

Case Study

Te Kōmanawa Rowley Primary School

An interview with Principal, Graeme Norman, and Deputy Principal, Niki Penny.

Flipping the narrative and restoring pride

What is unique about Te Kōmanawa Rowley School is that the transition away from streaming came naturally with the shift in school culture and attitude towards tamariki, and their rights in accessing education. Graeme on his arrival shares what may seem like a relatively simple goal but is something that many schools have struggled with: How do we get children to school to learn? This simple pātai encouraged them to ensure that when tamariki enter Te Kōmanawa that “the kids can come in and see themselves.”

When you walk into the kura, you are greeted with multiple reo – te reo Māori, Gagana Samoa, Lea Faka-Tonga, and English. That means that when whānau come into the kura that they can see themselves, and this is a true testament to the strides that the kura has made to build trust within the community – a significant transformation to create quality relationships especially with diverse groups of people that will have their own unique stories.

Why did you decide to end streaming at your school?

Graeme, who has a background in low decile schools and accounting, saw his experience as an advantage when he came into Te Kōmanawa three years ago. “The core business was getting our children to school and learning. We focused right from the start on how we get children wanting to come to Te Kōmanawa Rowley School. That was the first thing I brought up to the staff, the very first time I met them – how do we get them wanting to be here. What do we do? Because they’re not gonna learn if they’re not here.” The staff wanted to ensure tamariki felt valued and saw that the staff had high expectations of them so that ‘we meet them where they’re at’ to then explore ‘how we move them on.’”

Niki builds on this concept of high expectations, and how they were doing it incidentally. “Having high expectations but then going, what does it take to get the kids to that point, how do we group them, how do we create this school culture that enables that to happen. And so, the big piece of work around coming to a school that could de-stream was making this a place where it’s okay to take risks with your learning.” From risks comes learning, from learning comes success.

How did you manage the shift from streaming?

“It was probably an unconscious decision because it is what worked for our kids. But mixed ability grouping was a no-brainer for us because culturally it made sense for our kids. That is where their strengths laid.”

Retrospectively Niki believes that having a strong foundation during their culture shift contributed to a smooth transition. “The year prior to becoming a DMIC school, our Head of Math’s had already started talking to our staff about mixed ability grouping and the idea of communities working together to solve problems, using our oral language and building that knowledge in our kids so they can succeed and grow further.” There is a real focus on building leadership at all levels. “We believe in our staff as experts – we upskill them so that they can lead, because they understand our context and know how to make it work.

“Mixed ability grouping, for some, is a very foreign idea, and the idea that you should set a math’s problem that challenges your top mathematician when you’ve got so many kids down here, but it’s that idea of you as a teacher, that you are putting a barrier in place for the children, rather than the work being the barrier, because if you are only ever teaching them at that level, they’re only ever going to achieve at that level.”

What challenges did you face?

Like many other schools, attendance was a real challenge at Te Kōmanawa. “If the car breaks down, if they’re not at school, they’re not going to learn, so it makes sense to go and get them and bring them to school. We have some of our whānau that work nightshifts, and they weren’t sending their kids when they slept in because they thought they would be late, and that there was shame attached to that. We’d rather them come late than not at all.”

“We don’t like the word ‘shame’, we like the term ‘restoring pride’. Again, it’s flipping that narrative because none of our community want their kids to fail at school or for them to be labelled as not having a future. They want the best for their kids but there are so many things in the way to helping them do what they want for their children. So, when you’re having to work three jobs it’s quite hard to organise your kids to get to school on time because you’re running in and out trying to do that – it’s about putting food on the table for your kids.”

What significant actions helped manage the shift away from streaming?

“The piece of paper can wait, tamariki are the priority.”

Graeme says that simply being on the gate for kid drop-offs and pick-ups allows whānau to see that the senior leadership team is there through their child’s journey.

Open plan classrooms have been commonly implemented and encouraged for low decile schools, but Graeme says it does not work, “especially for children that are in high trauma. We’ve worked hard to make sure we stay single cell, opening up new classrooms, putting up false walls to make sure they are as much single cell as possible.” He says it has helped with the process of de-streaming as “the community trust, and know that everything we’re doing is for the betterment of their child and their child’s education.”

They also ensure that the staff doesn’t know everything pastoral to ensure teachers look at the kids without ‘deficit thinking.’

Te Kōmanawa’s approach is about ‘meeting the kids where they are at in a timely way, and in the best way for them.’ This includes surrounding yourself with effective leadership and staff on the same page, as well as following up with whānau. They have access to a social worker on-site, “she’s based here and works with a number of other schools, but by virtue of her having a base here, she’s a familiar face to our whānau. Same with Mana Ake, it’s about having the right people that fit with us too, and us having those hard conversations at times about the journey.”

Senior leadership are directly involved in the nurturing of hauora through pastoral care meetings held twice a term. “All the agencies come in and we triage the cases and we share knowledge, and we have an agreement that in that room, we’re able to talk freely about the best solutions for the kids and that we’re not breaking confidentiality. Because of these relationships, these agencies know the history and can advocate for our kids.”

“It’s all interwoven, culture is really important, and the de-streaming just supports the culture.”

The story of this school has woven its way throughout Ōtautahi as Graeme states that they are seeing whānau and their tamariki join all the way from the likes of Aranui, Halswell, Clyde Rd, Woolston, and other areas as Te Kōmanawa does not have a zone. “There are easier choices, but parents are choosing to bring their kids to this school.”

The school Facebook page has grown in popularity as teachers celebrate successes and sharing learnings, “There’s cheesy photos of Graeme with kids that have written a word for the first time. We celebrate success whatever that looks like for that child, and our whānau know if we are celebrating, it’s meaningful for that child and for that whānau. It also shows them what is happening inside the school, it’s that there are no secrets here.” This inter-generational engagement has seen grandparents, parents and teachers who went through the school become openly proud.

“Teachers have epiphanies when they recognise the barriers in place for tamariki potential and whānau perspectives are changing from ‘we want our kids to be happy at school’ to ‘we want our kids to succeed at school.’”

Writing data doubled from 20 percent to 41 percent in the space of a year, but there were also some incredible individual stories of tamariki potential, growth, and success.

“Kids who have had a significant growth in confidence, self-worth, self-value and self-belief. When your peers are encouraging you to be a learner, and see you as a learner, and see that you have potential, then they take a risk and then you see the evidence of what they can do.”

What advice would you give a principal who is considering or planning to end streaming at their school?

We have heard the effects of community buy-in and making space for tamariki to flourish on their own grounds. Te Kōmanawa has been exercising inter-generational healing and now has eyes fixed on the future horizon. The focus is on creating sustainable school environments so that whānau have a solid foundation for tamariki to grow. “Nothing is done until I’m confident that we can run it without it falling over... I needed to be confident that our kids were at the right place to be able to take that on.”

They ensured that everybody was on the same page so they can support each other and understand what ‘real achievement’ looks like. Therefore, achievement looks like: 400 whānau attending a community hāngī, parents trusting that the school creates open transitional pathways, the community sharing the story, and successful, healthy, happy tamariki that are celebrated by their kura, whānau, community and themselves.



Niki Penny and Graeme Norman with Rangimarie Elvin from Tokona te Raki.