



## Manu Tukutuku, ma te Huruhuru ka Rere te Manu: Empowering Learners to Soar

**Phase One: Opening the door for Māori to succeed in a digital community where cultural capacity and knowledge are valued and respected**

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### Abstract

The first step to enabling Māori achievement is engaging whānau (family) and tamariki (children) in situations where their mana (autonomy) and tuakiri (identity) remains intact. This paper identifies steps for culturally critical and sustaining practice when engaging whānau and students, highlights some positive examples, and reflects on lessons learnt. This is phase one of a multi-layered project, Ngā Manu – Manu Tukutuku: Empowering Learners to Soar.

**Keywords:** Māori achievement; engagement; distance learning; online learning; student and whānau voice

### Introduction

In the last few decades there has been thorough research published in the education sector about Māori achievement (or the lack of it) and the need to address the increasingly widening gap. (Ka Eke Panuku, n.d.; Williams, 2003; Peterson, Rubie-Davies, Osborne, & Sibley, 2013) This gap has been touted as long-term system failure, and initiatives such as Ka Hikatia, Ka Eke Panuku, and Te Kotahitanga have sought to educate teachers, change practice, and improve the landscape for Māori learners. Yet still the gap increases.

The notion of changing the dominant discourse has had various uptakes. Friere (1972) states that, to achieve critical consciousness, we need to build liberating action that is independent of this dominant discourse. However, it is the opinion of this author that we are continually perpetuating the westernised system by introducing constructs such as National Standards, the Learning Progression Framework, and NCEA Assessment Standards. Although virtuous in their intent, these constructs continue to marginalise and “whitewash” the opportunities for Māori to succeed as Māori. It is the intent of this paper to share a kaupapa (approach) for re-engaging Māori learners in authentic contexts where their mana<sup>1</sup> and tuakiri (identity) remain intact.

This approach is the first phase in a multi-layered project that is being developed and implemented at Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu (Te Kura, The Correspondence School), which has a high percentage of disengaged and alienated Māori students. These students are often pathwayed to Te Kura in the expectation that they will achieve better there than in the schools

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<sup>1</sup> In this context, mana refers to the student’s and whānau’s autonomy to determine their learning pathway.

that have passed them on.<sup>2</sup> It's not our intent to blame other schools. We wish to understand the bigger picture, and to accurately gauge the progress and achievements of the Te Kura students who have been involved in this approach.

“Ma te huruhuru ka rere te manu” is the whakatauki (proverb) that envelopes step one, re-engaging our Māori learners in an online community in which cultural capacity and knowledge is valued and respected. This whakatauki embodies the belief that, as they become more enabled and empowered, our learners will soar to great heights and be successful as Māori. The literal translation is “to adorn the bird with feathers to fly”.

## **Māori student achievement: The Aotearoa context**

In 1999, the first Māori education strategy, *Ka Hikitia* (Ministry of Education, 1999), was shared with the education sector. This publication aimed to:

- raise the quality of mainstream education for Māori
- support the growth of high-quality kaupapa Māori education
- support greater Māori involvement and authority in education.

*Ka Hikitia* (Ministry of Education, 2013) focuses on accelerating success by enabling Māori potential and productive partnerships, and building on identity, language, and culture to help Māori achieve educational success as Māori. This publication shares and identifies that, for Māori to succeed, high-quality teaching is the most important influence on education for Māori students and that incorporating culture and productive partnerships into learning leads to success.

Further research shows that the notion of Māori succeeding as Māori is not new (Durie, 2003; Milne, 2013), yet the research for Aotearoa in this area is limited and sparse. Durie (2003) states that, for Māori learners to succeed as Māori, they must retain their uniqueness. Being successful academically, socially—or in any other forum—is still success, but if the essence of their Māoriness is not retained, then are they truly successful as Māori?

Accelerating success is also a current focus in the education sector and highlights that a series of benchmarks or key characteristics must be met to successfully close the gap (Phipps & Merisotis, 2003). Embedded benchmarks at various stages of initiatives that focus on raising Māori student achievement are essential but can be problematic if the benchmarks continue to reinforce the dominant discourse. The need for rapid change is undeniable but embedding culturally sustaining practices also needs careful consideration. This paper explores the idea that Māori can engage in an online learning forum in which their uniqueness is acknowledged, celebrated, and embraced as a catalyst for rapid success.

