



Border Crossing: Supporting factors of collaboration across sectors in one Kāhui Ako/Community of Learning

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ABSTRACT

In theory, collaboration is a key component of education in Aotearoa New Zealand. In practice, however, cross sector collaborative relationships are not so easily established or maintained, even when collaboration is 'mandated' through government policy. This research explores the perspectives of nine teachers from one Kāhui Ako/Community of Learning (Kāhui Ako), who discussed the successes and challenges they experienced when collaborating across sectors. With commitment to collaborative work, the research participants were able to cross the borders that exist within and extend beyond the education sectors, exploring exciting new frontiers of leadership and learning. The teachers' experiences were analysed using a social learning theory lens, highlighting the complex nature of cross-sector collaboration. It is hoped this research will support other education communities to evaluate the effectiveness of their own collaborative endeavours.

INTRODUCTION

The nature of teachers' work in English medium education is becoming increasingly collaborative, in response to diverse, globally connected learning communities (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2021). One such initiative that calls for collaboration across sectors in Aotearoa New Zealand is Kāhui Ako (Kamp, 2019). The Kāhui Ako initiative affords co-located groups of schools and Early Childhood Education (ECE) providers the resources and guidance they need to collaboratively support the learners in their region, as well as the professional capabilities of teachers (New Appointments National Panel [NANP], 2021; Sinnema et al., 2021). With 220 schools and over 60,000 learners in various Kāhui Ako across Aotearoa New Zealand (NANP, 2021), the initiative is one of the most widespread collaborative initiatives that intentionally promotes across sector collaboration (Kamp, 2019).

Ten years after the beginning of the Kāhui Ako initiative, research regarding the role of Kāhui Ako in the education system is rather limited, considering the number of teachers who are involved in one. While a number of research projects explore discrete Kāhui Ako initiatives or draw on their existing networks for participants (see, for example, Bond et al., 2019; Stevens, 2019),

there is a notable lack of literature regarding which collaborative practices support Kāhui Ako work, and why (Education Review office - Te Tari Arotake Mātauranga [ERO], 2019). Instead, the focus tends to lean toward what is *not* working, referring to the barriers in collaboration that Kāhui Ako members face (Sinnema et al., 2021). There is also evidence of inequity regarding the early education sector, recognised by Kāhui Ako members (NANP, 2022) but not addressed in changes to policy (Wylie, 2016). For these reasons, this research project sought to highlight the *supporting* factors of a Kāhui Ako that contributed to effective cross-sector collaboration, across ECE, primary, and secondary school sectors. The research question that guided this study was: *What are the supporting factors of across sector collaboration in one Kāhui Ako?*

There were compelling connections between the experiences of research participants and particular aspects of social learning theory (Wenger et al., 2002). The Communities of Practice (CoP) conceptual model of social learning was central to this research. The CoP model underlines organisational, cultural, and practical aspects of social learning. Furthermore, the attitudes and attributes of community members who collaborate effectively were explored using a systems convening approach to leadership, a style that is also firmly grounded in social learning theory (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2021).

WHAT ARE KĀHUI AKO?

Kāhui Ako are communities of schools and ECE providers that have agreed to work together. The Kāhui Ako initiative is a principal factor of the 2013 *Investing in Educational Success* policy in Aotearoa New Zealand (Rawlins et al., 2014). Kāhui Ako are also known as communities of learning and were originally termed communities of schools. The change of name illustrates how the Kāhui Ako initiative has adapted since its beginning: to be more inclusive of across sector participants, to increase leadership opportunities across communities, and to have a broader scope of foci, or achieve challenges, for Kāhui Ako to work on collaboratively (Wylie, 2016). Achieve challenges are agreed upon goals based on the needs of local students, using local expertise to solve local issues. The purpose of an achieve challenge is to address equity issues in education, with the mission for every Kāhui Ako being “equity and excellence for ākonga [learners]” (Kamp, 2019, p. 1).

Another important element of Kāhui Ako is the commitment to a more diverse range of career opportunities for teachers and leaders (Sinnema et al., 2021). Each Kāhui Ako is guided by a governance group and led by a Lead Principal. Further positional roles include Across Sector Leads and Within School Leads. Across Sector Leads (Sometimes called Across Sector Teachers or Across Community Leads) work across settings to support the implementation of Kāhui Ako work. Within School Leads are charged with leading inquiries that are relevant to achieve challenges, therefore building relevant professional capacity (NANP, 2021).

WHAT IS SOCIAL LEARNING?

