



SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Aotea College Case Study: Improving Māori student wellbeing and achievement

Context

Aotea College's improvement journey has taken place over 4-5 years. The school's journey illustrates the weaving together of evaluation processes and thinking over time in ongoing, interconnected cycles. The school is developing a culturally responsive, learner-centered curriculum that provides opportunity to learn for every student. Student outcomes have improved significantly.

The beginning was a process of noticing and recognising the key issues ...

In 2012 the appointment of a new principal provided the catalyst for taking a close look at what was happening in the school. The most recent Education Review office external evaluation had identified that Māori students had a negative perception of their place in the school. Te ao Māori was not reflected in the use of te reo Māori or the inclusion of tikanga Māori in school protocols. There was no formal kapa haka group. Marae space was located at the back of the school in a dilapidated building. There was little sense of bicultural partnership evident in the environment beyond the Māori name of the college.

The student achievement picture showed significant disparity for Māori and Pacific learners. Achievement levels overall were below national comparisons with schools of similar decile and type. Internal review systems did not enable adequate planning at a whole school level.

Systems for consistent curriculum analysis and reporting were insufficient. Leaders and teachers did not have access to comprehensive information about achievement and progress, especially by ethnicity. Assessment approaches were not well developed. Processes to identify students who were not making expected progress or unlikely to achieve success during the school year were inadequate, limiting the nimbleness of responses to identified problems.

Because the senior and middle leaders' understanding of student achievement was limited to end of year National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) data, the school's ability to provide effective programmes to respond to students' learning needs, was slow and cumbersome.

In addition, the senior leadership team had not focused specifically on the issue of Māori achievement as a priority. Although achievement reports were prepared annually by curriculum leaders and discussed at meetings with the Board, there was no formal mechanism for sharing or growing understanding of achievement data within and across learning areas and amongst school leaders. There was no focus on using achievement data to improve Māori student achievement. This made it difficult for teachers to identify priorities and take action.

The inclusion of student voice in internal evaluation was limited.

Looking into things more deeply – investigating

The principal conducted a cultural audit of the school with teachers, drawing on the work associated with Angus McFarlane's educultural wheel. The consultation with teachers revealed a lack of confidence and knowledge about the content of Tātaiako but also an appetite and willingness to learn more about te ao Māori.

Investigation based on the cultural audit, ERO's previous findings and Mason Durie's work on Māori wellbeing, Tātaiako and Ka Hikitia identified the need for the school to be more systematic in

- » raising the profile of language, culture and identity in the school, in particular, that of Māori
- » focusing on improvements in achievement for Māori
- » providing good quality, school wide professional development to support this focus.

To gain a better understanding of students' identity as Māori the school looked closely at the range of iwi affiliation within the student body – *"the really complex tapestry, or tāniko, of who Māori are in our school."* Significant numbers, (the three largest groups) were affiliated with the tribal areas of Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Porou and Ngāti Kahungunu, a long distance from the school's location in Porirua. The fourth largest group identified as Māori but recorded no iwi affiliation. The fifth largest group of Māori students were affiliated with local iwi – Ngāti Toa, but there was no Māori or local iwi representation on the Board of Trustees.

School leaders identified the need to engage and develop learning centred relationships with families, whānau, Ngāti Toa and the Pacific community to better understand and provide learning opportunities for students as a priority. The timing coincided with the development of an education strategy by Ngāti Toa. The principal initiated contact with the iwi's development group and links have been maintained and grown since this time.

Collaborative sense making

The sense making process was critical in *"getting beyond the limiting learning mind set to a growth mindset"*.

The school invested time in investigating achievement. The introduction of a new template for curriculum reporting and a process for analysing and making sense of the data (that included benchmarks for expected progress), enabled senior and middle leaders to establish how well the school's curriculum and teaching was promoting student progress and achievement. *"We tried to grapple with what the data [was] showing...we didn't know how things were going...we needed to know what was really going on."*



As part of this process senior leadership team members set aside significant time to meet with curriculum leaders individually. Sometimes the conversations were challenging as they focused on *“so what does that mean for curriculum design and teaching practice?”* It was important to *“grow the professional curiosity of curriculum and senior leaders about the possibilities presented by the data, asking: Why is this happening? What lies underneath this data? What further questions do we need to know the answers to before we devise meaningful responses? Who are the people behind the numbers?”*

Prioritising to take action

“It just comes back to what are you going to do about it.”