## **The catalyst for change: Our method to engage**

Achievement data shared with Te Kura staff in November 2017 painted a bleak picture of success for Māori students at Te Kura. Small regional teams met and discussed that if we continued doing what we have always done, we were unlikely to achieve better results. A call for change was made, and *Manu Tukutuku – Regional Kites*<sup>3</sup> was established in late 2017. These kites sought to change the landscape for students in Te Kura to improve engagement and achievement.

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<sup>2</sup> This is an issue for further publication.

<sup>3</sup> *Manu Tukutuku – Regional Kites* refers to action plans created by team leaders and regional managers. These action plans focus on changing the teaching and learning landscape for Te Kura students.

The Central North Region identified that the role of learning advisor<sup>4</sup> was paramount in enabling and empowering student success. Ngā Manu – Manu Tukutuku was formed to capture the Māori students in Rotorua, Tauranga, the greater Bay of Plenty and parts of the East Coast, because this is where most of the Māori students in the Central North Region live. These students and whānau<sup>5</sup> were invited to a korero (discussion) with staff to discuss how their education might be delivered differently. These discussions were held on sites identified by whānau, and at times and dates that suited them. This allowed the whānau to control the hui (meeting).<sup>6</sup> These discussions were undertaken by Māori staff and used the concept of kanohi ki te kanohi.<sup>7</sup> Notes were written by Te Kura staff, and whānau confirmed their agreement. There were at least three discussions kanohi ki te kanohi with whānau, as well as four to five calls, emails, or texts, before they committed to be part of this kaupapa.

The main focus of the extended discussion was to share with whānau that we (Te Kura) wanted their input and direction as to what success for their tamaiti (child) might look like and how we would measure this success. Ngā Manu Tukutuku – Oku Wawata<sup>8</sup> establishment documents embedded Māori concepts and constructs in relevant and meaningful authentic learning contexts. These documents were shared with whānau only when we had a good understanding of their aspirations for their tamaiti/tamariki (children).

The next step was a commitment to regular and frequent contact (text messages, video calls, kanohi ki te kanohi visits, or emails) as determined by the whānau and tamaiti. In fact, we readily agreed to whatever the whānau suggested. Following the commitment to their individual learning plan for success and for regular and frequent contact, the next step was to navigate students' online presence (they are distance learners most of the time). Further discussions were held to ask which environment the whānau and their tamaiti most preferred and felt comfortable in. This included social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat.

The steps to engage the whanau were to:

1. identify the student and whānau, and seek permission for inclusion in Ngā Manu
2. commit to learning in a manner they may not be accustomed to
3. establish communication plans, and commitment to these
4. identify online platforms they are comfortable with, and are prepared to use
5. start the mahi—get the treats!

## Research project

### Identify the student and whānau, seek permission for inclusion in Ngā Manu

#### Methodology

Students were identified from our school roll as being Māori and living in the areas mentioned above. Phone calls, emails, and visits were undertaken to confirm a time and place to meet and discuss Ngā Manu Tukutuku – Oku Wawata. These phone calls, emails, and visits occurred

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<sup>4</sup> A learning advisor is similar to home-room or form teacher. They are charged primarily with pastoral care.

<sup>5</sup> Family – not only immediate, and not necessarily determined by bloodlines

<sup>6</sup> The idea of power and control has been widely touted as a key reason for whānau not engaging in school events or settings.

<sup>7</sup> Kanohi ki te kanohi refers to meetings that are held in person. The literal translation is “face to face”.

<sup>8</sup> A draft document that identified the student's learning plan and goals.

during Summer School<sup>9</sup> and were conducted by two volunteer teaching staff (one primary-trained, the other a te reo Māori (Māori language) secondary-school teacher).

### **Discussion**

Eighty whānau were initially identified. Sixty confirmed their acceptance of this approach to learning. Two staff volunteered to facilitate the roopu (group) by conducting hui with all involved (whānau, iwi and hapū,<sup>10</sup> and external providers such as EastBay REAP), and were the central contacts for all whānau, delivering relevant and contextualised curriculum content for Years 0 to 13 if needed. The initial expectation was that maybe 40 to 50 children would be interested. But after first consultations and contacts, 92 students wanted to be involved.

