

Chapter 2 “Nothing great is easily won”

Cathy Wylie

Te Papapa School in Onehunga has around 240 students, predominantly Pasifika and Māori. It serves mainly low-income families within a gentrifying inner Auckland suburb. The school roll is volatile, with a high proportion of transient students, making it hard to plan ahead in terms of teacher numbers. In 2016 that resulted in higher than desirable class sizes (28–30 for some classes).

Not long after Robyn Curry was appointed principal of Te Papapa School in 2009, she “completely floored” a board member when she gave the board a report on student achievement. The board member commented, “We thought it was all rosy.” Such concern for student achievement and honesty gave the board faith in the changes she began to make and their full support to make those changes. One senior school leader said that when Robyn started as principal “we sent our Year 6s away with less than 10% achieving at or above National Standards”; around 90% had not achieved the National Standards. In mid-2016 the school’s careful tracking of student progress showed a substantial improvement: only 21% of all students were seen as being at risk of not achieving the national standard by the end of the year in maths, 27% in reading, and 34% in writing. Its 2014 Education

Review Office (ERO) review resulted in it achieving ERO’s highest level, a 4–5-year review return.

How had Robyn’s leadership led to this turnaround? What teaching practices and school culture underpin increasing student performance in a school serving families who often have insecurity of housing and work?

What Robyn brought to Te Papapa School

Robyn was new to the role of principal when she came to Te Papapa School. She brought with her a fundamental belief in the students’ abilities, and their entitlement to teachers who would have high expectations of them and see themselves as responsible for student achievement:

I so believe in these kids, they have so much potential. I’m just sick of the perception out there that Māori and Pasifika kids means a poor school. They’re not racist comments but they’re just such low expectations for these awesome kids. Of course there are social challenges, but the only way to break the cycle is for our kids to have opportunity and choice, and the person who will make the biggest difference is ultimately the classroom teacher. (Principal)

The school philosophy is: no failure for the kids. If the kids don’t understand, it’s the teacher’s responsibility. With my older one [who went to another school], she says, ‘I don’t ask any more because the teacher gets angry.’ I said, ‘Why is this, is it just apathy or the work’s too hard, or you’re scared?’ For her it was all three. At Te Papapa School they’re eliminating that. If it doesn’t work, they’ll try something else. (Parent)

Early solutions addressed obstacles to children attending school, such as introducing a breakfast club; making free lunches available; getting support from the KidsCan charity for shoes, rain gear, and jackets; having a low-cost school uniform and some latitude around it; and no school donation. As one parent said, “The school doesn’t give you any excuse for your child not to be here!”

Robyn also came with considerable knowledge of teaching practices that enable teachers to accurately identify and respond to individual needs so that students were engaged in learning that progressed them. She had

seen the benefits of differentiated teaching in her former work with students with special education needs, including students whose behaviour had caused grief to both themselves and others. She came directly from a seconded advisory position with the University of Auckland's Team Solutions which gave her "fantastic learning with experienced principals, and cutting-edge research." These colleagues gave her vital mentorship and support with what was a demanding change process at the school. They worked with her to move teachers away from a narrow uniform programme approach, where "I got really sad to walk into classrooms and see teachers doing the same thing ... All the children's stories would look the same," to develop teachers' capability in formative assessment. As teachers saw improvements in student learning, they became more enthusiastic about this approach—and their expectations grew for what Te Papapa School students could achieve. Putting students first meant changing teaching practices. It meant teachers paying much more attention to the evidence they had for student progress, and the effectiveness of different strategies:

She gives free rein to teachers to work in their own style; the one thing she expects is that it's formative in practice and results in student achievement. (Senior leader)

It meant teachers working together more, discussing student progress in relation to what different teachers were doing, and it meant that school roles changed to serve this approach. When Robyn arrived at the school the teachers worked in two teams, each headed by an assistant principal. Teachers now describe a structure of distributed leadership, with roles based on individual strengths. One senior leadership team role now focuses on overall curriculum assessment responsibility, and the other on special needs and student behaviour. Both of these roles have been funded by the school board of trustees so leaders can spend time coaching and mentoring other teachers. Three team leaders take overall responsibility for a particular curriculum area and other key aspects such as work with families. They lead professional learning groups in regular cycles, discussing the evidence for student progress and whether strategies are working. They also lead the three groups of teachers working with the early years, middle years, and senior years of the school. The senior leadership team and team leaders meet each

Friday morning and identify teacher and student support needs, and one senior leader commented, “This is a very strong team, tight and consistent. We value our differences, the way we can bounce off each other.”

