MY CONTRIBUTION MATTERS!
Developing ākonga leadership potential

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MY WHY - Leadership opportunities for all ākonga

He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata!
It is people that are of importance! In particular it was the ākonga in my school who sparked the focus of my project as an eFellow 2020. In my role as a Kaihautu (iwi leader - similar to a dean) I felt that there wasn’t the support for those ākonga with leadership roles, nor were we extending capacity to include others not in existing leadership roles. So my project was framed to inquire into ākonga leadership.

As a passionate leader of learning I am fortunate to be one of the foundation staff at Rototuna Senior High School. Here I have the opportunity to collaboratively work as a Kaihautu to support the delivery of our advisory curriculum. As part of this role I was curious about how to best develop opportunities to empower ākonga to lead. Through this my hope was to break down barriers to empower all ākonga to see leadership as more than just for a selected few - where everyone has a valuable contribution to make.
As an innovative and highly collaborative school with a strong belief in distributed leadership, it was natural that this approach would flow over to ākonga leadership opportunities. Between 2017-2019, there were several iterations of our leadership opportunities for ākonga. Although we had a distributed leadership framework, only a few were given roles. That meant ākonga who applied to be leaders but missed out and others who were not confident enough to even consider applying did not get support or further leadership opportunities. For those who were selected, the skills and capabilities needed to thrive in their leadership positions were assumed. So, I wondered...

- What were we actually doing to support all ākonga to develop leadership potential?
- Were we providing the right opportunities for leadership to emerge?
- What opportunities could we provide to empower ākonga to feel that they can make meaningful contributions within our school?

I chose this topic to research to develop my understanding of the leadership aspirations of ākonga and disband the notion that I suspected they held - that a title or position makes a leader. My perception was that ākonga saw the titles or leadership roles as being of the highest importance, and critical to being an effective leader at our school. My intention was to focus on understanding how leadership skills and capabilities could be fostered in ākonga to empower them to be active contributors to the wider school culture. Through this my hope was to foster opportunities for ākonga to engage across our school and in turn empower them to see leadership as more than just for a selected few, and that everyone has something to contribute to leadership.
THE INQUIRY: How I went about my research.

At our first eFellowship hui I was challenged to unpack what leadership meant in the context of my project. I knew it wasn’t just a title or position, but that it was more about the concept of being leaderful, where everyone has a contribution to make to the overall school culture.

My initial framing was likened to the roles and responsibilities of people in a waka. When on the water the waka requires a collective contribution to navigate and stay afloat. This consists of the:

- Kaihautu - who has a position of responsibility that sets the beat and gives instruction
- Kaihoe - the paddlers who are doing the work
- Kaiārahi - who is the steerer keeping things on track

(Eketone, 2002).

They work together and without the others they couldn’t function. Although there seems to be a main role (the Kaihautu), this responsibility has been delegated and the authority still remains with the people. If another task was presented then roles would be spread differently. So, in this analogy, the leadership role is more about the contribution one person can make to the collective.

I began this project assuming that ākonga valued leadership as solely a position or role, and that this was significant to them. I had made this assumption based on observations over the first 3 years of both those who had been successful in gaining leadership roles and those who had missed out. As a school it seemed that we did not formally provide further opportunities for ākonga to develop as leaders. I believed there were things missing from how we identified and supported leaders in developing their leadership potential.

However, as I delved into understanding ākonga perspectives, my preconceived notions were quickly challenged. Their shared views of what leadership was and what it meant were more holistic and their understanding of leadership was in fact more than a nominal title. So I shifted my research focus to the development of skills and capabilities connected to leadership, and how to be leaderful in action.
My project inquiry was based on an action research cycle. This spiral of inquiry was a cyclical process that had several rounds. Initially data was collected through observation of ākonga. Then a survey was conducted which generated the next round of data that I used to inform my focus group questions. Finally the focus groups provided further evidence of ākonga perspective.

Throughout my project I worked weekly with a small group of 15 ākonga from across our senior year groups (Yr 11 - 13). Outside of this weekly group I also interacted with a range of ākonga and several kaiāko (teachers). The main activities included:

- **Class time:** within our school timetable I had a class once a week for any ākonga to select if they were interested in leadership. A range of activities were used to support both understanding of leadership as well as develop capabilities.
- **Data gathering:** of both ākonga and kaiako using a Google form to better understand their perspectives on leadership in our school.
- **Focus groups:** small hui held with sub groups of ākonga who were either aspirational, past or present leaders. For each of the focus groups the same base questions were used.

**LEARNINGS - What I actually heard.**

There were three intersecting themes to emerge from my research:

1. leadership means more than just a title
2. ākonga value opportunities to lead at our school
3. ākonga want to continue learning about the skills and capabilities connected to leadership.

