

POSITIONING FOR TRUANCY INNOVATION REPORT

for Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi



ihi Research
Social Change
& Innovation

INA KEI TE MŌHIO KOE KI A KOE, I AHU MAI KOE I HEA, KEI TE MŌHIO KOE, KEI TE AHU ATU KI HEA

**If you know who you are and where
you are from, then you will know
where you are going**

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Ihi Research wishes to acknowledge the whānau, teachers and project staff members who gave their time and wisdom to inform this report.

Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this report.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ihi Research was contracted by Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi to better understand why innovation is needed to enable schools to address student truancy and improve student attendance.

Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi has developed and implemented an innovative approach to working with schools to improve student attendance. The programme is underpinned by recent research into attendance, engagement and wellbeing of rangatahi in mainstream education carried out by The Southern Initiative (2020). The research indicates the transition to Year 9 is hard for a large group of rangatahi and that relationships and empathy are key to learning. This research, along with Te Ora Hou's model of Indigenous youth practice, TOHATOHA, and a Whānau Ora Navigator approach, informs the truancy Innovation.

The purpose of this positioning report¹ is to understand:

- 01** What is the rationale for an innovative approach to truancy?
- 02** What are the early outcomes of the approach?
- 03** What are the key learnings that have emerged from early engagement in the innovation?

¹A full description of the evaluation methodology is provided in Appendix 1.

The exploratory research was underpinned by Māori-centred protocols (Cunningham, 1998) and mixed method approaches including an integrative literature review and interviews with key stakeholders. The literature review examined 40 documents and published material related to the causes of student truancy to identify possible solutions. Several interrelated themes emerged from analysis related to the framing of student truancy within the current context of Aotearoa New Zealand and the factors that influence it. Findings included:

- The framing of truancy as a legal, disciplinary and compliance issue
- The framing of truancy as a relational and wellbeing issue
- The framing of truancy as a response to racism (individual, institutional and structural) and intergenerational trauma
- Gaps: Not enough being done to engage whānau/families in solutions

Eleven stakeholders including whānau, teachers and school leaders who had experienced the programme, were interviewed. The following themes emerged from interview analysis that spoke to the value of the programme:

- **Early outcomes:** Increased student engagement in school
- **Early outcomes:** Better understanding of the causes of truancy
- **Early outcomes:** Improved whānau engagement with school
- **Key learnings:** The causes of truancy are complex and intergenerational
- **Key learnings:** The value of the Whānau Ora approach
- **Key learnings:** The value of focussing on transistions

- **Key learnings:** The need to expand the innovation

Common themes from whānau narratives

- Non-attendance at school is complex and linked to many issues, and whānau can feel overwhelmed by their circumstances.
- One of the issues is safety at school (children not feeling safe at school/their parents are worried about their safety)
- Children who were non-attending from these whānau/families were described as neurodiverse and needed extra assistance to engage in school
- Parents/whānau felt they were failing/bad parents, and before the assistance of Te Ora Hou felt they were on their own

Stakeholders interviewed for this report were overwhelmingly supportive of the Te Ora Hou programme and wanted it to be continued and expanded. Interview analysis highlighted the significant challenges that some whānau/families faced in ensuring their children were able to attend school. COVID-19 and the Omicron variants also emerged as a key barrier to progress and innovation, that emphasised the need for longer-term, wraparound support for students and their whānau.

Whilst teachers valued the Whānau Ora approach, interview analysis suggested the concept was not well understood in schools. It is recommended that Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi facilitate professional development sessions with their schools so leaders and teachers have a better understanding of this approach. Teachers welcomed the focus on transistion, however there was a need for a shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities to improve transistion, particularly for families whose children have a history of significant absence. Finally there are opportunities for the programme to capture outcome data (besides attendance), related to improving student confidence and wellbeing. One of the limitations of this report is

that students themselves were not interviewed. Working with students and whānau to capture progress towards wellbeing outcomes is also recommended.

Findings from this study emphasises the need for innovative programmes such as Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi. Further research is also needed to better understand the long-term impacts and how whānau-led initiatives can better improve student attendance over time.

Key recommendations:

- Continue and expand the truancy innovation developed by Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi.
- Facilitate professional development sessions within schools so that teachers and leaders have a better understanding of Whānau Ora and its contribution to tamariki, rangatahi and whānau wellbeing.
- Work with schools to ensure shared understandings and practices around supportive transition pathways.
- Work with students, schools and whānau to better capture outcome data to track student confidence, wellbeing and attendance over time.
- Continue to research the long-term impacts and benefits of whānau-led initiatives and their impact on student attendance and engagement in education.
- The Ministry of Education adopts high trust commissioning to support innovation in truancy response.



INTRODUCTION

Ihi Research was contracted by Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi to undertake an independent evaluation of its truancy innovation which is based on a blended whānau support model.

Te Ora Hou is a network of faith-based youth and community organisations working with young people, their whānau and communities in Aotearoa. Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi has held the contract for truancy services with the Ministry of Education for the past nine years. The contract covers Nelson, Marlborough, West Coast, and Canterbury.

In 2021, Te Ora Hou discussed the possibility of an innovation pilot for truancy services with two Kāhui Ako/Communities of Learning (CoL) in Christchurch. The CoL's agreed to pilot a new approach which is a blended whānau support model, focussed on whānau and their rangatahi who are transitioning into Year 9 and are at risk of non-attendance.

The programme is underpinned by recent research into attendance, engagement and wellbeing of rangatahi in mainstream education carried out by The Southern Initiative (2020). The research indicates the transition to Year 9 is difficult for a large group of rangatahi and that relationships and empathy are key to learning. This research,

along with Te Ora Hou's model of Indigenous youth practice, TOHATOHA, and a Whānau Ora Navigator approach, informs the truancy innovation.

The purpose of this positioning report² is to understand:

- 01** What is the rationale for an innovative approach to truancy?
- 02** What are the early outcomes of the approach?
- 03** What are the key learnings that have emerged from early engagement in the innovation?

The following section presents some background to the problem of student truancy within Aotearoa, and why an innovative approach is now needed. Findings from an integrative literature and document review are provided, related to the causes of truancy, particularly for Indigenous students in colonised countries.

²A full description of the evaluation methodology is provided in Appendix 1.

BACKGROUND

The issue of student truancy or disengagement from school has plagued many western countries that have compulsory school attendance policies (OECD, 2019; Purdie & Buckley, 2010; Kerslake, Lange & Bennie, 1997; Taylor, Sturrock & White, 1982). Truancy is complex and is linked to various causes and micro, meso and macro contexts. Micro contexts include home support and family circumstances (Whitney, 1994), the quality of school environments for culturally diverse students (OECD, 2019; Purdie & Buckley, 2010; Weiner, 1990), and the psycho-social contexts of classrooms (Hardré, 2015). Other evidence has highlighted wider contextual (meso/macro) factors that influence student disengagement. These include neighbourhood poverty and crime (Burdick-Will, Stein & Grigg, 2019) and structural racism and discrimination as experienced by Indigenous students in colonised countries (Fowler, 2020).

Student non-attendance at school is a hot topic in Aotearoa currently, with pupil turnout at school plummeting. It has been reported that as many of 100,000 students are missing from school due to the impacts of COVID-19 and the Omicron variant (Kenny, 2022a). The issue of falling student attendance has been reported nationally (New Zealand Herald, 2022). In 2020, the Ministry of Education acknowledged that COVID-19 had substantially worsened “existing inequities in school attendance” and this was particularly noticeable for Pacific and Māori students in low decile schools (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 1). Whilst COVID-19 is a new problem in terms of school truancy, for Māori and Pacific students in low decile schools truancy it is not a new experience (Webber, 2020; Baskerville, 2019; Bruce, 2018; Owen, 2016; Baleinakorodawa, 2009).

