



# Amplifying the Voices of our Tamariki

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## Introduction

My name is Kit Haines and I have the privilege of working with the amazing young men of Kelston Boys' High School in West Auckland. As Head of the English Department at Kelston, my pedagogical interests include digital technology, collaborative learning and culturally responsive practice. Particularly, I have an interest in student voice and how it can be used to inform teaching practices. In 2020, my eFellowship research project was focused around amplifying the voices of students through Talanoa conversations and podcasts.

## Area of focus

At its heart, this project is about talking and listening - about conversations and the ways in which they can transform educational outcomes for our students.

The research project aimed to amplify marginalised voices in education through the use of digital technologies, such as podcasts. The project was born out of a desire to improve engagement and learning outcomes for our Māori and Pacific students.

One of the groups I work with is our Vocational Pathways class. What I've experienced with these classes over the last year is that there is a disconnect between the material we offer and students' realities. This has resulted in low engagement with the subject of English, leading to many of the students in the course having low self-efficacy and agency in relation to their learning capabilities.

I asked, "how I could better support these students to share what is important to them and their identity?" I wanted to do this by exploring how digital platforms, such as podcasts, would help them to make a difference in their community.



## Methodology

The research question I asked was twofold:

*How can I support students to share what is important to them and their identity?*

*How might digital platforms assist in student and community change making?*

The latter question ended up taking more of a back seat in this research project. I began by asking how I could gather information on student interest and identity.

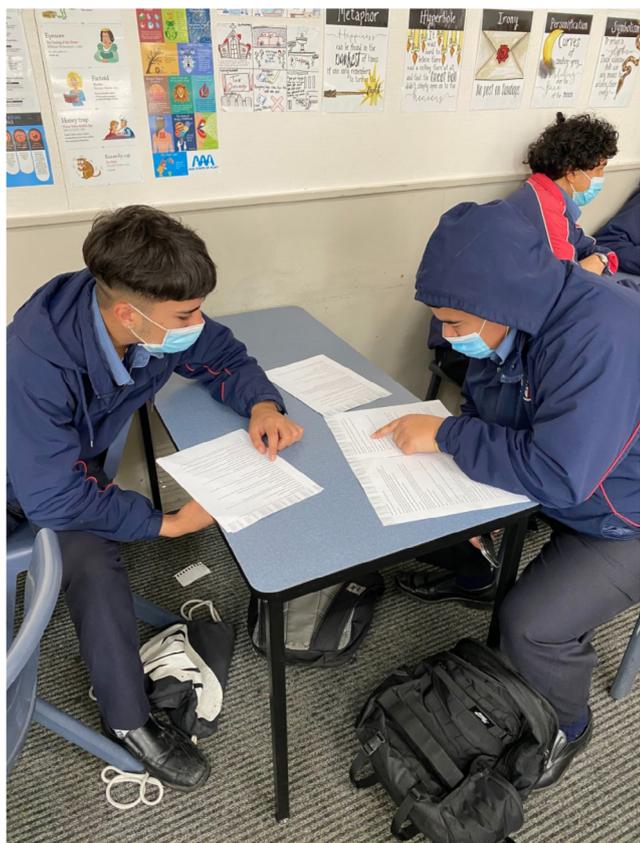
Methods of gathering student interests that I had used prior were not particularly successful. I had tried to 'get to know you' sheets, writing projects and one-on-one conversations, often finding that students were reticent to share anything about who they were. Information given was often limited to one-word responses.

My research process was heavily informed by the work of Timote Vaioleti. Embedded in Pacific methodologies, the research was framed through a metaphor proposed by Vaioleti (2006) of the Tui Kakala. Tongan for fragrant flowers and leaves woven together in special ways, Kakala is made according to the need of the occasion they are woven for. As a research methodology, this fluidity is paralleled in Talanoa. Tui Kakala involves three stages - Toli, Tui and Luva. Each part of the tui kakala process illustrates a stage in the research process; the framing of the inquiry (Toli), the synthesis of the data gathered (Tui) and the presentation of findings (Luva) (Vaioleti, 2006, 27).

Using Pacific methodologies with a research group that was largely Māori and Pacific offered the key to unlocking the stories which had not been heard before. For this project, I decided to use Talanoa. Talanoa is a traditional word used in Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and across the Pacific to reflect a process of inclusive, participatory and transparent dialogue. The process of Talanoa involves sharing ideas, skills and experience through storytelling. Tala means to inform, tell, relate and command, as well as to ask or apply and Noa means of any kind, ordinary, nothing in particular, purely imaginary or void (Vaioleti, 2006, 23). In this sense, Talanoa is to talk about nothing particular or not to interact within a rigid framework. I found the fluidity of the Talanoa process was as enabling as it was challenging.

I used Talanoa as traditional methods of interviewing students had proved unsuccessful in garnering useful information about who the students were that could be used to shape our programme.