Ākonga thought leadership could take many forms:

**Leadership is more than just a title.**

As I got into working with the ākonga the assumptions I had made about their thoughts on leadership were quickly disbanded. In terms of my role as researcher, I had to really listen to what the ākonga were saying and adapt as needed. All ākonga indicated that a title or position wasn’t required in order to be a leader.
Ākonga identified that leadership was about taking lead or responsibility, being a role model or guiding others, having initiative and taking action. A leader is a person who is passionate, a problem solver, and an advocate for others. Surprisingly none defaulted to just identifying leadership as being a role or position, but rather opted to describe leadership in terms of the responsibilities they viewed as important. These quotes encapsulate some of the ākonga voice:

“Leadership is not necessarily a position of hierarchy but more so an attitude which inspires others. Leadership is a mindset which uplifts and encourages others.”

“Leadership is not necessarily about position; it is about ensuring that you are helping others and ensuring that others achieve their best for the betterment of themselves and for the team.”

“In my experience, a lot of leaders are not specifically appointed as a ‘leader’ they just naturally take on that role.”

(Anonymous via survey, 2020)

Much like the general student body responses to the survey, those who went for the Senior High Manukura (student) leadership positions also had similar thoughts about leadership:

“For me, leadership is about developing people to reach their full potential. I think that leadership is showing a good example and motivating a group to reach a common goal. Being a leader is about equipping others with the right tools and strategies. Leadership is all about good communication, confidence and empathy.”

(Anonymous via survey, 2020)

And for those already in Manukura positions they further echoed the same sentiments, all indicating that you don’t need a role or title:

“Everyone should be able to lead; as it’s more about stepping out of your comfort zone; you don’t need a role or title it just depends on the situation; it is about you.”

(Manukura, Focus group, 2020)
Ākonga valued current leadership opportunities in our school.

As much as I felt there were few opportunities to engage in leading, ākonga could identify multiple areas where opportunities existed. They could see leadership skills and capabilities in action in our specialised programmes like Advisory\(^1\) and Projects\(^2\), as well as in extracurricular activities such as sport and kapa haka.

“Group tasks I step up to be a leader; like in Advisory I step up and say what I think, I try to help people that are younger than me & life in general; Do lots of leadership outside of school that I apply in school.”

“A great place for it to grow is in Projects - where it’s often independent or in groups - so you have opportunity.”

“Opportunities in Advisory to develop leadership skills but not official role. People learn a lot of communication and leadership in projects too.”

“In Duke of Edinburgh being the senior I could help the younger year levels; I also am doing outside of school, like volunteering and community service.”

“In Yr 11/12 helped organise end of year event and food truck last year - both part of Pathways opportunities.”

(Anonymous via survey, 2020)

Also, because of the nature of our school there is the opportunity to create roles for yourself. One ākonga, Timi, had done so by starting clubs and groups, which included the Climate Change Action group, a composting initiative and the Kindness Club. She felt that there was the freedom and flexibility to do this, as well as the support to make it happen.

“Our school is open to everything so if you have the passion and want to take on something and follow through then you can do it.”

(Timi Barabos, Focus group, 2020)

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\(^1\) In the context of RSHS, Advisory is a localised ‘curriculum’ that fosters the holistic development of ākonga through focus on relationships, well-being, mentoring and tracking. This has dedicated blocks of time during the week to enable Kāiārahi (whānau group teachers) to make connections with their small group and support their development.

\(^2\) Within our school we also dedicate part of the timetable to be involved in Impact Projects. This is a time for ākonga to engage in project based learning in an area of interest often connected to the community, where they are supported to develop 21st century skills such as critical thinking, communication and collaboration.
Although ākonga aspire to the Manukura leadership positions, they also recognised that these positions are sometimes restricting, and there are certainly pro’s and con’s of formal leadership positions.

“Manukura has helped to be more open to ideas.”

“Not having a position allows more freedom and flexibility to really make a difference.”

“Being a school leader can be empowering, but also often constraining.”

“It’s easier without a title as [you] don’t have the pressure.”

(Anonymous via survey, 2020)

Ultimately many thought it was up to the individual to create leadership opportunities.

“I can find other ways to lead. If I had something to say that I thought was important I would not let having a position stop me.”

(Anonymous via survey, 2020)
Ongoing learning of leadership skills and capabilities.

Enabling the space in the timetable for the Ahurea class sessions gave ākonga the option to engage in leadership focused learning. In this class they were able to consider the contributions they could make, and they were supported to develop leadership skills and capabilities. This gave some ākonga the push they needed to get out and share the expertise they already had.

“Yeah I did feel like I built on skills; it made me think about what leadership was and put into [my] own context.”

“Helped me see what it takes to be a leader more and grow some of the qualities.”