Numerous studies have shown that regular attendance at school contributes to students’ feelings of being connected to school, this in turn influences their wellbeing and their engagement in learning. Best evidence indicates all of these factors positively influence student achievement as well as future academic success (Lubeck, 2022; Webber, 2020; OECD, 2019). Conversely, research has shown a strong positive correlation between truancy, underachievement and crime (Beresford & Omaji, 1996).

This integrative literature review seeks to understand what is already known about student truancy within the current context of Aotearoa New Zealand and the factors that influence it. In particular the review will examine how truancy is framed, the gaps in the evidence base and possible solutions and innovations.

LITERATURE REVIEW METHODOLOGY

The following section explains the literature review process and approach to analysis. Insights emerged from a review of a range of documents. Analysis methods followed integrative literature review protocols. This, “is a form of research that reviews, critiques, and synthesises representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated” (Torraco, 2005, p. 356). It is a method that permits the presence of diverse sources and methodologies (including experimental and non-experimental research) and has the potential to contribute significantly to policy design and evidence-based practices.

Integrative reviews can clarify concepts and review theories by presenting an overview of the present state of a phenomenon. In this way an integrative literature review contributes to theory development. This is done by analysing and highlighting methodological issues and debates, whilst pointing out gaps in current understandings. It provides evidence that has direct applicability to practice and policy (Torraco, 2005).

SEARCH PROCESS AND TERMS

The following search terms were used to locate relevant documents: truant, truancy, attendance, participation, absence/absenteeism, unjustified absence, engagement, disengagement, retention coupled with student, pupil, school, Māori, Pacifica, Pacific, Pasifika, Indigenous and culturally diverse.

Inclusion of literature sources was conducted through peer review against a set of clear inclusion criteria constructed to align with the overall inquiry questions. Information on the total number of documents identified and screened was included in an electronic template and reviewed. The template recorded the number of included literature sources and key findings from analysis. Thematic analysis was employed with all included literature sources. Data analysis integrated within literature reviews requires that the data from primary and secondary sources are ordered, coded, categorised, and summarised into a unified and integrated conclusion about the research problem (Cooper, 1998). A thorough interpretation of reviewed documents, along with an innovative

synthesis of the evidence, were the goals of the analysis stage. Critical analysis involved deconstructing the topic into its basic elements (for example how student truancy interventions are framed or described; barriers and/or solutions to increasing student engagement in school; as well as the effectiveness of such efforts for different groups). Forty documents/sources were reviewed for this work. The table below indicates the type of sources reviewed.

LIST OF SOURCES	
Theses/unpublished academic papers	2
Peer reviewed published journal articles	6
Reports	17
Books/book chapters	6
Media	6
Websites	3
TOTAL	40

Table 1. List of sources

It is important to note that additional literature has been included in this report, that was not part of the integrative literature review. This was done to further consider and reflect on overall research findings.

RESULTS

Several interrelated themes emerged from analysis related to the framing of student truancy within the current context of Aotearoa New Zealand and the factors that influence it. These are:

- The framing of truancy as a legal, disciplinary and compliance issue
- The framing of truancy as a relational and wellbeing issue
- The framing of truancy as a response to racism (individual, institutional and structural) and intergenerational trauma
- Gaps: Not enough being done to engage whānau/families in solutions

THE FRAMING OF TRUANCY AS A LEGAL, COMPLIANCE AND DISCIPLINARY ISSUE

The first theme to emerge from literature analysis was related to the framing of truancy as a legal, compliance and disciplinary matter. This meant interventions were often punitive and targeted at parents and legal guardians who were viewed as failing in their duty to ensure their children regularly attend school (Varnham, 2014; Donoghue, 2011; Baleinakorodawa, 2009; Darlow, 1999). These approaches to student truancy were typically centred within a discourse of “social moralisation” towards “flawed parents” (Donoghue, 2011, p. 216). Truancy being viewed as a symptom of “behaviourally disordered children and youth” (Schultz, 1987, p. 117). International research has demonstrated how government interventions are typically framed around sanctions and penalties directed at parents and their children (Purdie &

Buckley, 2010, p. 9). Such sanctions can include the removal of welfare benefit payments or preventing children from engaging with their favourite sport. There has been considerable criticism of such approaches in that “they implicitly define the problem as one of parental or student negligence” (ibid).

Within Aotearoa, students aged between 6-16 years are expected to attend school regularly. Responsibility for ensuring student attendance is shared by schools and students’ legal guardians/parents. Schools are expected to ensure attendance registers are kept up to date and monitor student attendance. District attendance services are contracted to the Ministry of Education to provide truancy services to schools. Parents and legal guardians can be prosecuted if they persistently fail to uphold “their legal responsibility” and ensure their child attends school (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 2). The following point was made by Darlow (1999) in advice to parents on their responsibilities.

“Parents are legally required (sections 20 and 24 of the Education Act 1989) to enrol their children (aged between six and 16 inclusive) at a registered school. Parents must ensure their child attends every day the school is open unless the child has a genuine reason, such as being sick. Boards of trustees are legally required (section 25) to take all reasonable steps to ensure students enrolled in its school attend whenever it is open. Principals are required to keep accurate admission and daily attendance registers for all students” (Darlow, 1999, p. 23).

According to Darlow (1999), school Boards of Trustees have the power to prosecute parents and legal guardians under the Education Act 1989 (Part 3) for failing to ensure their child's regular attendance. Within Aotearoa, descriptions of "lazy" "irresponsible" parents have been emphasised in the media (New Zealand Herald, 2006). Prosecution has been necessary to hold such parents accountable (ibid). Framing truancy as a compliance and legal issue means that interventions are needed to discipline parents who are failing in their responsibilities. However, Varnham (2014) argues that "prosecuting parents for a child's truancy is a reactive response that ignores the real issue. It turns a social problem into a criminal one" (p. 1)

Framing truancy as a disorder and/or moral failing means that interventions to address truancy have focussed on the perceived deficits of the truant and their immediate family. Despite the policies of prosecution, sanctions and legal action, student truancy has continued to rise within Aotearoa (New Zealand Herald, 2022).

THE FRAMING OF TRUANCY AS A RELATIONAL, LEARNING AND WELLBEING ISSUE

Another key theme to emerge from literature analysis was the framing of truancy as a relational, learning and wellbeing issue. In this regard, interventions to truancy typically focussed on improving the psycho-social contexts of schools in an attempt to create more inclusive and effective learning environments. A number of studies have been conducted within Aotearoa to better understand the influences of truancy and disengagement, particularly for students who have a history of truancy (Savage et al., 2022; Baskerville, 2019; Bruce, 2014). One study by Bruce (2014) highlighted two interrelated patterns. The first was "relational factors" and the second was "learning factors" (pp. 1-2). Both were identified as affecting student engagement and disengagement in school. Relational factors included such things as friendships with peers, a feeling of belonging at school, as well as

relationships with teachers. Learning factors also affected student dis/engagement in school. These included whether students were able to get specific help with their learning, and whether they had choice and autonomy in their learning. Learning factors also included the effectiveness of teacher pedagogies and learning strategies in class, particularly if students experienced learning difficulties. Schools are required to provide safe and effective learning contexts. School provision around individualised help and support is essential, particularly for students who are not achieving and who are at risk of not achieving. This includes students with unjustified school absences (Bruce, 2014).

