

# Ko te tākaro te kauwaka e pakari ake ai te tangata | Cultural pluralism for play-based pedagogy:

## Developing and implementing an indigenised framework for play in a primary school

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### Project description

This project investigates the integration of culturally sustaining play pedagogies into primary education, emphasising the importance of play in fostering cultural identity, language development, and belonging. Drawing on design-based research methodology, this initiative developed an indigenised pedagogical framework aligning with iwi aspirations and the unique needs of tamariki. Practice-based coaching, tailored to the cultural needs of kaiako and tamariki, provided real-time, contextualised support through focused observation, reflection and goal setting. The project bridged theory and practice, ensuring culturally responsive and meaningful integration of play within classroom environments, aligned explicitly with Māori cultural values of manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, and māramatanga.

### Aims

The project aimed to develop and implement a culturally sustaining play pedagogy framework by exploring the perspectives of ākonga, whānau, kaiako, and iwi on play, examining how play reflects school values (manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, māramatanga), identifying necessary professional learning supports for teachers, and assessing the impact of these play practices on tamariki identity, belonging, language, and mana as mana whenua. The project involved kaiako and tamariki from Te Whai Hiringa School, alongside whānau and iwi partners. Teachers engaged in coaching and wānanga, tamariki shared perspectives through interviews, and whānau contributed via surveys. Kauwaka and iwi knowledge holders provided cultural guidance throughout the process.

### Why is this research important?

Despite increasing recognition of play-based learning, important indigenous perspectives and cultural values related to this pedagogical approach have often been marginalised or overlooked in education research and practice. Addressing this significant gap, the project provides insights into how culturally sustaining pedagogies

can enhance educational experiences for Māori learners. By embedding indigenous knowledge and values within play practices, the research supports schools in creating inclusive, culturally affirming environments that empower tamariki and strengthen their identity, language, and connections to whānau and iwi.

### Key findings

**Perspectives on play-based learning** Initially, kaiako anticipated whānau resistance to play-based learning, yet surveys showed whānau strongly supported play for developing life skills and oral language. Teachers started with varying confidence levels in implementing culturally sustaining play pedagogies, but professional development and coaching significantly improved their practice. Teachers became intentional, creating dynamic environments responsive to tamariki. Consequently, tamariki began recognising play as integral to problem-solving, collaboration, literacy, and numeracy.

**Cultural values and play** Tamariki increasingly linked play to their school's values, particularly kindness (manaakitanga), collaboration (whanaungatanga), and collective learning. Teachers demonstrated a greater awareness of cultural connections in their teaching, with PBLT data reflecting an increased use of mātauranga Māori in play-based learning. Whānau affirmed that play strengthened cultural identity and connections, providing tamariki with meaningful opportunities to express their heritage.

**Teacher learning and support needs** Coaching and wānanga were essential in helping teachers embed culturally sustaining play practices. Teachers highlighted the need for more culturally responsive resources, such as locally relevant stories, play materials, and support for environmental design. Collaborative learning with iwi knowledge holders proved invaluable in building teacher confidence and cultural competence. In-class coaching and iterative wānanga provided practical guidance, helping teachers integrate play into culturally sustaining pedagogies. However, time constraints remained a challenge in fully embedding these approaches.

**Impact on ākonga cultural identity** PBLT data showed significant improvements in how teachers integrated te reo me ōna tikanga into play, making cultural connections more intentional. Tamariki interviews reflected greater awareness of the learning happening through play, particularly in problem-solving, construction, and social collaboration. Whānau reinforced that play was a crucial way for tamariki to strengthen their sense of identity and mana as tangata whenua.

### Implications for practice

To strengthen culturally sustaining play pedagogies, schools can develop play resources in partnership with iwi and hapū, ensuring they reflect local narratives and aspirations. Schools should also allocate structured time for play-based learning, recognising its role in both academic and socio-emotional development. Expanding coaching and mentoring opportunities will help sustain these practices, providing ongoing support for teachers as they refine their pedagogy. Future research should explore the long-term impact of culturally sustaining play pedagogies on student achievement, identity, and wellbeing. Expanding research across diverse school contexts, including urban, rural, and Māori-medium settings, will ensure broader applicability. Policy advocacy is also essential to secure recognition of play-based learning as a valid and valuable approach, ensuring equity for Māori learners and embedding culturally sustaining practices across the education system.

### Our partners:

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