The key theoretical underpinning for this research was social learning theory (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015; 2021), where knowledge is contextual and created by people. Social learning occurs when people who are passionate about a particular topic learn by sharing ideas and experiences on a regular basis. A central concept for social learning theory is the notion of capital. Simply put, capital is what a person knows, or their expertise (Clark, 2018), and how relevant that knowledge is to other people and their context. For example, teachers have different capital to doctors; ECE teachers have different capital to secondary school teachers. People with similar types of capital form communities and a kind of metaphorical ‘border’ is created (Clark, 2018).

The borders that exist around different education sectors are created by a range of variables such as curriculum, pedagogy, funding, timetabling, and competition for enrolments (Sinnema et al., 2021). All these variables affect the capital of teachers across education sectors, and therefore, their sense of identity and their willingness to collaborate within their broader education community. The notion of the border and social capital were highly relevant to this research because, as Kamp (2019) explains, “Kāhui Ako are designed to work in the spaces *between* schools ... early childhood and tertiary education providers, and other agencies working for and with ākonga” (p. 6).

Specific aspects of social learning theory that were important for this research were the CoP conceptual model of social learning (Wenger et al., 2002), and the systems convening approach to leadership (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2021), both of which will be explained below. Systems convening and CoPs both explore notions of community boundaries and the importance of sharing capital. The CoP model was used to analyse the complexity of how Kāhui Ako members worked together. Systems convening was used to analyse the particular kind of leadership needed to support collaboration across sectors.

Communities of Practice (CoP)

CoPs are groups of people who come together to share ideas and learn from each other in order to solve shared problems (Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023). CoPs “develop around the things that matter to people” (Wilson-Mah et al., 2021, p. 2), or more specifically, around the needs of practitioners of any given field. Through a CoP, even the most complex challenges facing practitioners can be addressed through social interaction and collaborative problem solving.

For this research, the three CoP elements of domain, community, and practice were a central focus. The elements ensure capital, or expertise, is shared across a CoP in a sustainable and transformative way. Wenger et al. (2002), and later, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015; 2023) make it very clear: if a group does not have three essential elements, then it is not a CoP. The three elements helped the researcher orient themselves within the complexity of the participating Kāhui Ako.

Domain

The first element of a CoP, *domain*, is the reason people collaborate in the first place. Perhaps a group of people have a shared vision for improvement, or they have identified ‘problems of practice’ they are choosing to work on together. Regardless, the presence of a domain means people in a CoP have a shared

competence and can see potential for improvement through interacting with others (Wilson-Mah et al., 2021).

Community

The *community* element refers to a sense of commitment to each other as learners and professionals. When the community element is present, members of a CoP experience relational trust. That is, members have a sense of responsibility for the learning of others while enjoying a supportive learning environment themselves (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). A strong sense of community means capital can be shared freely, in a culture characterised by professional critique, reciprocity, and growth.

Practice

Practice, the third element of a CoP, refers to a shared repertoire of knowledge. Over time, a CoP develops processes, tools, even a shared language through their work with each other (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023). If existing capital is the reason people collaborate in the first place, the practice element refers to new capital that has been created as a result of their collaboration. The practice element is arguably the most visible of the three, as it refers to changes in practical application of skills and knowledge.

Systems convening: Leading across borders

Also informed by social learning theory, systems convening is a specific type of collaborative social leadership (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2021). Systems convening leadership is focused on ‘bridging’ communities to facilitate collaboration, through the use of transferrable capital. While the leadership approach is not new, the terminology of systems convening gives definition and scope to the actions and attitudes of teachers that seek stronger cross-sector connections.

The attributes and actions of systems conveners were particularly relevant for this research. Systems conveners are motivated to address complex social problems for all community members. They have a vast scope of social and professional capital that is relevant across contexts (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2021). Systems conveners also highlight the capital held by other professionals, and facilitate the conditions needed for people to collaborate. They work closely with people while also ensuring systems and initiatives, such as Kāhui Ako, are working as best they can for the people they are intended to serve (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2021). The parallels between the leadership approach described by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2021) and the leadership positions in Kāhui Ako (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2018; NANP, 2022) were many, which helped define the effect leadership has on across sector collaboration in a Kāhui Ako.

RESEARCH METHODS

The researcher worked with members of one Kāhui Ako in an effort to answer their research question. As their research focused on social learning theory, fundamental principles of social learning also informed the research methodology. Participation in the research was to be a professionally rewarding

process, where participants had an opportunity to reflect on and learn from their experiences (Raelin, 2014). The researcher focused on establishing relational trust with participants, or a relationship based on transparency and mutual respect (Resnik, 2023). Relational trust is an essential ingredient for collaboration (Wenger et al., 2002), which makes it highly relevant for an interactive research process where collaboration is the focus. Employing a relational approach ensured that participants were not only protected in the research, but they also benefited professionally from their participation (Raelin, 2014). Establishing relational trust began with a robust consent process and was actively nurtured throughout the research project.