Similar findings emerged from a study conducted by Baskerville (2019). She investigated truancy through grounded theory, that privileged the perspectives of students with a history of truancy otherwise known as "wagging" (2019, p. i). Results indicated different dimensions of wagging. These included: "wagging as a habit; wagging as an activity in response to perceived disrespect in class" (either by peers or by teachers); "wagging as an attraction to be with friends; and wagging as a time to be alone" (Baskerville, 2019, p. 106). These findings indicated that teachers and school leaders needed to understand the causes of wagging, particularly what motivated students from disengaging. Results also showed students needed to be willing to change their behaviour, indicating that findings were interrelated. Baskerville recommended teachers work to provide supportive learning environments through positive student-to-student relationships as well as teacher-student relationships. This was necessary to ensure students experienced a feeling of belonging in class and enjoyment in their learning. In other words, teachers and school leaders needed to be 'intentional' in their behaviours to attract students back into class. Close monitoring of student attendance was also needed, as 'lack of detection' was a key factor in wagging becoming a habit (p. 114). Other recommendations included schools ensuring better links with whānau and families as family support was needed to change students' wagging behaviours (p. 143). Improving school connectedness was an important

recommendation, along with developing inclusive and supportive school systems to ensure students felt they belonged and were respected at school.

All of these factors (students' perceptions of safety, connection and belonging) are related to the psycho-social environments of classrooms and schools. Perceptions of a student's personal safety are key to understanding truancy as students can 'wag' school if they are bullied by peers and feel disrespected at school. Whānau and families can also be reluctant to encourage their children back to school if they feel school leaders are ineffective at dealing with bullying (Savage et al., 2022). Such issues have been emphasised in research into factors that influence student motivation and engagement (Weiner, 1990; Hardré, 2015; Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2011; Penetito, 2010). It has been argued that schools are social and cultural learning systems with a range of motivational contexts that have a direct impact on student engagement and learning (Weiner, 1990). According to international research undertaken by the OECD (2019), students need to feel they belong in classrooms and schools in order to engage in learning. Citing the work of Baumeister and Leary (1995) and Maslow (1943), the OECD reported that a student's sense of belonging is based on perceptions of acceptance, trust and support (2019).

However, teacher and school leader attitudes and beliefs infuse classroom and school environments through 'valuing' and 'devaluing' messages (Hardré, 2015, p. 25). The presence of devaluing, deficit and negative messages have been emphasised in research involving Māori and Pasifika students (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Penetito, 2010; Alton-Lee, 2003; Hynds et al., 2016). Teachers' unconscious bias negatively impacts the engagement and achievement of tamariki and rangatahi across New Zealand schools (Blank, Houkamau & Kingi, 2016). Research has demonstrated how teachers' low expectations of Māori students influences their academic achievement (Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2011).

These devaluing and deficit messages can be communicated to students explicitly and intentionally, but also implicitly and unintentionally (Hardré, 2015; Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2011). These messages influence student engagement and their aspirations towards academic success. For example, considerable research has emphasised how a teacher's low expectations of Māori and Pasifika students, coupled with school streaming, (grouping students based on their perceived ability) has contributed to low levels of student engagement and achievement (Kenny, 2022b; Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2011). Kenny (2022b) reported on new research by Tokona Te Raki into the effect of streaming on Māori and Pasifika students. The research called for streaming to be eliminated within Aotearoa as a discriminating practice in schools (Tokona Te Raki (2022). It disadvantages Māori and Pasifika students by increasing "learners' sense of low self-worth and low self-esteem" (Kenny, 2022b, p. 1). The presence of negative stereotypes has contributed to students' feeling disrespected and a distrust of teachers.

"Over 90% of NZ schools have this system. All the research shows that it is bad for everybody, but it is especially bad for Māori and Pasifika students. Teacher bias and stereotypes lead to situations where the top classes are predominantly white, and the bottom (cabbage) classes are largely brown. For many Māori and Pasifika students, streaming acts as a gatekeeper, forcing them into low paid, low skilled jobs." (Tokona Te Raki, 2022, p. 1).

Responses to such issues, has meant various interventions have been developed and implemented to improve their psycho-social contexts of schools. These have included Positive Behaviour for Learning School-Wide (PB4L-SW) and Teaching for Positive Behaviour (Rohan, 2017). The focus is on teachers and school leaders developing culturally responsive, inclusive and effective learning environments in order to provide more equitable opportunities for children and young people to engage and achieve.

The 'Check and Connect' programme is another invention that has been implemented within Aotearoa, as part of the PB4L initiative with a relational focus. It is aimed at improving the attendance of students in participating secondary schools (Wylie & Felgate, 2016). The programme originated in the USA with a focus on providing each student with a mentor who 'checks in' with them on a weekly basis and reviews the student's attendance, behaviour and achievement. The aim is that mentors work with each student to equip them with the confidence, attitudes and skills that will enable them to see that school is worthwhile. The mentor also communicates with family and whānau. An evaluation of the Check and Connect programme indicated positive gains for many students. However, mentors did experience challenges, particularly when working with students who had "deeper and more complex mental health and social issues than Check and Connect was designed for" (Wylie & Felgate, 2016, p. 20). This suggests that different programmes are needed for children and young people who have such needs.

THE FRAMING OF TRUANCY AS A RESPONSE TO RACISM (INDIVIDUAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND STRUCTURAL) AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

The third key theme to emerge from literature analysis, was that truancy can be seen as a valid response to racism (individual, institutional and structural). It has also been connected to intergenerational trauma as experienced by Indigenous communities within colonised countries. Māori students have long been 'voting with their feet', indicating what they think of their educational experience in English Medium schools (Penetito, 2010). Māori student disengagement and non-attendance from school cannot be separated from the enduring effects of colonisation and structural, insitutional racism. Colonisation is inherently violent and traumatic for Indigenous communities. In Aotearoa, it has resulted in intergenerational, psycho-social harms to whānau, hapū and iwi (Savage et al., 2021;

Pihama et al., 2019; Boulton et al., 2018; Dudgeon & Bray, 2018; Reid et al., 2017; Cram, 2011; Brave Heart, 2003; Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Mikaere, 1994).

Racism has fuelled deficit views of Māori whānau and Pacific families as lazy, welfare dependants, incapable of providing the right family environment for their children (Stanley, 2016). Negative, racist stereotypes depicting Māori tamariki as possessing lower intelligence than their Pākehā peers were clearly evident in educational discourse around the 1960s (Lovegrove, 1966). Lower levels of intelligence were assessed through culturally biased intelligence tests (Savage et al., 2021; Bishop & Glynn, 1999). Despite overwhelming evidence from the 1960s onwards (Hunn, 1961, Fifield & Donnell, 1980; Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Māori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare, 1988; Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Walker, 1992; Penetito, 2010), successive New Zealand governments and their agencies have ignored the body of evidence that emphasises how schools and education policies have consistently failed whānau and tamariki Māori.

This failure has been demonstrated recently in research undertaken by Savage et al. (2022) who investigated the causes of high levels of Māori student disengagement from schools that is particularly evident in the Wairoa community. The focus of this research was student disengagement, with interviews conducted with whānau, their tamariki and rangatahi who were currently outside of the local schooling system or in other forms of education. These other forms included Te Kura, the Correspondence School, home-schooling or alternative education or youth support programmes. The report analysed Māori student attendance data in Wairoa that was made available by the Ministry of Education. Over 60 whānau and their tamariki, rangatahi, educators, and stakeholders from Wairoa were also interviewed. Data analysis highlighted that Wairoa schools have lower attendance rates than most regions in the country. Wairoa students achieve below the national average, particularly Māori boys. Stand-downs, suspensions and exclusion/

expulsion rates are significantly higher than other comparable areas, and a number of students are either going out of town or opting for alternative education such as Te Kura. Interview analysis also emphasised psychosocial issues that have a significant impact on Māori student engagement including ineffective, monocultural teacher and school practices, the presence of bullying within schools and the prevalence of physical violence, drug and alcohol abuse. Perceptions of neighbourhood and school safety was an issue that could deter whānau from encouraging tamariki and rangatahi Māori back to school.