The participants for this project were young men from our Year 12 Vocational Pathway, who had traditionally seen lower levels of success in English, resulting in low engagement, self-efficacy and agency in relation to learning English. I believed novel strategies were needed to help this group of students to express their voice and engage in English. This group was chosen because I believed they have some of the most diverse and valuable voices in our kura, our community and beyond.



I began my research with a preliminary online survey of 11 students from our Vocational Pathway. I used the data from this to draft questions for our Talanoa. Participants took part in a shared conversation, which was recorded and then transcribed. Throughout the conversations, the sense of fluidity remained. We shared jokes, covered a wide array of topics and, for me, there was no real driving impetus or goal, other than to get to know the participants.

Once completed and transcribed, students were given the opportunity to read over the transcript and annotate conversations and reflect on their own statements. As well, students were then given one further opportunity to complete the same online form used at the start of the process.

Topics covered in the Talanoa formed the basis of learning conversations, which the boys then wrote into podcast transcripts. These were then recorded and shared. Some of the participants would go on to use these podcasts as the basis for written work.



## Findings

The findings of this research were around both the first and second research question; supporting students to share their identity and using digital platforms.

As I have gone through the research process, I have come to realise that this project is as much about places to speak, as it is about platforms to speak on. In order to develop space for voices to come through in digital spaces, one first must listen to the voices of young people in their own traditional contexts. When we use a methodology that students are comfortable with, such as Talanoa, the contribution is far richer, offering kaiako valuable insights into the worlds of their students.

When we began our Talanoa practice it was interesting to watch several students light up as they were familiar and comfortable in the practice. In a sense, they saw their world reflected in school. They became the teacher or expert in this space and helped teach me.

The Talanoa opened up some interesting observations around students' perceptions. It went into their personal lives, their values and identities and participants reflected on perceptions of themselves. Dialogue from our Talanoa included statements like "People view Islanders as big, scary, always wanting to fight people". Students shared experiences of people crossing the road when they saw them. It became clear that the perception of others and of the media, fed into their own perception/behaviour. Our Talanoa became an important space to speak truth against the myths that students were hearing, believing, and subsequently perpetuating.

Students openly talked about being hated by other schools in Auckland and having a reputation to protect. Statements like "Yeah we'd be like the most hated school in Auckland" came as a surprise to me. As a practitioner there was a disconnect between the students I taught in my classroom, kind, caring and empathetic young men, and the image these boys wanted to present in the community. Bridging this disconnect would become our work.

The process of reflecting on our Talanoa discussion and whether it was effective provided more insights into student self-efficacy and perceptions. When asked the question “What was the most difficult part of our Talanoa?” several students responded that telling the truth and being honest about themselves at times was hard. What they found most interesting in our Talanoa was “Talking about everyday life, opening up to each other” and “seeing things from the perspective of others in the class”. The Talanoa space clearly allowed the students an opportunity to drop down walls and connect with each other.

The flow-on effect of using Talanoa practices revealed drastically improved student response and engagement. Talanoa opened up conversations with students about their own personal lives: their goals, their dreams, and their passions. Prior to our Talanoa, student responses were often short and perfunctory. However, after this experience, students were significantly more forthcoming contributing to discussion. This helped to build relationships but also to tailor learning experiences. I was able to offer helpful suggestions for writing assessments, based on the conversations we had.

In the process of analysing their own work (Tui), students became cognisant of their behaviour, their contribution to Talanoa and were self-reflective. Several students were surprised at the comments they made. Reading their own statements acted as a mirror, reflecting their voice back to them. Students were able to see where they were lacking in self-belief, motivation or valuing of their own cultural context. They were able to see a breakdown in the relationship between their identity as a learner, and their identity at home. It helped students realise that the disconnect was unnecessary and that their particular cultural context was what made their voice so valuable.

Using their student interests to inform podcasting and conversations, improved their self-efficacy and subsequently their engagement with learning. It became clear that students were more motivated to learn about their given area of study and to acknowledge that they had something to say.

Student ownership of learning ended up making me question the power dynamics within my classroom and who drives the learning in a traditional classroom. When students take ownership over the content, they take ownership over the purpose and trajectory of their conversations. In this way, Talanoa helped foster not only self-efficacy but self-determination.

