachers have found it more successful to introduce Seesaw to whānau in person, and where required, support the parents to connect with Seesaw.

Sharing Seesaw learning journals with whānau is successful and provides opportunities for productive partnerships; 'an ongoing exchange of knowledge and information... where everybody contributes to achieving the goals'<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> (n.d.). Ka Hikitia – Accelerating Success 2013–2017 - Ministry of Education. Retrieved October 28, 2017, from <https://education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Ministry/Strategies-and-policies/Ka-Hikitia/KaHikitiaAcceleratingSuccessEnglish.pdf>

## Conclusion/Additional comments

I am grateful to the Grass Roots Ideas Initiative for funding our initial journey with Seesaw and also the time to learn about Seesaw and investigate how we can use it at Park Estate School to strengthen learning partnerships with whānau and document and share student learning. I have appreciated the support and advice from Dr Viv Aitkin, my critical friend for this project. I have been fortunate also to have support for this project from my current principal, Michelle Hayward, and past principal, Chris Williams. It is great to work in a school where innovation and inquiry are encouraged, and to work with teachers who are willing to try new things and are excited about learning.

Participating in this project has been a great learning experience and what I have learned about gathering, analysing and presenting data from this inquiry will be invaluable for future inquiries.

I am happy to share my learning with others and welcome anyone interested in learning more about how we use Seesaw learning journals in our junior school to get in touch to talk further or visit Park Estate School.

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# Appendices



[Redacted]

.RR - Gretchen Bennett, Teacher

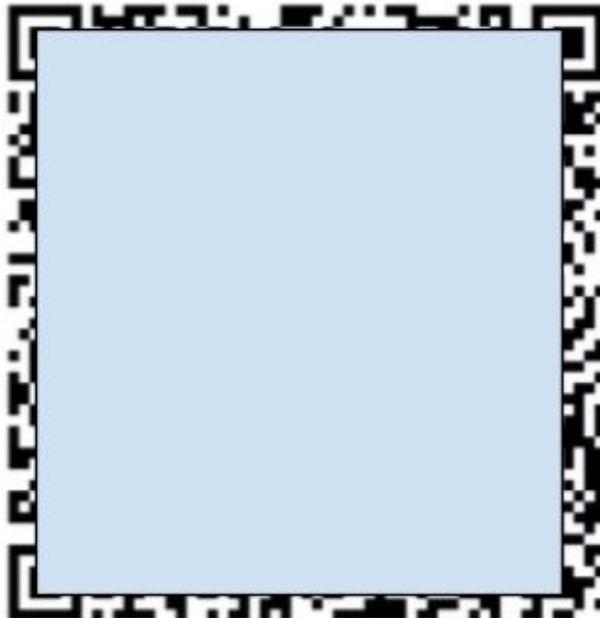
**Connect to Seesaw to receive important updates from**

[Redacted] **t and Gretchen Bennett, Teacher in .RR.**

Your child will post to Seesaw to share their learning with you.

Teachers will also send you messages and reminders.

Seesaw is private. You'll only see posts created by your child or their teacher.



### From Your Smartphone

1. Download the free Seesaw Family app for iOS or Android
2. Choose "Create Family Account"
3. Scan this QR code using Seesaw's built-in QR code scanner
4. Create your account

### From Your Computer

1. In a web browser, go to: [https://\[Redacted\]](https://[Redacted])
2. Choose your child from the list
3. Create your account
4. Once you're approved by Gretchen Bennett, Teacher, you'll get access to Seesaw

### Already Have an Account?

If you've used Seesaw before or have more than one child using Seesaw, follow these steps:

1. Sign in to your account in Seesaw Family app or on the web at [https://\[Redacted\]](https://[Redacted])