Whilst cited as a major barrier to educational engagement in Wairoa, these issues are a symptom of years of systemic inequality and inadequate action on the part of the state to address these. Savage et al. (2022) argue these issues are symptomatic of wider structural and institutional policies and actions that are grossly inadequate and have failed to uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations. The symptom narrative has resulted in a culture of blame that circulates around the community, from whānau who blame teachers and schools, schools who blame whānau and tamariki, and stakeholders who blame both. The narrative enables the focus to remain firmly off the state and alleviates the state from being held accountable for delivering an equitable and appropriate education in Wairoa.

Savage et al. (2022) point to the impact of enduring racist colonial policies and lack of culturally sustaining investment in education and rural communities, which has led to the intergenerational trauma that underpins educational disengagement in Wairoa. Wairoa whānau have experienced generations of under investment in education, coupled with the crippling effects of successive government policies that have reinforced disadvantage, deprivation and underachievement. Warnings of institutional racism across government agencies and the need to address whānau marginalisation and deprivation was emphasised during the 1980s, in the ground-breaking Puaote-Ata-Tū report (Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Māori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare, 1988). Despite the

overwhelming evidence presented in this report, the recommendations were not implemented, and this has meant structural racism has been allowed to flourish, compounding intergenerational educational trauma for many whānau (Savage et al., 2021; Savage et al., 2022).

GAPS: UTILISING WHĀNAU-CENTRED AND WHĀNAU ORA APPROACHES

Within Aotearoa the strength of whānau in addressing social issues has been highlighted (Savage, Hynds, Kus-Harbord & Leonard, 2020) yet little is published about blended whānau support to address truancy. According to the Ministry of Education, whānau involvement is critical to Māori students' educational success (Ministry of Education, 2021). Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia is the refreshed national education strategy to ensure Māori students achieve educational success as Māori (Ministry of Education, 2021). The refreshed strategy has five key areas:

- “Te Whānau: Education provision responds to learners within the context of their whānau
- Te Tangata: Māori are free from racism, discrimination and stigma in education
- Te Kanorautanga: Māori are diverse and need to be understood in the context of their diverse aspirations and lived experiences
- Te Tuakiritanga: Identity, language and culture matter for Māori learners
- Te Rangatiratanga: Māori exercise their authority and agency in education” (ibid, p. 1).

Many studies highlighted in this review have talked about the importance of engaging whānau and families (Lubeck, 2022; Baskerville, 2019; Bruce, 2014; Owen, 2016; Purdie, & Buckley, 2010). According to earlier research

undertaken in Australia, "successful educational programmes" aimed at reducing student truancy within Indigenous communities involves "creative collaboration" that engage Indigenous families and communities as well as different government agencies, other than just education (Purdie & Buckley, 2010; p. 1). Such collaboration is intentional in its approach to strengthen relationships in culturally responsive and sustaining ways, reducing barriers that prevent parents and community-based organisations from engaging in truancy-based reform.

Within Aotearoa, Baskerville (2019) argued that whānau and family support was important for eliminating students' wagging behaviours. In particular "family support and guidance" was essential to "break the cycle of problem behaviours such as drug use and truancy" (p. 145). Despite highlighting the importance of engaging whānau and other families, there is a dearth of research about how this occurs in ways that utilise and strengthen whānau ora.

Deterioration of whānau and family wellbeing has been recently linked to rising rates of truancy due to the effects of COVID-19 and the rising cost of living which is causing whānau and families to reach out for extra support and guidance. In 2016, Lisa Owen interviewed the Chief Executive of the National Urban Māori Authority (NUMA) who delivered truancy services within Auckland and Wellington. Mr Norman argued for "a more targeted approach to truancy that focusses resources on our highest risk families" (p. 1). He stated not enough was being done for whānau and families who were struggling financially (Owen, 2016). School costs were becoming unaffordable. Rising costs included transport costs to get to school, paying for school uniforms, stationery, school trips and school lunches. Mr Norman states many families feel whakamā (shame) and are embarrassed to ask for help. He commented, "a lot of families aren't able to afford the basics; rent, food, uniforms. So, we are seeing a lot of hardship out there and as a consequence going to school is just a lower priority for the families." (Owen, 2016, p. 1).

More recently, the outbreak of COVID-19 and Omicron and the rising cost of living has fuelled inequalities within Aotearoa. In an interview with Radio New Zealand (2021), the Salvation Army reported many more families were turning up to food banks. The financial strain was impacting those on the lowest incomes. "We are seeing threefold poverty: lack of food, electricity and internet access ... these pressures come on top of continuing high housing costs in Auckland as well as other parts of the country." (Radio New Zealand, 2021, p. 1). According to research undertaken by the Ministry of Education (2020), COVID-19 appears to be substantially worsening existing inequities in school attendance, particularly for Māori and Pasifika students in low decile schools. In 2021, the New Zealand Parliament's education committee launched an inquiry into truancy issues, and recently published its findings (Lubeck, 2022). It found societal causes of student non-attendance in school, including the rising cost of living, and recommended early intervention policies to prevent students from becoming chronically absent.

SUMMARY

There is now an urgent need for an innovative approach to truancy. Research shows that students who disengage from school early, with no qualifications, are most likely to experience poor health and economic outcomes over their lifetimes (Lubeck, 2022; Stats NZ, 2017). Māori and Pasifika students in low decile schools are most represented in the truancy statistics (Lubeck, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2020). Therefore any truancy innovation must be grounded in culturally responsive and sustaining approaches to engage these students and their whānau and families.

The following section examines the innovation proposed by Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi and the perspectives of stakeholders who have experienced the programme.

TRUANCY INNOVATION

TE ORA HOU ŌTAUTAHĪ PILOT (2022)

Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi pilot is a truancy innovation that has grown out of previous attendance work the team has carried out in schools. The pilot programme outcomes are for participating students to have more sustainable, positive engagement in schooling. The aim is that after the six month intervention, relationships between home and school will have been strengthened. Previously the support for students had been over a short period of time with a focus on students returning to school. This was an unsustainable approach as students were soon being referred back to Te Ora Hou as non attenders. There was little opportunity for the relationships between school and whānau to be strengthened, and due to the short time frames, the programme wasn't able to deal with non-attendance in a sustainable manner. Schools reported dissatisfaction with the support and Te Ora Hou was keen to provide a different approach that was more sustainable.

TOHATOHA - A KAUPAPA MĀORI APPROACH TO YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Te Ora Hou utilises TOHATOHA - a kaupapa Māori approach to youth development that draws on the richness of Te Ao Māori to understand and support the stages of a young person's journey. According to their website, "TOHATOHA means to share, disperse and distribute, lovingly and wisely. It is an intentional generosity based on positive relationships which unlock the potential within young people as they make the journey of Tamariki tū Taitamariki tū Rangatahi tū Rangatira" (from childhood to adulthood) <http://www.toho.org.nz/home/our-approach/>

The website of Te Ora Hou acknowledges the stages of a young person's journey can be challenging to navigate. It is important young people are supported to stand with confidence and mana, enabling them to transition through their development stages in ways that enable them to learn and realise their potential. Key to their journey is the ability to connect with whānau, including whakapapa whānau (blood relatives), kaupapa whānau (those who share a common purpose), tihokahoka whānau (temporary support networks), and hapori whānau (the community) (ibid).

