

### Intro / Project description

We examined how teachers and students at Rototuna High School (RHS), an innovative learning environment (ILE), develop agentic identities to define their sense of self as foundation inhabitants of the school. We wanted to know how schools, founded on future-focused design principles, provide agentic conditions for teachers' and students' learning with the Key Competencies (Ministry of Education, 2007). We used *The Architecture of Ownership* concept (Fletcher, 2008) as the unifying framework to understand ways they made sense of and forged their agentic identities regarding relational, pedagogical, cultural, and physical architectures.

### Aims

- Explore features characterising agentic identities that teachers and students form in a new ILE school.
- Examine how ILE architectures (physical, pedagogical, social and relational) influence how students and teachers make sense of their identities and develop personal and/or collective agency as teachers or students as they connect in classroom contexts.
- Understand challenges and successes in doing things differently in a new school and how new ways of interpreting teaching and learning, link with Key Competencies (Ministry of Education, 2007).

### Why is this research important?

Little is known about what it takes to 'make' new schools from the inside using the perspectives of teachers and students. New schools are opportunities to present innovative curriculum approaches and decide on what is valued in the school community. This research contributes to what is known about how new schools develop their cultural and ritual practices and how they create distinctive identities that constitute their logic of practice. This new knowledge can inform the future planning and design of future New Zealand schools, and possibly internationally. It also generates new knowledge, skills and theory about how leaders, teachers and students make sense of their experiences and form agentic identities.

### Key findings

- Being a staff member in a new ILE created professional, pedagogical, and subject content challenges and meant that risk-taking had to be valued, acknowledged and supported.
- Connections between architectures of curriculum, relationships, and pedagogy required collaborative teacher practices. Students knew when subjects did not facilitate conceptual or practical connections and when teachers could not find ways to teach synergistically.
- Reducing relational distances, formed meaningful relationships between teachers and students. This was a critical feature that had an impact on senses of belonging (eg students addressing teachers on a first name basis)
- Integrating curriculum supported students to embrace subjects they do not usually like, and enhanced their knowledge creation overall.
- Student understandings about agency were shaped within the school context. This included relationships formed with staff, the opportunities for planning and actively participating in integrated learning encounters. Agency was practiced through their decision-making

- Both leaders worked from a place of high trust. Distributed leadership actions created spaces for others to lead and exercise agency. Extending beyond allocating portfolios and tasks, it was practised through growing and sharing skills, knowledge and power. This involved forming and actively cultivating, leadership 'presence' and identities, agency and ownership.
- Leaders made deliberate and strategic appointments to create diverse leadership teams, which complemented their own skills and abilities.



Figure 1: Using biology to inform

### Implications for practice

- *Teacher actions:* Preparedness for complexity, uncertainty, thinking and acting differently as a teacher; sharing classroom power with other teachers and learning; learning to cope with peer critique, skills for integrating curriculum subjects.
- *Leader actions:* Strategic understanding of factors, complexities or nuances involved in people learning to work in, learn in and create a new school; through understanding relationships between a school's beginning ethos and practices and how its participants forge identities (as learners, teachers, leaders), other schools can adapt ideas for own needs to support positive learning and teaching. Overt leadership practices that are collaborative, ethical, relational, distributed and pedagogically focused are necessary for leading learning in ILEs. Principal leadership preparation must evolve to accommodate very different conceptions about leadership, as these too evolve.
- *Student actions:* Creating spaces for students to express agency, individuality, identity and belonging. Providing artefacts of learning to grow a sense of connectedness to physical spaces.
- *Curriculum development:* Building agentic citizens in future-focused schools goes beyond the current key competencies. The emergence, or recognition of, new key competencies might better acknowledge new conceptions of teaching and learning relationships.
- *Professional learning and development actions:* Integrating learning area concepts into cohesive module while addressing achievement standard needs; translating school vision to practice; developing broad attitudinal and learning strategy competence in learners, eg thinking, dealing with language, symbols and texts, decision-making, social justice ethics, social conscience, interpersonal skills etc.



Figure 2: kapa haka as relational and identity-forming

### Our Research Partners:

Anna Pratt and Megan Barry, Rototuna High School Liaison counterparts, plus 10 participating staff and 25 student participants (from years 7-11)

### Contact details:

[noeline.wright@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:noeline.wright@waikato.ac.nz)  
[rachel.mcnae@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:rachel.mcnae@waikato.ac.nz)