A kete of best practice and a kaupapa o Aotea, developed in consultation with teachers, provided a set of unifying principles from Tātaiako and Ka Hikitia to support improvement. Knowing individual students

well quickly became the focus and purpose of looking at data. Improvements in data management systems enabled more time to be spent on understanding and responding to data rather than finding, collating and presenting it.

“It was important to gain an understanding of who the person or people were behind the numbers.”

The senior leadership team set about creating the conditions through which leaders and teachers could develop a better understanding of *“who the students are in front of you.”* The te reo Māori teacher was appointed Head of Languages reinforcing the status of Māori in the school. Opportunities to learn and practise Māori protocols and te reo Māori increased. Professional learning opportunities for teachers, teacher aides and other staff were prioritised. The school reached out to parents, whānau and the community, involving them in a range of learning focused activities and strengthening relationships.

Joe, a Year 12 Māori student, appeared to be disengaged in the school setting and was not achieving. A deficit story evolved around his disengagement but he had achieved a merit endorsement in economics in NCEA Level 1. Senior leadership wanted to explore what was going well in economics that enabled this success.

Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning (asTTle) testing had previously identified Joe as having one of the highest reading results in his cohort. Although Joe was occasionally observed reading and with evident enjoyment, very challenging material, this high level of literacy had not translated into consistent success in learning at school.

The deputy principal had a conversation with Joe and another student who were happy to be asked about what was working for them in the subjects they were doing well in. Joe explained what it was about the individual teacher and teaching that enabled him to be a highly successful learner in this area. Joe’s explanation was recorded on video. He was happy and intrigued to think the school thought he had something helpful to say about teaching and learning. The video taped conversation was shared with all teachers.

Joe’s comments served to interrupt and confront some deficit framings and discourses that existed about his learning. Joe noticed and acknowledged that the teacher’s high expectations of him and her insistence that he perform to his ability enabled him to achieve well. Joe described how he was in a group of students who all accepted the teacher’s expectations and supported each other to achieve them. He said if he waggled, the teacher sent someone from the group to get him.

Joe also recognised that the teacher provided lots of opportunities to meet deadlines. He was happy to be teacher directed in his learning and was cooperative when he knew his teacher was determined for him to achieve the best possible result. He was deeply respectful of the teacher who believed in his abilities and who persisted in having high expectations of him.

“The personal story sent a powerful message about the potential for harm when negative assumptions are made about students and conversely, the power of a determinedly positive, professional connection with an individual learner.”

The school's investment in providing access to student outcome data and introduction of effective data management systems and common assessments in the junior school were important steps in the improvement process. The new systems and processes facilitated a more rapid and accurate response.

The development process was led by the senior leadership team. Team members were closely involved in scrutinising assessment and benchmarking early in the year, monitoring credits and attendance and the collation and use of data with Heads of Departments and deans as well as at whole staff meetings.

Data tracking for the holistic development of learners was also undertaken. Deans and the senior leadership team were able to track closely and respond quickly to information related to attendance and behaviour to ensure a wrap-around whole student focus.

At the middle leadership level data literacy, internal accountability and capacity increased as staff increasingly shared the sense making from looking at the data: *"looking at stuff earlier, looking at the data and responding to it"* with a focus on *"what can we do about this?"*

Priority was given to the development and implementation of curriculum courses that reflected the school's principles and elements of the Ngāti Toa Iwi Education Plan. Strategic partnerships were sought with the iwi, tertiary institutions such as the wānanga and polytechnic as well as other secondary schools.