COMPONENTS OF THE PROGRAMME

A Whānau Ora Navigator approach informs the truancy innovation. Two kaimahi each work with 20 whānau, encompassing the most 'at risk' students. Some feeder primary and intermediate schools are also included as they are part of the wider CoL. Participation from the feeder schools is important as Year 8 students transition to secondary schools as Year 9s.

The innovations embedded within the Te Ora Hou pilot include the focus on transition into secondary school, the need for a culturally responsive approach and the experience of whānau. The relationship with whānau and students began in 2021 when the most 'at risk' Year 8 students were identified. The majority of these students were Māori and Pasifika. The plan included a transition camp in January, before the high school year began, to strengthen the relationships between students and Te Ora Hou kaimahi. Kai

and fun activities were included, as well as a mentoring approach to socialise students into the high school environment. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the transition camp could not go ahead. Kaimahi improvised, maintaining contact with students and their whānau/families to understand their aspirations and needs prior to the 2022 school year.

The team also developed a risk assessment to be carried out with whānau in their homes. It was designed to be completed on the doorstep if necessary, due to COVID-19 restrictions. The risk analysis is carried out early in the programme, and identifies key supports needed to smooth the transition process and ensure students get to school.

The following table provides some demographic information about the ethnicity and gender of the students involved with each Navigator in 2022.

		MĀORI		NZ EUROPEAN		SAMOAN		TONGAN	
KAI MAHI 1		14		0		2		0	
		FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE
		5	9	0	0	0	2	0	0
KAI MAHI 2		12		4		0		1	
		FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE
		9	2	4	1	0	0	0	1
TOTAL MALE/FEMALE									
		14	11	8	1	0	2	0	1
TOTAL STUDENTS									
		25		9		2		1	

Table 2: Demographic information about students involved in the programme 2022

The following section explores the major themes that emerged from analysis of participant interviews. We start this section of the report with the voices of whānau who have participated in the programme.

BRENDA'S STORY³

"I am Brenda. I am 36-years-old. I have four children. One of whom is in (Name of High School). He's 14-years-old, and I have another child who is of a similar age and this child has been excluded from one school and we're trying to move them into a new school."

"The staff from Te Ora Hou have been helping us with my child, basically anything that can help us. One of the workers who's with Whānau Ora, he comes over once a week. He helps us with food parcels. He's a Navigator. He also signed my girl up for the boxing that she does here every Wednesday. So, she's doing that with him. Now her dad's going to be jumping on board to help out with boxing. So, it's been quite a tight relationship with us."

"It's led to more whānau outings. And the programmes have helped us so much. Even with my son's issues, he's neurodiverse and needs extra help in school. We missed out on Ministry of Education funding, and I have to be on call to pick him up, so I had to give up my business and working full-time as I have to find him if he runs away from school."

"When we started working with Te Ora Hou, they helped me find some courses. I've worked with the Navigator about dreams and goals and that's got me excited again, because I thought, I can actually work again. Since I haven't been able to work, we've been stuck in poverty because I can't hold down a job while I am caring for my son. So, we've had no choice. But I am prepared to be on call for him. But now it's looking up ... one of the

things I have struggles with is ... I thought that I was a bad mother, and ... it felt like everything I was trying to do, I'm just failing. I had given up. It was too hard."

"But all of the support they (Te Ora Hou staff) have given me, gives me hope, and I guess it's really hard if you're living in a unique situation. But then again, I think so many people have these different situations."

"So, with my eldest child at high school ... he's built that trust with the Te Ora Hou staff, so he can actually go and talk to them. Usually, he won't talk to you if he doesn't know you. And he'll just want to get out and he'll think everyone's against him especially when it's in the education system. So, it's about consistency. That's what we've had with the Te Ora Hou programme it is consistency and supportive contact."

"This year I have felt really supported. Now my eldest child is finally in a space where he's comfortable. He's going to get a chance to actually learn. He's excited and I'm excited for him, so we haven't had this before. And because of that, I listened to everything the staff have said. Before I didn't have any courage, or strength, or support system behind me. This year, everything changed because I actually felt that support. Te Ora Hou ... the staff ... they've been to all the meetings with me, or they've even run them and asked for the meetings to be put in place. I feel like I've got a support system now, so I can talk about the things that are troubling me."

³Brenda is a pseudonym. Details of this parent's story have been disguised to protect the identity of the whānau.

"I know the reasons why my child didn't want to go to school previously ... he isn't able to read properly yet. He wasn't attending classes because he didn't know where to go. At his previous school we asked for his timetable to be colour coded and for somebody to take him from class to class. They didn't colour code his timetable, no one took him to classes, so he started hiding in school. But then he got in trouble because they were saying he was bunking his classes. And then my younger child didn't want to go to school either, so it had that ripple effect."

"So, for my son, his biggest main thing is feeling safe, and it usually takes him about a year to be able to become comfortable in a classroom. But now we've been able to put him in a smaller group. And he's happy about that, he's really excited about that, he's never been excited about school before. That's the biggest thing is to be able to make trust and safe relationships for him. As soon as he feels, it's not safe, he will very much show it. "

"I would definitely recommend this programme to other whānau. I just wish schools could be a bit more compassionate. I understand there are thousands and thousands of students. But try and connect a little bit more, especially for the ones who need a bit of extra help, instead of looking at them as if they are not going to actually contribute to society when they get older, especially children who are neurodiverse. And I think also to change the perception of the way we look at our neurodiverse kids. So, stop looking at it with that medical model of disability. And start looking more at the social model of disability where we can create an environment that caters to their values, rather than placing them in an environment where they have to cater to our values."



KIRI'S STORY⁴

"I am a single mum and I have two children, a daughter and a son. My daughter is her own individual, but my son has had a horrific time at school. My boy is always on the go – he's been my challenge. My daughter is almost 19-years-old now she's got anxiety but she's always looked after my boy."

"When things were really bad, I was working full-time, I couldn't take time off, I couldn't get to school, I had too much going on – I was stressed ... rushed in the mornings, overwhelmed, trying to get the kids ready to school, I would get cross with him, frustrated ... cause he wasn't able to get himself sorted. When my boy first started school, he was five. My boy was getting into trouble, he wouldn't sit still, he would take off, he would get angry and the teachers would ring me, he was in trouble at school. It was a safety thing for him. He would just want to take himself off to a safe place. School for him was chaos, it was noisy, there were incidents. If I could turn back time I would have taken more time to be at school, when I saw him at school, I could see him walking around on his own ... lost ... one time he left school and tried to walk to me at work ... he was only five and he was out the door and the teachers didn't seem to know where he was ... and then it escalated. At home I would try time out but it didn't work, he got angry and he smashed a couple of windows. My son, he struggles with his emotions. I was called to a hui but I was mad, I felt my boy wasn't being looked after, he's still a baby, he's still young, so all the other incidents previous to that - this was the final straw so I shut the door on school."

"In that first lockdown I noticed the change in him, he was quiet and more settled. My son opened up at home about some of the things that happened to him at school. My son never had the relationships or positive connections with teachers at school. No-one was looking after him. In 2021 I didn't return my boy to school, I ignored the phone calls and the letters. The police ended up coming to my house. My boy was present when that happened and my boy was witnessing this too, I know the cop was doing his job he told me it was my responsibility to get my boy to school. I closed the door on everyone.. In terms of my son going to school, things have to be good at home first. But I got the fine and I paid it."