(Ahurea class, Focus group, 2020)

Despite the wide range of experiences that ākonga have felt they had, it was still evident that they wanted the opportunity to have more specific leadership development. They noted that having a focus on developing leadership skills and capabilities would be beneficial for all ākonga, not just those who seek out the positions.

“[My] skills and attributes developed in a range of places, opportunities everywhere - especially if I have different strengths.”

“If you have the skills then that’s enough, you don’t need the name to show it.”

(Anonymous via survey, 2020)
TAKE AWAYS - The potential opportunities.

Through this process it became apparent that my own assumptions and perspectives need to be checked. I was ready to dive into developing a programme and offering more leadership opportunities where I thought they were needed. However, through taking the time to really understand the perspectives of the ākonga it became clearer about what they actually wanted. As Vivianne Robinson (2011) supports, it is important to honour the information from ākonga, both the ownership of it and its whakapapa.

Here are some suggestions about taking action to change perceptions in the context of student leadership:

**Check** the lens you bring and the assumptions you make, then really listen to what the ākonga say and ensure they are part of the review process.

**Explore** the hierarchical systems that are in place and consider other organisational structures. At our school we do not have a single head student, but rather a number who represent each of the four iwi (houses). They work collaboratively as the Manukura (student leaders) of the school.

**Look critically** at how leadership positions are set up and what is expected of those selected to fulfil them. For example, there can be many managerial tasks associated with these roles. We may also make the assumption that those selected are already equipped with organisational skills but, as this research revealed, leadership is more than just ‘managing’ school events; it is also about developing dispositions to lead - like motivating others, communicating and being empathetic. If leadership is just about managing events, it potentially limits leadership capacity and growth.

**Consider** providing more deliberate opportunities for growth of individuals in class situations. Incorporate opportunities where activities are set up so that individuals can take on different roles and develop a range of skills and capabilities. This will better support the development of all to be active contributors.

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**In short:**

Provide space and time for conversations and value what ākonga say and want.

Provide space for learning and development of skills and capabilities connected to leadership.

Provide support and flexibility for those in leadership positions to build capacity and thrive.
NEXT STEPS - Where to from here.

As a middle leader with collective responsibility for the development of the curriculum in the Advisory part of our timetable, I can see that we can expand the learning experiences in this area. There is an opportunity to be more deliberate about incorporating activities in these timetabled classes that help to foster skills and capabilities for ākonga to be leaderful. By providing more specific and scaffolded opportunities where contribution is expected and supported, all ākonga will be able to benefit.

Those currently in Manukura (student leadership) positions identified the need for ongoing support to develop their leadership skills and capacity, but also to consider future groups. Their suggestions included:

- Mentoring - continue to work with the Principal or an SLT member as a mentor of the group, with focus on sharing their leadership experience and hearing leadership skills.
- Clear processes - clarity around who is responsible for what when it comes to interacting with SLT, Kaihautu and staff members; Clear timeframes; Transparent communication.
- Support - needs a teacher (not an SLT member) in charge of the group, to oversee it, regularly check up and help ensure tasks are followed through.
- Application - start the process earlier; increase promotion; give more opportunity to apply; ensure diversity of those selected.
- Visibility - the group needs to be more involved with ākonga, so those who want to be leaders understand the role of Manukura.

“Liked learning while we’re leading; sometimes we do it unintentionally, but mentoring helped to think about skills you need to develop while you’re doing it.”

(Manukura, Focus group, 2020)

For those who don’t get appointed or selected for leadership positions, ākonga indicated that there should be other ways to contribute, for example, behind the scenes with planning, setting things up, and leading small groups, etc. These could be in class where different roles are assigned, or simply by helping ākonga to build confidence to say what they think.

“Maybe [there] should be more personal growth opportunities. In Projects more people could have taken charge. Could be other smaller leadership roles within iwi or work with Manukura. The role and description could scare people off with the commitment.”

(Anonymous via survey, 2020)
In terms of my next steps with ākonga being active contributors I would like to develop supported learning experiences that the Kaiārahi (whānau teachers) could utilise across the Advisory programme. Alongside this I’d like to further investigate how the personal agency and drive of individuals impacts their wanting to contribute or lead. During the focus group where I talked with Timi about her experiences, I was intrigued by how predominant her drive was, and that she made her own opportunities. This was a perspective that I hadn’t considered in my project, and could be an interesting avenue to investigate to understand how this impacts contribution and leadership.

**FINAL WORD - The lasting impressions.**

I believe that through fostering opportunities for ākonga to develop leadership skills and capabilities they will be empowered to voice their thoughts, actively connect with others and share their ideas in leaderful action. If they are supported to feel that they do already and can continue to make a difference then there is more of a chance that they will transfer their skills to contribute to whatever context they are in.

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