Teachers admired Robyn for her belief in them and her challenging of them: her focus always on growth, whether student or teacher. They spoke of her leading by example, of being clear and passionate, always treating children and adults with warmth and respect, and being highly knowledgeable:

I definitely landed on my feet coming here. I’ve really been set up for success in my career ... it’s not always easy but if you want to do a good job it shouldn’t be easy. She gives us such opportunities for leadership, identifying your strength and giving you opportunities to grow within that... She builds your capability, challenges you all the time in your leadership, you’re never resting on your laurels, it’s always ‘What can we do better?’ It always comes back to our children. It’s not about us, it’s about the kids. (Team leader)

Board members saw commitment, determination, openness, and high expectations of herself and the staff to improve children’s learning and achievement. One drew lessons for his own leadership role from the way she kept growing her staff and took their accountability for performance seriously. They admired her both as a leader and a human being.

Inclusion of parents

Parents felt welcome in the school and included in their child’s learning. One parent offers an insightful glimpse:

What I like about this school more than any other is the inclusion of the parents. A lot of programmes to support parents reading to the children, support for the parents to continue the children’s learning at home, resource packs for exactly what they’re learning in the classroom, so parents know where they’re studying, what level they’re at right across the spectrum, numeracy, literacy, the whole lot. We have a real view of their progress. Helped me learn a lot as well, how I can help my children.

Another parent noted that, while recognition of students’ cultures was a hallmark of the school before Robyn came, she had added a much

stronger focus on the children's achievement. Robyn signalled both her respect for parents and the role that their child's learning would play as the common language with teachers by opening the staffroom for parents to come in and have a cup of tea or coffee whenever they wanted, and talk to teachers there, and then by opening the classrooms to them to visit whenever they chose. Parents felt respected by this encouragement to observe their children learning and through the ways teachers worked with them to support their children's learning:

My daughter didn't like maths. At the beginning of the year I came in and I talked with the teacher and they're like really into her with the maths, and I follow up, and she really enjoys it now. She says, 'Oh now I get it Mum and before I didn't, that's why I said I didn't like it.' Really good for me to follow up, I always come in for the 3-way conference, then I follow up with the teacher, about their development, look at her tests. (Parent)

Te Papapa School had embedded the Mutukaroa approach¹ to home-school partnerships that involve parents more deeply in their children's learning, with one of the leadership team sitting down with parents individually and sharing with them their child's progress, learning goals, and games or activities they could do with their child at home to support their progress.

Parents' comments showed enthusiasm for this partnership, the activities they did at home with their child, and the efficacy it gave them:

That was another fear I had, how am I going to help her if I don't know what she's learning at school? But here they tell me what she's learning, how I can help her at home, I know exactly what she's learning.

It's fun learning—if I had that I'd still be in school!

I struggled in school, I don't know whether it was the teaching or not, but I don't want my child to struggle. So Mutukaroa has been really important, means I get to help her, not just the teachers.

Robyn's emphasis on the importance of home-school partnerships and high expectations for students saw parents invited to periodic

1 <http://elearning.tki.org.nz/Beyond-the-classroom/Engaging-with-the-community/The-Mutukaroa-project>

workshops to see what learning progression looked like and how it could be supported with strategies at home. A recent workshop had 35 family members attending, with both parents and teachers recalling the fun in learning they had experienced together. Another was aimed at families of students who were at risk of not achieving the National Standards. The teacher leading this workshop shared the patterns in what the students were struggling with, focusing on a few things with related activities that parents could do with their children at home, and highlighting parental agency:

I refer to research, that the amount of words that a child knows at 5 is the best indicator of how they do at 16. I say there’s no reason just because you don’t live in a big flash house, don’t have a big car, and all the things that others have that your children can’t be the most successful. (Team leader)

Establishing open relationships and high expectations for children’s success with family also occurred through a transition group, working with local early childhood education services to identify children coming through. The programme involved more than the customary school visits by students before they started, and had included a professional learning group of Te Papapa School and early childhood education teachers looking at curriculum alignment to make the children’s transition smoother.

Robyn also met with Māori whānau, with Tongan parents, and with Samoan parents to get their perspectives on how well the school was meeting their children’s needs. From the meetings with Māori whānau came the setting up of a Māori bilingual class for Year 5–6 students. Te reo Māori is visible around the school, in the school values, and is used in class instructions. The morning school announcements on the intercom are done by students, and start with karakia. New students and visitors are welcomed in through pōwhiri, with students leading the welcome in te reo Māori.