Senior and middle leadership made judicious use of capability building opportunities through participation in *Kia Eke Panuku* and the use of a pedagogical approach that was responsive to the learning and wellbeing of Māori. It was important to put the time and the resource into the initiative to make it work well. The school resourced whole days for middle leaders to collaborate and look closely at shifts in understanding and practice as they played out in classrooms across the curriculum. Listening to students and drawing on their views meant that *"instead of lurching to solutions, we became open to looking for something deeper, to understand why?"* Pedagogical improvements were evident as teachers worked with shadow coaches to adopt a more discursive approach, and to incorporate more opportunities for co construction with students.

Professional learning and development associated with the *Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L)* programme supported this approach with deliberate efforts to include the teaching of pro-social skills.



Shifts in thinking and practice

As a result of Aotea College's improvement actions the integration of different aspects of the wider community in the life of the school increased.

Changing focus for whānau

The Whānau Advisory Group engaged in a reflect and review cycle and reinvented itself as the Manaaki o Tauria group. Finding ways to retain high levels of parent engagement in this group has spread to a focus on providing multiple entry points for whānau: online access to achievement and attendance data and information on facebook; opportunities for kanohi ki te kanohi engagement in kapa haka support; and meetings with whānau, students and Hui Ako teachers during the year. Increasing opportunities for engagement with parents and whānau with a focus on learning and pathways has been important. Aotea College is looking at ways to support parent groups who have expressed interest in leading other parents and caregivers in showing them how to make good use of the whānau portal. Informal workshops held in family homes or other places in the community provide an important starting point. More families are comfortable with coming into the school to support kapa haka hui. The growth of kapa haka, involving past students in the life of the school reflects



the emphasis on student leadership especially in promoting te ao Māori, and affirms the value of kapa haka in the school and wider community.

The inclusion of te reo Māori

Basic te reo Māori is used throughout the school, for example, in assemblies, classrooms and conversation. Further progress is evident in plans to ensure te reo Māori is included in the Hui Ako curriculum and the inclusion of karakia in whole school assemblies.

Signage in plans for the new school will be in te reo Māori as well as English. Senior leaders and a significant number of staff use mihi in public situations. Confidence in waiata and other Māori protocols used across the school has increased. Academic achievement awards for Māori and Pacific students recognise and make visible learning success.

Good information for good thinking and planning

"Data is now part of the culture." Increasingly sophisticated software has enabled the slicing and interrogation of the data in different ways and for different purposes, at any time, increasing the capacity to respond to issues earlier.

At the end of each term senior and middle leaders look at snapshots of students in "top ten" categories, identifying achievers by gender and ethnicity to help identify what is working and what is not working. Curriculum leaders then can focus on modifications to class or individual programmes or approaches to make a difference. The first step is noticing the issue, followed by recognising what the issue is, enabling an appropriate response. Curriculum leaders ask the question *"what's going on in this course or with this student?"* The availability of good information systems enables a response to this question at any time through useful breakdowns for individuals and groups in a learning area or by class.

Responsive curriculum

Greater responsiveness can be seen in curriculum developments that focus on both individualised and integrated programmes.

“Creative curriculum design is happening; with cross curricular initiatives; short courses; and authentic contexts related to meaningful pathways into tertiary education and employment.”

For example, science opportunities have been deliberately strengthened to increase the choices available to students. Expanding the range of opportunities available has led to more students doing science for longer, strengthening vocational opportunities beyond school. A creative approach to science curriculum design has resulted in the introduction of philosophy and forensic sciences and health science in the senior school. Collaboration with the local Polytechnic Whitireia has meant specialist facilities can be accessed, through their School of Health. Timetabling the opportunity for senior students to pursue individual achievement plans for University Entrance is a step towards tailoring programmes for students.

Professional capability and capacity

The core principles of *Kia Eke Panuku* and *PB4L and restorative practice* provided a springboard for further development of professional practice. The emphasis on co-construction and a discursive approach, the use of the 'reflect, review, act' framework¹ and shadow coaching, supported the development of a collaborative, inquiry focused approach to lift achievement. This approach focuses on the "authentic learning of the teacher to be able to lift achievement and improve progress" and helps teachers develop the "agency to talk about it and then walk the talk."

The quality of internal evaluation has increased, influencing individual and collective goal setting.



"How will we know about the impact of our actions? What kinds of tools do we need to use/develop to measure our learning?"

