

Understanding the past to make sense of the future

Whānau and ākonga perspectives on early implementation of the Aotearoa New Zealand histories curriculum

He whakarāpopototanga | Executive summary

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New curriculum content for teaching Aotearoa New Zealand's histories (ANZH) and Te Takanga o te Wā (TToTW) was gazetted in 2022, for schools and kura to begin using in 2023. The release of this curriculum content followed prolonged campaigning and advocacy from historians, ākonga, learners, kaiako, teachers, and members of the public who had called for better and more consistent teaching of our local and national histories.

This qualitative research project was established in 2023 to follow a group of eight schools—primarily English-medium schools including three with bilingual or Māori language immersion settings—as they navigated curriculum implementation. Our previous report drew on interviews with more than 50 school leaders and kaiako across our eight study schools. This report focuses on the perspectives and experiences of 92 ākonga and 52 whānau members associated with these schools.

We chose identity as a lens of analysis because other research indicates that people's identities—including cultural backgrounds—can influence their perspectives about, and responses to, Aotearoa New Zealand's histories curriculum and teaching (Dam, 2022; ERO, 2024; MacDonald & Kidman, 2022; O'Malley & Kidman, 2018; Yukich, 2021). We used two identity groupings for our analysis. The first group (Māori) includes those who identify themselves as Māori and who may also identify with other ethnicities. The second group (tauiwi) includes those who do not identify as Māori, but do identify as Pākehā, Pacific peoples, Asian, and all other identities.

Ākonga and whānau views on the importance of learning these histories

Ākonga and whānau we interviewed were mostly positive about learning ANZH and TToTW in schools. Ākonga saw this learning as vital for strengthening individual and collective identities (including national identity), connecting with ancestral stories, sustaining and sharing cultural knowledge, and understanding the past to make sense of the present and the future.

Whānau shared similar aspirations, seeing histories learning as benefiting learners, their whānau, and wider communities including hapū and iwi. Whether they were Māori or tauīwi, many whānau interviewees linked histories learning with opportunities to learn te reo Māori and mātauranga Māori—experiences they and previous generations had often missed at school. Many viewed their children's learning about histories as a way to enrich the knowledge, understanding, and wellbeing of the whole whānau.

Many whānau saw the importance of learning localised histories, and valued schools' engagement with hapū and iwi as holders of these histories. Like ākonga, whānau thought knowledge of histories could support better understanding of contemporary social issues and diverse perspectives. Some highlighted the importance of learning about both local iwi and colonial histories to support current efforts to regenerate the wellbeing of whenua and taiao.

Learning histories at school

Ākonga in primary and secondary schools described a variety of history topics they had been learning about. Many primary ākonga learnt about local places, stories, and pūrākau. Te Tiriti o Waitangi was a common focus across both primary and secondary schools, with secondary ākonga tending to go deeper into the historical events before and after 1840 and exploring different perspectives on Te Tiriti o Waitangi and histories of colonisation.

While some whānau were closely engaged with their children's schooling or involved in curriculum implementation, others had more limited knowledge about what was being taught in relation to Aotearoa New Zealand's histories. Some whānau expressed trust and confidence in their schools. Other whānau felt schools could be doing more to share and communicate what they were doing to implement teaching of Aotearoa New Zealand's histories.

Learning histories at home and wider community contexts

Some ākonga were also learning histories passed down by whānau at home, including their own family, cultural, and ancestral histories. Some ākonga identified particular whānau members as holders of historical knowledge or as being particularly engaged with their school learning about histories. Critical conversations about difficult or painful histories were shared in some whānau, including lived experiences of these events.

Most whānau supported the inclusion of local and iwi histories in schools, as well as histories of other people and communities connected with their areas. Whānau suggested there could be more communication, access to resources, and opportunities to be able to contribute to and support histories teaching and learning, provided these were respectful of people's time and expertise.

Ākonga perspectives on what could be improved

Ākonga noted both challenges and opportunities in learning histories. While those we interviewed largely enjoyed learning histories, they thought some learners' resistance could stem from a lack of personal connection to the content, disengaging teaching, or difficult emotions such as disconnection, sadness, guilt, or shame. They shared thoughtful strategies for overcoming these challenges, including modelling the benefits of collective knowledge-building, encouraging open dialogue, and connecting ākonga with their own histories first as a pathway to understanding others' histories. To make learning engaging, ākonga recommended multi-modal resources, active and creative approaches, field trips, and guest speakers. Secondary ākonga especially valued kaiako who were knowledgeable in histories and able to connect well with learners.

Conclusion

This report was completed prior to the outcome of further rewriting of the Social Sciences learning area, due to be available for feedback in late 2025. Given the signalled intention to "rebalance" histories in curriculum, it seems likely that some decisions will be made about what will be retained, removed, added, or reorganised to achieve this goal. While the history education literature offers useful concepts such as "historical significance" and "historical consciousness" as possible criteria for making these decisions, the literature also demonstrates the ways in which politics and power feed into debates about which aspects of history should be included or prioritised in school education.

The move towards a curriculum that is more specific about what content to teach, and when to teach it, *could* help to overcome prior inconsistencies in the teaching and learning of our national histories by supporting teachers and schools who may otherwise be unprepared or reluctant to teach these histories. However, there is also a risk that, if teachers and learners feel pressured to meet the demands of content coverage in a busy curriculum, the exploration of diverse localised histories might be diminished. Given the long campaigns to strengthen the depth and focus onto Māori histories and Aotearoa New Zealand's histories of colonisation in school learning, we hope that these facets of our histories will remain strongly visible and well supported in the updated curriculum.

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