Seeing that students going into the bilingual class needed more vocabulary and proficiency, the school has now included explicit teaching of te reo Māori in all its classes:

I looked at a lot of schools around Onehunga, and this is the only one that jumped out at me. It’s important for me as Māori to see

Māori words, pictures, something that says we're NZ and helps my child learn more about her Māoritanga because I wasn't doing that, but the school has brought in all that. She's learning Māori words, Māori songs, that just blew me away ... my daughter has got a sense of belonging, of who she is, and we can build on that at home. That's tremendous for our daughter's education, for us. (Parent)

Tongan and Samoan parents also saw their cultures respected in the school, in the everyday as well as the cultural festivals aligned with their national language weeks. One parent commented, "Another thing we like about Mrs Curry, she engages with each cultural group. She tries her best to blend in: she dances, wears cultural clothes, eats our food." Several talked of the school as family, or as one parent put it, "The school felt like family, a community family ... you can feel the unity."

Parents also talked of feeling personally respected by the principal, feeling her door was always open to them, and never seeing her ruffled. She knew their names, she knew their families.

Inclusion of all students

The action of putting the students first every time was applied to *all* students who enrolled at Te Papapa School. As a result, the school was both safe and supportive for a wide range of learners, and it had become a magnet school. It took more than its fair share of students with special needs, including students who other schools had deterred from enrolment or had failed to engage and build their capability. As well as seven students on the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS) or with high learning needs, it had 15 of its 247 students on the Ministry of Education's Behaviour Service and Support, and two more in the Intensive Wraparound Service. Thirty-five students were from families with Child, Youth and Family (CYF) involvement, indicating children dealing with stressful circumstances. There were 83 children on the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) register. Since Robyn became principal, Te Papapa School has not suspended or excluded any student, in line with its commitment to inclusion and adult responsibility for student learning, and she commented, "We don't kick any child out. I would never do that to my child, so why would I do that to anyone else's child?"

Fully including all students at Te Papapa School needed a four-pronged approach by school leadership. First, the school provided differentiated learning that engages students and speaks to their strengths and needs (covered in the next section). Second, it had developed a school culture and values that built staff and student social–emotional capabilities and respect and support for one another. Third, the school developed strong partnerships with skilled specialists. Fourth, it tried to get timely and relevant support from government agencies for children and families. The first three prongs of the Te Papapa School approach were working well. The fourth prong was the cause of some frustration and pain because government agencies were not well geared or resourced to provide the support needed.

Building a respectful and supportive school culture

Te Papapa School was an early entrant in the Ministry of Education’s Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) initiative. All of the school’s teachers have undertaken the Incredible Years Teacher Programme, which builds teachers’ skills and strategies in managing behaviour by defining and recognising positive behaviour and building children’s social and emotional skills. It has strong systems and processes to support positive behaviour as a result of it being a PB4L School-Wide school for 5 years. It is now a Tier 2 school in PB4L School-Wide, using particular approaches for the students whose behaviour needs individual intervention. One example that was working well was “Check in, Check out,” aimed at children who misbehaved in order to get adult attention. Teachers and teacher aides periodically checked in with these children to give them positive adult attention, such as taking photos of the child learning and saying, “How are you going?”

Teacher aides—usually from the community—who often had their own children in the school were an important part of the school-wide approach. They worked closely with the SENCO and classroom teachers as part of classroom programmes rather than attached to one child, and were included in professional learning.

Interactions between school staff and students were warm. The students were confident and trusting. The school’s values, developed with students and their community, are *mana* (defined as ‘respect’), *manaakitanga* (defined as ‘caring for each other and the environment’),

and mahi tahi ('working and learning together'). Year 6 students I interviewed said they liked their school because "everyone has friends," "everyone is nice to each other," "we get to see the best part of every culture," and that teachers were "fair: we are one big family."

Student feedback on each other's work is a common element in the teaching practice at Te Papapa School. Students also spoke of helping each other by sharing ideas for writing if someone was stuck, and by not distracting others. Parents noted that the children were generally tolerant, and accepting of difference. Student views are sought and used. When it came to developing the playground, they visited other schools to feed into their identification of what they would like to have and why. Students are given roles of responsibility within their class and school and sometimes with other students:

The kids that help him in his class, they have to keep an eye on him at lunchtime, like make sure he's got his lunchbox, doesn't throw it in a tree or something. He's always got a carer, who's one of the kids, not an adult, and I think that's cool because it teaches the kids how to care for other people. (Parent)

Partnering

The leadership team ensured that the school worked closely with a range of specialist expertise. Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) were in the school several days a week working with teachers. "We really see them as colleagues rather than people 'coming in,'" said one teacher. One of these RTLB had been their PB4L School-Wide coach for 4 years. She and a Ministry of Education special education psychologist were part of the school's PB4L School-Wide monthly team meeting to ensure cohesion. They ran relevant professional learning sessions for staff, often with teachers and teacher aides together, or shared professional learning with them, such as a recent day on restorative practices.