### **Findings**

Regardless of the number of phone calls and other contact, reminders need to be sent the day before to ensure everyone is on board and prepared for the discussions.

Parents and whānau are keen to learn about new initiatives. They are willing to jump on board if they see how it can improve their situation.

Sometimes times our roll data is inaccurate, and some whānau were not consulted because their ethnicity was recorded incorrectly. This has resulted in the school having initial conversations about ethnicity with whānau when tamariki are enrolled, and we explain why we need this information. For those who did not identify as Māori but were Māori through whakapapa (genealogy, bloodline), we explained that, by identifying as a Māori student, doors would open and they could access a range of networks if they chose.

## **Commitment to learning in a manner they may not be accustomed to**

### **Methodology**

This section of the research project focused on the discussions held with whānau, and on understanding their experiences with education and their expectations of what learning could look like if involved with Ngā Manu. These discussions were not pre-determined or scripted—when contacted, whānau were informed that staff would like to talk with them about their tamaiti's learning and a possible new way to engage in learning and teaching.

### **Discussion**

Traditional experience for most whānau and children was: you go to school; the teacher tells you what to do; you do it. This section focused on whānau and tamariki identifying what they liked, what they wanted to learn about, and how they wanted to learn. It also explored career pathways and future job prospects.

The learning tasks were to be integrated and contextualised in kaupapa Māori or authentic learning situations. The tasks were not driven by NCEA Standards or National Standards (reading, writing and math descriptors).

From all of the hui held with whānau and tamariki, 25 of the 92 students wanted to continue with Te Kura's resources and teaching methods (pre-determined paper-based or online modules). The remaining 67 wanted flexibility, self-determination and autonomy over what they would learn throughout their time on Te Kura's roll.

These 67 students identified topics of interest to explore, and for which they needed support to construct their learning. This is our current practice, which we continue to develop.

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<sup>9</sup> Te Kura conducts Summer School between December and February. This new initiative challenges expectations of traditional delivery time periods.

<sup>10</sup> Extended whānau connections

## Findings

Whānau felt empowered to determine what learning could look like but were also very afraid of what needed to be done, and how it would be done. There was a sense of trepidation—parents would often ask, “Is this going to be considered real work?” and “What about the credits (or national standards)?”

Educating whānau about key skills and knowledge embedded in work in which they are, for example, running events at marae or discussing migration routes and narratives of creation stories, is critical because they still focus on traditional approaches to content and contexts of learning at school. Whānau also need help to understand that evidence of learning can be collected in a variety of forms and that written tasks don’t always reflect their tamaiti’s/tamariki’s understanding.

Students are very reluctant to operate in areas in which they are uncomfortable, or if they believe they are inadequate. Historic experiences also affect students hugely when engaging in certain curriculum subjects.

Integrating learning tasks for NCEA requires a lot of effort and time to identify what meets the standards, what still needs to occur to meet the entire standard, and the validity of the evidence being captured to meet the needs of the standard.

## Establish communication plans, and commitment to these

### Methodology

During the kanohi ki te kanohi sessions, whānau and Te Kura staff identified their preferred means of communication, and times and days of the week that most suited the whānau. Te Kura staff did not have any fixed times or modes of contact and were willing to work with whānau in their preferred modes.

### Discussion

It was agreed by all (Te Kura, whānau, and tamariki) that contact be initiated at least once every fortnight by whānau to staff, once a week by staff to student, and once a week by student to staff. Individuals negotiated how that contact was to occur. The options included SMS texts, phone calls, email, Skype, Google Hangouts, Facebook Messenger, Instagram Direct Messages, Snapchat, Facebook Live, and kanohi ki te kanohi visits. The most commonly used methods for the group are identified in Table 1. The data was derived from the frequency of contact made by staff and students using each tool. (Whānau use phone calls, emails or text messaging only.)

**Table 1** Communication tool preferred by Te Kura students at the end of the project

Phone calls	Facebook Messenger	SMS text	Skype	Kanohi ki te kanohi	Instagram	Snapchat	Facebook Live	Google Hangouts
30	20	15	15	10	4	2		

## Findings

Students live in an instantaneous world in which they expect feedback, contact, and support immediately. Clear direction about times when these will occur ensures that there is no miscommunication or feeling of being let down.