"I am learning, I know there are things I could have done better, I know I can be overly protective at times so that is something I am trying to work on. My boy he still sleeps with me, I am trying to be less stressed. It's not easy for me to ask for help. My boy struggles to control his emotions, so when I first worked with Te Ora Hou we had a three hour hui, I talked about the timeline – everything that happened to him at school, the worker was really good, she saw me as a person. I felt heard. So she met my boy she wanted to get him a medical assessment but I wasn't happy about that. She went away and I didn't hear from her."

"I have a new worker with Te Ora Hou and that's been better. Building rapport and connection is important, we are in a generation where there is so much distrust, so that whanaungatanga needs to happen. Finding out who lives in the whare.. This new worker is better for me."

⁴Kiri is a pseudonym. Details of this parent's story have been disguised to protect the identity of the whānau.

“We have developed a Whānau Action Plan between my son and I, it’s a living document, I would like to see my boy in school, enjoying it ... that’s my dream. I was not good at school, I was mischief but I enjoyed being with my mates. But I want my boy to feel safe at school. I know I have to be accountable for this too. Having a time frame for achieving our goals is important, he’s getting to school now.”



COMMON THEMES RISING FROM WHĀNAU NARRATIVES

Analysis of whānau interviews highlighted the following common themes.

- Non-attendance at school is complex and linked to many issues, and whānau can feel overwhelmed.
- One of the issues is safety at school (children not feeling safe at school/their parents are worried about their safety).
- Children who were non-attending from these whānau/families were described as neurodiverse and needed extra assistance to engage in school.
- Parents/whānau felt they were failing/bad parents, and before the assistance of Te Ora Hou felt they were on their own.
- Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi staff worked over time with whānau to find the rights supports.
- Programme staff worked with whānau to identify their hopes and goals and created an action-plan to get children back to school.

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED IN THE PROGRAMME

In total 11 participants were interviewed about the impact of the programme and key learnings that had emerged from their involvement in the Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi (2022) programme. The following themes emerged from interview analysis that spoke to the value of the programme:

- **Early outcomes:** Increased student engagement in school
- **Early outcomes:** Better understanding of the causes of truancy
- **Early outcomes:** Improved whānau engagement with school
- **Key learnings:** The causes of truancy are complex and intergenerational
- **Key learnings:** The value of the Whānau Ora approach
- **Key learnings:** The value of focussing on transitions
- **Key learnings:** The need to expand the innovation

COVID-19 also emerged as a key barrier to progress and innovation, that emphasised the need for longer-term, wraparound support for students and their whānau. The following section explores these themes in more depth.

EARLY OUTCOMES: INCREASED STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOL

Interviewees spoke about early outcomes achieved through the programme. This was evident through increased student engagement in school. Kaimahi involved in the programme were able to connect with whānau and understand their needs.

“We are starting to see quite a difference just in student engagement, not necessarily with excitement about going to class, but the engagement with the system. From the student’s perspective, the fact they feel like they know someone here. And I think it’s made quite a big difference, just getting the kids here, and also because of the programme we have really good communications with the family now.” (Dean)

“TOHO arranged a bus card for a student who lived a distance away. He needed to catch a bus, but mum could not afford the bus money. We (the school) didn’t know this before. TOHO was able to ensure the student was able to attend school.” (Teacher)

As a result of the programme, participants felt students were more connected to school. The focus on transitions had enabled Kaimahi to accompany students to school and feel more connected. Attending high school for the first time could be daunting for some, due to their lack of friends, the school size and the more formalised siloed curriculum. Understanding student unease and anxiety about attending school was an important outcome of the programme.

“I think the programme has been very good for the students who don’t know other people here. You know, this is a big school. So, it is good for those kids who now feel more part of it, whereas before they didn’t feel part of it, that’s made a big difference. And the good thing is that it’s given them a voice about the things they’re not enjoying about the school that’s making them not come. Sometimes it could be just something so easy to fix, like I really wish I hadn’t taken music.” (Dean)

Participants described improving student attendance as a ‘work in progress’. The closing of schools due to COVID-19 and the Omicron variant was an ongoing challenge to improving student attendance.

EARLY OUTCOMES: BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE CAUSES OF TRUANCY

All of the interviewees spoke about how the programme had enabled schools to develop a better understanding of the causes of truancy. The relationships that Navigators/kaimahi established with whānau/families was key to this, as were the home visits.

“By visiting home, TOHO was able to gain a better understanding of mum’s needs. Mum had some mental health issues which we were not aware of. She avoided coming in and talking with us, and we found it very hard to make contact with her. So, the home visit from TOHO and the relationship they created was great. With other families through TOHO we’ve become more aware of the financial situation at home too, and we’ve been able to provide food to students at school.” (Teacher)

“Because often the parents and caregivers who teachers are trying to contact, they don’t know them. And teachers try a phone call or send them

an email, and it's not great for establishing relationships ... and it is daunting to have a meeting at school with the parents, the only time they've ever been called in is when their children are in trouble. And one of the great things the programme does is forge those relationships at home, so the parents are in their safe place." (Dean)

"Home visits are a real need as sometimes caregivers do not answer the phone or reply to emails. So, we need somebody to go and knock on the door. This is something as a school we usually do not do. TOHO can also build a relationship with caregivers. They can also be the whole of whānau contact if there are children at other schools. TOHO can also recommend other services that may be applicable to whānau." (Teacher)

Understanding the causes of truancy was essential to addressing the problem. Sometimes the causes were easily fixed.

"There are lots of causes of truancy. Some causes are just the basics. Haven't got the right uniform, not organised enough at home in the mornings. The child doesn't have any breakfast ... sometimes it's about the buses. They miss a bus, so they just go home again. We have a large number of students who live outside the school zone. I think all of those things combined, and we also have students who are definitely affected by mental health anxiety. It doesn't take much to stop them from coming because it was a struggle anyway." (Dean)

EARLY OUTCOMES: IMPROVED WHĀNAU COMMUNICATION/ ENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOOL

Another early outcome was the improvement in whānau/parent/caregiver communication and engagement in school. By establishing trusting relationships with whānau at home, the Navigator was able to help broker more open communication between whānau and school.

"One of the really positive consequences is that whānau are now happy to talk to us, not just the Navigator. It has had a really positive flow on effect for parents and caregivers feeling they can engage with us." (Dean)

"It's great for schools to have this extra support – they have helped with many students over the years.... Some of the parents who have been hard to reach, we've been able to have contact with because of the programme." (Teacher)

Overcoming barriers to whānau/family engagement with schools was difficult, particularly if parents/caregivers themselves were distrustful of white, middle-class professionals.

"I probably didn't realise how important Te Ora Hou's support was until recently, we weren't able to access them for the first six months of this year due to COVID-19. And I've really felt the pressure of everything being placed on the school. As soon as they see a middle-aged white man getting out of the car to come knock on their door, straight away they've got the wall up, they don't want to let me in as such, because last time they did that, it was for a negative reason. Some of these families have had Oranga Tamariki, the police coming around ... I don't know who at the school would be in a position to go around to a home and talk to people about attendance and get them back into school? Going around to the house, there's a bit of a wall up, but also there are many agencies and different people going around to the same house. You find out there's been three people over the last week all trying to do the same thing." (Teacher)

KEY LEARNINGS: THE CAUSES OF TRUANCY ARE COMPLEX AND INTERGENERATIONAL

Teachers who were interviewed also described the causes of truancy as being complex and intergenerational for some whānau/families.