Recently the school has had particular success with a small group of 10 children, working with one of the special education psychologists on a narrative therapy approach, where students write books with adults and choose what positive behaviour they want to have noticed. The book goes home to parents or caregivers, as well as being shared with adults in the school:

We were able to support that child to change the way he views himself, to change the way the school community views him, to change his reputation—between the work of this psychologist, his supportive Nana, and a stunning teacher willing to go that extra mile—a significant shift in the space of about 16 weeks from that kid who you had to ring Nana about ‘he’s on the roof again’— he was so angry—to one who had a better understanding of what he could do when that feeling of anger comes over him. He is not perfect, he still has blips—but he became a student counsellor this year. (SENCO)

Good relations with local police had also led to the successful ‘police squad’, building a group of boys’ social and self-management skills so that they could turn away from physical conflict in the playground: showing how skills such as deep breathing, self-talk, setting goals, and visualising enabled police and Navy Seal teams to work through tense situations. This was followed up with a session with local rugby league players reinforcing these messages.

A part-time social worker has been invaluable, as has the local public health nurse. They too were seen as part of the school team, rather than as periodic visitors.

The enduring quest for connected support

There was further support that the children needed that Robyn and her staff found difficult to access. Ministry of Education speech language therapists were in short supply and often inexperienced. It had taken 4 years to get some counselling through CYF for a traumatised child. It was even more difficult to get assessments of children’s mental and health needs and follow-up if children and their families were not under CYF care. Families who needed support that could come through CYF were often reluctant to approach the agency, associating it with loss of control over their family: “As soon as you get CYF involved, the families lose trust, they often pick up their children and run somewhere else ... even if I tell them there are whānau agreements they can have, that they’re not out to uplift your children.”

On one occasion, Robyn had called all the relevant agencies together to seek more connected support for the children and their families. However, each agency operates with its own service priorities and processes, and what she sought continues to be elusive. While she felt that

the staff were doing well in addressing barriers to learning inside the school, it was harder to address the barriers students faced beyond it:

I dread to think how many hours you spend having these meetings, fighting for the basic rights of children, how can they possibly access learning to the level that they need to, when those basic needs aren't being met?

I say to my teachers, you can't use deficit thinking, you can't tell us they're not learning because they're not going to bed on time, or they're not having breakfast, because we give them breakfast, we let them sleep, we do all those things because ultimately we want them to learn, because the only way these kids are ever going to get equity in this world, is if they're educated, and they have some choice, so that's what always drives me, and to do that they need interagency work, they need this wraparound for all their needs, and they need the very best teachers. (Principal)

Robyn's advocacy for students and her core belief that every student's needs should be well met meant that the school had a strong culture and set of practices and partnerships to support and develop students' own agency. She continued to seek the additional support for the school's students and families, despite ongoing difficulties.

Growing the best teachers

Responsibility for the efficacy and success of its teachers is at the heart of the Te Papapa School leadership work and the decision to prioritise staffing resources for the leadership team to work directly with individual teachers. There is a collective approach to teaching practice:

The model is that a teacher is never left on their own, so when they come into the school we put a coach in with them for part of the day, and then we make a decision on what kind of coaching it will be, whether it's talking with the teacher, whether it's the modelling, whether it's observation then giving the feedback afterwards, whether it's the interruption model—whatever fits, whatever is right for that teacher, but we work really hard to make sure that no teacher is ever left to struggle on their own. We try to identify really quickly where the support is needed. (Principal)

Care was also taken to distribute the students with high behavioural needs so that new teachers to the school—who were also often beginning teachers—had none or only one in their class. This was proving more difficult with the current number of such students.