Students work at all times of the day or night and will send messages when they have problems. They do this so they do not forget, and don’t always expect a reply.

Regular and frequent contact makes whānau and students feel valued and supported. The relationship formed by regular and frequent contact ensures whānau trust Te Kura staff when

necessary. This can lead to deeper conversations that can help staff to understand students' barriers, fears, or avoidance of learning.

## **Identify online platforms tamariki are comfortable with and prepared to use**

### **Methodology**

During the kanohi ki te kanohi sessions, whānau told Te Kura staff which online platforms they preferred.

### **Discussion**

Our students and some whānau use social media widely. This was seen as a great way to engage with our students in spaces where they are comfortable.

At the beginning of the project, students were most commonly using Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Google Hangouts in social settings. After staff and students had discussed the purpose for using the tool, students were happy to “follow” or “friend” staff members to connect with them. (Later, phone calls became more popular.)

The sites were used for checking about workload, time management, and pastoral issues. They also provided a way to share content easily, by “tagging” or commenting.

### **Findings**

Students would send requests, chats, and general information freely and frequently at times that best suited them.

They were more willing to share concerns, problems, or questions because these messages were private and shared only with staff members.

Students created groups in their region and added teachers to get help with group work or to ask common questions. These self-created groups showed a shared ownership of learning between and with the students.

## **Summary and conclusion**

“The Education Review Office (ERO) does not consider any school to be high performing unless the school can demonstrate that most of [its] Māori learners are progressing well and succeeding as Māori” (Education Review Office, 2010, p. 31). Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu would not be considered a high-performing school against that measure; however, the school is moving to embed appropriate and meaningful frameworks that enable Māori learners to succeed as Māori.

Challenging the rhetoric for acceptable measures of success is a first step to reclaiming identity and mana for Māori learners. Removing the dominant discourse and the barriers imposed upon Māori learners allows liberating action and acceleration. Working with whānau and students in spaces where they are comfortable allows for clear expectations, and an authentic relationship can be established.

Te Aho o Te Kura and the Ngā Manu – Manu Tukutuku roopu show how we can challenge the status quo to benefit Māori learners. Approaches based on relational strength are not new (Bishop & Glynn, 1999) but clear guidance and methods on how to form these approaches, and their purpose, are not always clearly identified or discussed. This localised approach is changing non-engaged students into highly engaged students who are starting to achieve against nationally imposed and self-determined measures.

This paper describes the first step of a multi-layered complex project that aims to realise Māori potential and enable rapid Māori success as Māori at Te Kura. The steps outlined above are measurable ways to create and show engagement with learning.

The next phase of our research will focus on integrating authentic learning situations in which we collect naturally occurring evidence of skills, knowledge, and understanding as outlined in the New Zealand Curriculum. Ngā Manu will embed the big-picture design into the learning pathways of the students and their whānau. The autonomy of what is learnt, when it's learnt and how it's shown will be a continual reciprocal action undertaken by Te Kura staff, the students, their whānau, and the community, hapū, and iwi. Furthermore, the next phase will result in students collating sources of evidence in a multi-media portfolio to highlight their discoveries, passions, and learning. This portfolio will showcase the learner and ensure that their mana and tuakiri is intact, if not highly empowered and enabled.

In conclusion, we must address the landscape for Māori learners, and we must stop perpetuating the dominant discourse at all levels. Realising Māori potential, strengthening productive partnerships, building on identity, language, and culture are all identified ways for Māori to succeed as Māori. Starting with small manageable steps to engage whānau in meaningful contexts lays the foundation from which to push off. The whakatauki from Princess Te Puea Hērangi succinctly describes the aspirations and approach of Māori, for Māori, by Māori:

Mehemea ka moemoeā ahau, ko ahau anake.  
Mehemea ka moemoeā a tātou, ka taea e tātou.

If I dream, I dream alone.  
If we all dream together, we can succeed.

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## Biographical notes

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Christine is unashamedly passionate about Māori succeeding as Māori in whitestream spaces. She has taught across all age levels and in all settings: bilingual, kura kaupapa, and mainstream classes. She continues to strive for a better future for her children, her mokopuna and their future.

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