As the school's improvement journey has progressed, leadership across the school has also strengthened: "the [professional] conversations are more constructive and more strategic" and they are often framed by Māori concepts. For the senior leadership team, changes in the quality of professional conversations in the school represent an increase in professional and collective ownership and accountability.

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation

There are now effective structures and processes in place for both formal and informal evaluation at middle and senior management levels. High expectations around the quality of data analysis in Annual curriculum area reports and the interrogation

by peers in middle and senior leadership has led to more openness about the what and how of improving achievement. Curriculum area leaders present directly to the Board every year. Ongoing internal evaluation is an expectation at Aotea College and creativity in terms of the response to outcomes is encouraged.



¹ Earl, L. & Timperley, H. (Eds.) (2009). *Professional Learning Conversations. Challenges in Using Evidence for Improvement*. Dordrecht Netherlands: Springer.

“It’s not just about today – it’s lengthening the view to real possibilities.”

“Software is making it easier to get more accurate data, quicker, and simpler so more time is spent understanding and using data, not finding and collating and presenting it.”

Data sets are used as an opportunity to ask: How come? Why is this? So what? Student and teacher voice is gathered and given genuine consideration. Wellbeing@school and teacher workplace surveys are used annually. The effectiveness of the personal and collective learning of staff is evaluated through appraisal processes and the school’s Kaupapa Ako principles.

Disparity remains evident but has been reduced. The outcome has been an improvement in Māori achievement. The school highlights where further progress needs to be made for Pacific students as well as in relation to gender disparity.

School leavers with NCEA Level 2 or above by ethnicity

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2016 NZ
Māori	45.5%	50%	69.6%	83.7%	76.8%	66.5%
Pacific	61.9%	59.7%	83%	84.2%	77.1%	74.7%
All	69.7%	69.52%	84.2%	89.2%	81.1%	80.3%

The continuing journey: expanding opportunities to learn

During 2017 significant development has taken place involving the integration of approaches to pastoral care and curriculum.

Changes have been made to the structure and resourcing of form time, now called Hui Ako. The primary focus of the Hui Ako programme is the front end of the New Zealand Curriculum to support improvement in wellbeing and achievement, pastoral noticing, academic progress and relationships with parents and whānau.



Three 30 minute sessions per week are resourced as contact time. A specific curriculum based programme is tailored to the needs of different year levels. For example, at Year 12 the emphasis is on goal setting, tracking and monitoring progress, learning study techniques, managing commitments and planning for next steps in a learning pathway.

“Our conversations with kids have changed.”

Students are encouraged to speak to their own learning; the aim is for them to develop self-efficacy.

“We have put the structures and processes in place to support change – the structure of Hui Ako enables teachers to support the whole student and respond effectively to an individual student who may not be achieving.”

The establishment of a ninth learning area, Learning Pathways (including Learning Support, English Language Learning, Careers, Gateway, and the Trades Academy) represents a significant development in the provision of a learner centred curriculum. The Faculty, located at the centre of the planned new school campus, brings together learner centred support services, new initiatives and programmes related to learning pathways, with key transition points from Year 8 to beyond secondary schooling. Students take ownership of building their

own pathways, with curriculum specialists, Hui Ako teachers and deans advising and supporting them along the way.

The design of learning pathway opportunities includes a strong Trades Academy pathway into tertiary learning and employment as well as more traditional university pathways. For students engaged in learning at tertiary institutions while still at school, the structure of curriculum provision is built around the student. The week is broken up into manageable chunks and may involve a combination of polytechnic courses, school based courses and work experience. Whole day and workshops over consecutive days are run to allow for intense engagement in learning and also used to extend learning in the term break. Students show increased engagement, motivation and achievement as a result.

These initiatives represent the weaving together of various threads to form a coherent network of strategies and approaches. The focus on a holistic approach to education provision is at the heart of the improvement journey. Aotea College is in a very different place to where it was in 2012.

Seeing the changes and improvements is empowering for all who contribute to making a difference. However, the work is not about a single problem that requires a single solution. Our aim is to achieve equitable outcomes and we know that this requires resilience and perseverance. ♦