Some of the hallmarks of the Te Papapa School pedagogy are:

- Intensive planning based on the evidence of what children could do and what they needed to do next, in relation to clear progressions. The planning was done every few days, within 3-weekly cycles checking where students were in relation to the progress they should make through the year. Te Papapa School teachers and team leaders had worked together to create clear sets of progressions in reading, writing, and mathematics based on national documents. Finding that the first writing stage was very broad, with students staying for a long time at the emergent level, the team leader described four stages within it, so that both students and teachers could describe progress and set specific goals.
- Fluid grouping of children, often changing week to week, and by their needs, not by their progression level. Children did not need to have achieved everything in a progression level to gain from being exposed to material and skills at the next level.
- Professional learning groups every fortnight bring teachers together to discuss target students as a team, think of different ways of doing things—which might include cross-class grouping—and report back on how well something new had worked. This grows individual teacher knowledge and confidence to be adaptive as well as the sense of collective responsibility for all students’ progress. It had taken a while for teachers to see that the focus on target students (those achieving below the national standard) was not only for the target students’ benefit, but would benefit all their students through their strengthening of their reflection on what they were doing and the impact it had.
- Tracking of student progress at the individual teacher, team leader, and school leader levels, and sharing of this tracking so that everyone can see what is happening, enabling the quick identification of any stalling in progress—or gains that could be inquired into and learnt from, and for leaders to have “these really challenging

conversations with teachers” (Team leader). School leaders seeing patterns of progress across year levels over time could lead to fruitful discussions; for example, of whether in the desire to accelerate students, some knowledge or skills had been missed. “I talk about how it takes longer to bake a cake in an oven than a microwave, but it tastes better. You can’t microwave learning” (Team leader). It had led to an innovative weaving of phonics work in whole language work that was resulting in much more solid progress for the early years of school.

- The encouragement of mutual challenge, on the basis of evidence, and seeking clarification. “It’s important at staff meetings that everyone feels safe to challenge and question, ask for clarification—nothing should be about compliance, we should do things because it will make a difference for the children” (Principal).
- An increasing use of student goals, classroom walls, peers (“talk partners”), and teacher aides as resources for learning, so that student learning is not held up waiting for teacher attention. The Year 6 students I spoke with gave me some specific goals they were working on, such as “to read with purpose”, “skimming and scanning to get information quick”, “to hook the reader, otherwise they’ll get bored, put away our story.”
- Learning as play: resources that are engaging to use and chosen to advance the students: there is no ‘busy work’.
- Weaving of literacy and mathematics learning into other curriculum areas, which often had a project focus.
- Explicit linking of school learning with having a good future.
- An increasing emphasis on students’ capability to review their own work and have a ‘growth mindset’:

Teachers help me to learn by always asking me questions about my work, asking me have I improved, or can I do much better. So I have challenging thinking on my work. (Year 6 student)

We love the teachers and we’ve got the best staff members here, they push us, they believe in the growth mindset, so we do too. They support us. (Year 6 student)

Reflections for readers

Several students told me proudly that *Nothing Great is Easily Won* was their school motto. One of the things they believed in and liked about their school was that they were supported to keep growing and accomplish something that would not have seemed possible when they began. When they introduced themselves to me, they told me not just their names but, without anyone asking, also gave their ethnic culture(s), and what they wanted to be. Each of them could see themselves in a desired role, some of which would be new for their families: (in alphabetical order) a builder, carpenter, cop, news reporter, scientist, soccer player, and veterinarian.

The school motto also speaks to the staff and buoys them when their energy flags. The staff I spoke with glowed with the rewards of working with the Te Papapa School community students, and of working together as a supportive team in a school that demanded that they too be continual learners, innovators, and contributors, evaluating their own impact.

The hardest—sores—challenges in their work came not from the students, but from the school context. Despite the school’s high ERO standing and the achievement levels of its students, it was bypassed by local families who placed their faith in schools with higher decile ratings. The inclusiveness and openness of the school sometimes counted against it. The early childhood education service that Robyn had championed to set up on the school site did not see itself as part of the Te Papapa School community. The volatile school roll resulted in higher than desirable class sizes (28–30 for some classes). The size of the school made it harder to keep teachers seeking promotion. The intensity of the work could lead teachers who Te Papapa School had grown to seek other schools. Auckland’s housing costs had also played a role in some recent staff departures.

Robyn and her staff did not gloss over these external challenges, nor were they daunted by them. Their focus was the students and ensuring they did their best by them. In our final discussion, with her two senior leaders present, Robyn asked me, “Where do you see the gaps in my leadership?” That question, in their presence, tells you much about the depth and strength of her leadership of Te Papapa School.

I hope that this description shows what high-quality and committed leadership can achieve for students, teachers, and parents and whānau in challenging circumstances.

Reflective questions

As reflective questions after reading this chapter, school leaders may want to ask themselves:

1. What am I doing to grow the agency and efficacy of my teachers, students, parents, and whānau?
2. How does our system support the development of such leadership, and the inter-agency capacity that it needs to support it?