“The data showed us it was the same families ... because we've had many siblings coming through the feeder schools. For some students, if I look back on the primary school notes, it's always truancy and attendance and punctuality being the issues. And I think that probably they've had no success at school, and they haven't built any sort of positive relationship with school.... So, it's just a history of patterns.” (Teacher)

The complexity of issues facing some families meant the causes of truancy were not the result of just one sole issue. Solutions needed to address the immediate needs of whānau/families.

“For many, truancy is intergenerational. It's not just one child who is not coming to school. Because, for some of those families the reasons for not coming, it's more than one thing, it's more than being slightly disorganised, there's no money in the home, there's stress in the family and stuff. Parents are not well, and are struggling on their own, those sorts of things. Obviously, it's not just going to affect the Year 9 students. It's going to have an impact on everyone who is living in that house and for students trying to get to school and access to education.” (Dean)

KEY LEARNINGS: THE VALUE OF THE WHĀNAU ORA APPROACH

Teachers who were interviewed talked about the value of the Whānau Ora approach. The Navigator's role in establishing a trusting relationship with whānau and advocating on their behalf was considered key to solving the problem of student non-attendance in school.

“It has to be a wraparound service because if you didn't need a home visit, schools could manage on their own. If you just got to phone up and talk to a parent and they said, ‘yeah, yeah, that's great, now we'll send the kids to school’. Well, problem solved. And we all know that the problem is not solved. And so, I think that a key thing we have learned is the power of involving whānau and families and making the parents feel they're heard is a big part of fixing your truancy issues. The Whānau Ora approach of the programme ... it's made a huge difference, not just for the children who are part of the group, but also for siblings. So, the fact the child has that relationship with the Navigator who then tries to encourage them into the school and they already know that person, so then they can come into school with that person.... So, I think the holistic approach is really important. I think we've seen that ordinary truancy services have not worked well in the past, addresses lots of things, not just get out of bed and come to school ... it's sorting out things that are an actual issue for them. That relationship they have with the Navigator is so important - they need someone to come and advocate for them and their parents.” (Dean)

Teachers realise there is a need to work constructively with families if the problem of student non-attendance is to be solved. Parents and caregivers need help to deal with challenging child behaviour at home.

“One of the things that keeps popping up is that families, for whatever reason, are enabling the behaviour at home. Which means we shouldn't be working with the student about their attendance. We should be working with the family or the parents.” (Teacher)

Working with the whole whānau meant siblings could also benefit from the programme's intervention. Through improved whānau communication, schools could also prepare in advance for the younger siblings to transition to high school.

“For example, one student, his Nana is now happy to ring and talk to us about her concerns about this younger sibling. Whereas previously we've had a struggle to get her to answer the phone. And so that's a big plus, and another benefit of that whole whānau approach is, now we know about this younger sibling. So, I think the work done by their Navigator has had the really good flow on to how we are able to communicate with the whānau for the transition of that younger sibling.” (Dean)

Some teachers wanted to know more about Whānau Ora and the Navigator approach, despite feeling the whānau blended support approach was making a difference. There is an opportunity for schools to learn more about this approach through Te Ora Hou.

KEY LEARNINGS: THE VALUE OF FOCUSING ON TRANSITIONS

Participants also talked about the value of focussing on transitions. Activities facilitated through the Te Ora Hou programme had enabled students to feel better prepared to move to high school.

“I think another learning was that focus on transitions was really useful, so they (Ōtautahi staff and children from Year 8) came to school at the end of last year, had a few sessions here and cooked pizza and had some mentoring and played some games as a group. And that transitioning was key for those students to feel prepared to be part of the school.” (Dean)

Having a shared approach between schools, and better communication of student attendance and needs was also considered important.

“Transition is really important, and you need the right people and processes at schools. And I've learned that recently ... because we used to give all these notes to the high school. And we would say little Johnny, he

missed 50% of the school year and we put him on 'Rock On' and we did this, and we did that. But we found out recently that all that information went into the filing cabinet of the Year 9 Dean. So, transition's important, but you still need to have the right systems in place and people to be able to focus on that ... we've highlighted this kid as having an attendance issue. Let's focus on that in the first few weeks to make sure they start well.” (Teacher)

KEY LEARNINGS – THE NEED TO EXPAND THE INNOVATION

Stakeholders interviewed for this report were overwhelmingly supportive of the Te Ora Hou programme and wanted it to be continued and expanded. Teachers felt overwhelmed by the scale of the issue in their local area.

“I think the Ministry of Education needs to understand that non-attendance - it is a huge problem here. It's not just lower socioeconomic families. It's not just the Māori and Pacifica families. It is a big problem, once you start adding that up in all of the schools, especially a school our size, suddenly ends up with a lot of numbers. Even if we're only one or two percent, we're still talking a lot of people. For some students, often it's a mental health issue, they can't bring themselves to come. Covid has made their anxiety worse, and in Ōtautahi we have had more issues than most, we have had the earthquakes and the mosque shootings, and just that change in normality has increased student anxiety. It just brings things back to them. Some of our chronic truants are New Zealand European and I would like to see the programme extended to include them.” (Dean)

COVID-19 and the Omicron variant had made it harder to deal with the problem.

“COVID-19 has had a huge impact. We identified 10 kids who were in isolation for long periods of time. Typically, when

a kid had someone in the household with COVID-19, then we knew how many days off they were roughly going to have, unless they got COVID-19 and then we knew roughly when they were due back to school. Some of our students were up to 25, 30 days. And so, then it just becomes harder and harder to get them back into school.” (Teacher)

There was concern that New Zealand European students were being overlooked and teachers felt the approach of Te Ora Hou would work for them.

“Out of those 10 kids who’d been in COVID-19 isolation for the largest periods of time, eight of them were New Zealand European.” (Teacher)



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Research undertaken for this report demonstrates an urgent need for an innovative approach to truancy. Studies shows that students who disengage from school early, with no qualifications are most likely to experience poor health and economic outcomes over their lifetimes (Lubeck, 2022; Stats NZ, 2017).

Māori and Pasifika students in low decile schools are most represented in the truancy statistics (Lubeck, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2020). Findings from this study have highlighted how the pilot truancy innovation is grounded in culturally responsive practice in ways that engage these students and their whānau and families.

Stakeholders interviewed for this report were overwhelmingly supportive of the Te Ora Hou programme and wanted it to be continued and expanded. Interview analysis highlighted the significant challenges that some whānau/families faced in ensuring their children were able to attend school. Parents interviewed for this research described feeling overwhelmed prior to the support of Te Ora Hou. Children who had a history

of non-attendance often felt unsafe in schools. These children were described as neurodiverse, suggesting that much more needs to be done to cater for these children in schools. COVID-19 and the Omicron variant emerged as a key barrier to progress and innovation, that emphasised the need for longer-term, wraparound support for vulnerable students and their whānau.

Whilst teachers valued the Whānau Ora approach, interview analysis suggested the concept was not well understood in schools. It is recommended that Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi facilitate professional development sessions with their schools so leaders and teachers have a better understanding of this approach. Teachers welcomed the focus on transistion, however there was a need for a shared

understanding of the roles and responsibilities to improve transition, particularly for families whose children have a history of significant absence. Finally, there are opportunities for the programme to capture outcome data (besides attendance), related to improving student confidence and wellbeing. One of the limitations of this report is that students themselves were not interviewed. Further research should focus on capturing student voice. Working with students and whānau to capture progress towards wellbeing outcomes is also recommended.