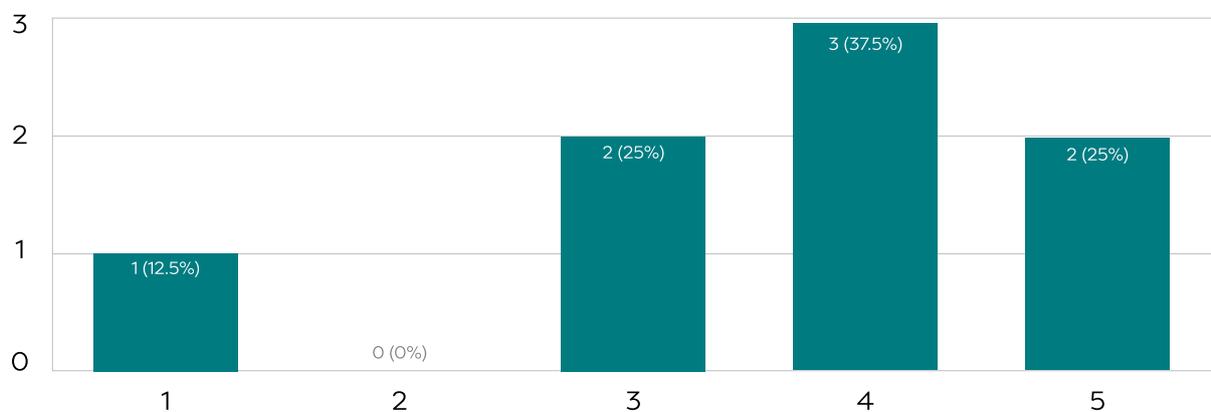
I was personally reflective about my own shortcomings in this space. I realised that the reason the Talanoa model was effective was not only due to it being a familiar model for students, it was a communal model. Prior to this, I had approached interests/passions as an individualistic notion and my methods of gathering student data reflected this. In the latter part of this project, I directed students towards creating individual or pair-based podcasts, in the hope that they might be used for assessment. Whilst this worked for several students, who achieved assessments based on their transcript, it did not translate for all our learners.

If I had seen success using a communal model of research gathering, then surely it follows that Pacific methods should have been applied to the latter parts of the project. Even my conceptualisation of goals and aspirations was a product of my Pākehā lens. I came to realise that within a Pacific context, the dreams and aspirations of our young men are deeply grounded within the vision for their cultural and faith communities. What follows should be a Pacific approach to assessment, and a standards based assessment should support this mode of learning.

The last finding was that digital technologies, such as podcasts, build student efficacy. Throughout this process, I noticed a physical change within some of the students I taught, who had a clear shift from feeling as though learning English was an oppressive task, to being alive at the thought of having their voice heard. Students who hadn't traditionally seen success saw that oral ways of being not only suited them but allowed them to thrive. I began to see students engage in blue sky thinking, asking questions such as whether they could invite a rugby league player to take part in their podcasts. By this same token, in the initial phase of creating podcasts, several students asked me to be on their podcast, asking questions to them. This invitation fascinated me, as I believe it spoke to their need to have their work validated through a Pākehā system and that somehow having the teacher on their podcast would provide that.

*“Talking about everyday life, opening up to each other, seeing things from the perspective of others in the class”*

I believe that the creation of podcasts would have been more successful if they had been done collaboratively and clearly linked to a purpose and audience. Whilst boys did consider the audience in the process of creating their podcasts, connection to ideas discussed in the Talanoa found more success. Students also needed to be reminded regularly of their unique positioning and voice in these conversations. Further involvement and conversations with whānau were needed to connect the podcasts to real community change making.



Student responses to how engaging they found Talanoa.



## Recommendations

### Fellow practitioners should use Talanoa

This project suggests that truly letting students drive the learning, through their own interests, leads to higher levels of engagement, motivation and self-efficacy. Replace your traditional models of gathering student interest with cultural practices, then ensure that the learning is informed by the conversations had in the first instance.

Along with other Pacific and Māori practices, practitioners should use Talanoa to engage with their students. Adopting these practices early on allows for relationship-building that is reciprocal and that doesn't conform to the traditional power structures within a classroom.

Explore communal approaches to gathering student information. Look at ways in which you can hear young people's voices through mediums other than written form. Using oral approaches will allow students on the margins an opportunity to succeed.

Question the power structures in your classroom and how they might be stifling student voices. Importantly, get out of the way. Too often as teachers, we espouse that student interest should drive curriculum choices but in reality it is driven by practicality, ease, and economic imperative. If we truly believe that student voice is valuable, we need to follow through in letting students drive their learning. When we tell students that their voice matters then do not use it to inform the work we do, we essentially confirm for students that their voice is not being listened to.

### Next steps

I am going to continue this research by allowing my practices to be further informed through Pacific lenses. This moves beyond Talanoa but will also see me using Talanoa as a regular practice for deciding curriculum content. It's also encouraged me to look further into the power structures that exist in my classroom and question how my Pākehā lens impacts on the practices I use within the classroom.

Particularly, letting students drive the context within which learning happens is a key aim looking forward. I believe I saw a very clear correlation between student interest driving learning and the level of motivation in the classroom. If we can use practices to uncover student motivations, we will have a more engaged and successful group of learners.

I'm also going to invest more time into teaching podcasting skills to future students, pairing with Digital Technologies teachers to ensure that the quality of podcast matches the quality of student content and voice. I believe that 2020 has only seen the beginning of what may be a long project in understanding how student voice can not only drive learning but have an impact on our communities.