In order to support innovation in the truancy space, the Ministry of Education will need to adapt and change rigid contracting approaches. This innovation was initiated and funded by Te Ora Hou additional to the business as usual truancy approach. In order to support innovation, it is recommended the Ministry of Education move to commissioning wellbeing outcomes in partnership with providers.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue and expand the truancy innovation developed by Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi.
- Facilitate professional development sessions within schools so teachers and leaders have a better understanding of Whānau Ora and its contribution to tamariki, rangatahi and whānau wellbeing.
- Work with schools to ensure shared understandings and practices around supportive transition pathways.
- Work with students, schools and whānau to better capture outcome data to track student confidence, wellbeing and attendance over time.
- Continue to research the long-term impacts and benefits on whānau-led initiatives and their impact on student attendance and engagement in education.
- The Ministry of Education adopts a high trust commissioning model to support innovation in truancy response.

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APPENDIX 1. METHODOLOGY

The study was Māori-centred and mixed method (involving both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analyses).

Cunningham (1998) states that Māori-centred research engages Māori in all levels of the research, operating Māori data collection and analysis processes and ensuing Māori knowledge. Moyle (2017) also argues that Māori-centred research draws strongly from kaupapa Māori theory and principles. Citing other kaupapa Māori theorists (Bishop, 1999; Smith, 1999; Cram, 2011; Pihama, Cram & Walker, 2002), Moyle notes that kaupapa Māori refers to a framework or methodology for thinking about and undertaking research by Māori, with Māori, for the benefit of Māori. It is a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know, and it affirms the right of Māori to be Māori (Pihama, Cram & Walker, 2002; Moyle, 2017, p. 30). In this regard the research kaupapa is underpinned by a strong ethical commitment to social justice (Penetito, 2010, p. 42).

For our company, trust is a very important part of stakeholder engagement and ensuring sustainable relationships. We take our ethical responsibilities very seriously and ensure our relationships in the community and with iwi, hapū and whānau are a priority. Our staff work to an engagement framework that ensures we have agreed values and principles. These are:

- Manaakitanga – acting in a caring and supporting way to each other
- Whanaungatanga – respecting the bonds of Māoritanga and 'kinship'
- Rangatiratanga – supporting and respecting each other's authority, intelligence and mana
- Paeheretanga – creating and nurturing the linkages between each other for a common purpose

The approach was built around whanaungatanga and ensuring that it underpins all our interactions with whānau. This value demanded that the research connected to the lives of Māori communities, for the life cycle of this project and beyond. Whanaungatanga ensures the researchers sought to capture, create, nurture, grow and protect the mātauranga shared with them during this project, not for their own benefit or gain, but for the benefit of whānau. Whanaungatanga demanded that they engage with whānau in a respectful way that is mana-enhancing, respectful of each individual and the collective mauri and whakapapa.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

All research activities adhered to strict ethical standards, including informed consent and avoidance of harm. Care was taken to ensure consent was voluntary in regard to participant interviews and there was a clear understanding as to the purpose of the evaluation and data collection activities. All participants who agreed to take part in the interviews were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. The interviews were electronically recorded. Each interview was transcribed and, if requested, sent back to participants. Interview transcribers have signed confidentiality agreements. Interview material is kept locked in a filing cabinet or a password protected file by Ihi Research. Once the research

has finished, all interview data will be kept for one year and then destroyed. It was explained to participants that the information provided will be analysed and included into a final report to be presented to Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi. A copy of the Participant Information forms and Participant Consent forms are provided in Appendix 2. Photographs included in this report were provided by Ōtautahi Te Ora Hou for publication purposes.

ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW MATERIAL

In total 11 participants agreed to take part in semi-structured interviews. Māori researchers interviewed Māori participants. All interview data was transcribed. The main themes in the interview data were identified inductively (Silverman, 1998). This meant that categories were not imposed on the data but arrived out of data analysis to inform the overall evaluation.

LIMITATIONS

One of the limitations of this report is students themselves were not interviewed. Further research should focus on capturing student voice. This was an exploratory study and further research would need to be undertaken to understand the impact of the Ōtautahi Te Ora Hou programme.



APPENDIX 2. **COPIES OF PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORMS**

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

TE ORA HOU - POSITIONING FOR TRUANCY INNOVATION

Tēnā koe

Ihi Research has been contracted by Te Ora Hou: Ōtautahi to conduct an evaluation of their Truancy Innovation Pilot. Te Ora Hou is network of faith-based youth and community organisations working with young people, their whānau and communities in Aotearoa. Te Ora Hou Ōtautahi have held the contract for truancy services with the Ministry of Education for the past nine years. The contract covers Nelson, Marlborough, West Coast, and Canterbury.

In 2021, Te Ora Hou discussed the possibility of an innovation pilot for truancy services with two Communities of Learning (CoL) in Christchurch. The CoL's agreed to pilot a new approach which is a blended whānau support model, focussed on whānau and their rangatahi who are transitioning into Year 9 and are at risk of non-attendance.

The following research questions are central to this evaluation:

- 01** What is the rationale for an innovation approach to truancy?
- 02** What are the early outcomes of the approach?
- 03** What are the enablers and barriers to the success of the innovation?
- 04** What are the key learnings that have informed the development of the innovation?

YOUR INVOLVEMENT

You have been identified as someone we could talk to. We would like to interview you to gain your thoughts and experiences of the Te Ora Hou programme and the impact it is having. We would prefer the interview was kanohi-te-kanohi (face-to-face) and at a place of your choosing, but this will depend on COVID-19 alert levels. If you would prefer (or if the COVID-19 alert levels should rise), we can arrange for the interview to be held via zoom or telephone.

The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes. To ensure we represent your views faithfully the kōrero will be recorded using a digital recording device. However, you can choose not to have your interview digitally recorded. In this case there will be two interviewers and one of them will take notes. All interviews will be transcribed, and a copy of your transcript will be sent back to you to confirm the accuracy.

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation to participate in this research. If you do choose to participate, you have the right to:

- Decline to answer any particular question/s;
- Withdraw at any time and information you have contributed at any time up until the report is written.
- Ask any questions about the research at any time during your participation.
- Provide any information on the understanding that your name will not be used, and you will not be identified.

All information provided is confidential. All interview recordings will be listened to only by members of the evaluation team and a professional transcriber. If we use a quote from your interview, we will disguise your identity. You will not be identified.

Interview transcribers have signed confidentiality agreements. All interview data, including audio files and written interview transcriptions will be securely locked in a filing cabinet or a password protected file for the period of one year after the completion of the research and then destroyed. The information you provide will be analysed and included into a Final Report that will be presented to Te Ora Hou and the Ministry of Education. If you would like a copy of the Final Report, please indicate this on your consent form along with an address or email so we can send it to you. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Nāku noa, nā

Dr Catherine Savage

DIRECTOR, IHI RESEARCH | catherine@ihi.co.nz



CONSENT FORM

TE ORA HOU - POSITIONING FOR TRUANCY INNOVATION

Full Name (Printed).....

I have read the Information Sheet and had the research explained to me.

I am aware that participation in this research is voluntary, and I understand the information will be kept confidential. Any questions that I have asked have been answered and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. All information will be in a password protected file and stored for a period of 1 year and will then be destroyed.

When the report is completed and has been accepted by Te Ora Hou, a copy will be sent to me if I would like.

Please tick the boxes if you agree;

- I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the information sheet.
- I give consent for my interview to be audio taped.
- I give consent for my comments to be included in the research.
- I understand my identity will not be revealed in any part of the research.

Please sign and date this consent form.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Please provide an address/e-mail for a copy of the report to be sent to you:



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