Relational trust was further supported through the use of a researcher's journal. The journal was used to unpack potential assumptions or personal bias that may have affected data analysis (Bell & Waters, 2018). With self-awareness and a critically reflective approach, the researcher was *not only* able to engage in vigorous data collection methods for the research project, but also support a learning opportunity for research participants.

A case study approach was employed for this research because the Kāhui Ako involved was a 'case', or bounded system (Bell & Waters, 2018). The case study approach honoured the broader context of Kāhui Ako while focusing on their very localised, personal experiences in their own community. The 'case', Kāhui Ako J*, was a Kāhui Ako in the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. Once the stewardship group of Kāhui Ako J gave written consent for the research to occur, the 'case' was further defined by working with nine members of Kāhui Ako J who responded to an invitation to participate. The research involved three teachers from ECE, primary, and secondary sector respectively. While not indicative of Kāhui Ako J's professional demographic, the even representation of teachers from the three sectors was vital to this research. Each teacher individually consented to participate in the research, and steps were taken to maintain anonymity of participants through the use of pseudonyms. The nine participating teachers had a wide range of leading and teaching experience in classrooms and in the Kāhui Ako, as indicated in the table below:

Kāhui Ako J research participants				
<i>Name*</i>	<i>Sector</i>	<i>Ethnicity, Gender</i>	<i>Time teaching</i>	<i>Further information</i>
K	ECE	NZ European, F	39 years	Head teacher, public kindergarten
T	ECE	NZ European, F	6 years	Teacher, private kindergarten
W	ECE	NZ European, F	21 years	Senior teacher, public kindergarten. Member of Kāhui Ako J stewardship group.
E	Primary	NZ European, F	17 years	Kāhui Ako Across Sector Lead

H	Primary	NZ European, M	13 years	Kāhui Ako Across Sector Lead
L	Primary	NZ European, F	42 years	Kāhui Ako lead principal
C	Secondary	NZ European, M	11 years	School principal
M	Secondary	Māori/NZ European/Native American/Scottish / German, M	6 years	Within School Lead
S	Secondary	NZ European, F	19 years	Within School Lead
*Identifying letters are pseudonyms, not participant initials.				

Table 1: *Kāhui Ako J research participants*

Teacher participation was centred around individual, semi-structured interviews, which were audio recorded for transcribing purposes. Each participant checked their interview transcript before active thematic analysis began. Having each participant check their interview transcript was another important factor of the ethical process, ensuring accuracy and giving participants a chance to further reflect on their responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Analysis of the confirmed transcripts occurred using the thematic analysis spiral as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step was to explore each interview using a CoP lens, highlighting evidence of the three key elements (domain, community, and practice). The process supported familiarity with the findings and confirmed that social learning theory was, indeed, an appropriate theoretical paradigm for this research. This step was akin to ‘active reading and tentative reflection’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006), an important initial stage that informed the rest of the data analysis. Through further reading and review, the researcher developed broad themes based on recurring words, phrases, or ideas. These themes were revisited several times, “leading to the formation of themes more relevant to the stories of teachers as well as the research question itself” (Williams, 2023, p. 40).

RESEARCH FINDINGS: A COLLABORATIVE, LEADERFUL, COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Data analysis highlighted three themes as key findings. The first theme showed how Kāhui Ako J could be described as an active, effective CoP. The second theme explored the notion of the ‘border’ in Kāhui Ako J, and how people viewed collaboration across the metaphorical borders that exist between and within different education sectors. The third theme explored leadership in the Kāhui Ako and the impact leadership has on collaboration.

The Kāhui Ako was a Community of Practice

The first key theme focused on highlighting parallels between the participant's experiences and the three elements of a CoP. To reiterate, these are domain, community, and practice, and there was ample evidence of all three.

For Kāhui Ako J, the domain was improving educational outcomes for learners of their particular region. Participant L, a lead principal for Kāhui Ako J, explained, "We should be able to develop around our own uniqueness, around the children, but still have this common goal of actually improving education for the region." Educational success for all learners was identified as the overarching purpose of collaboration for every Kāhui Ako (Kamp, 2019) and reiterated consistently through the research project at a local level by Kāhui Ako J teachers (Williams, 2023).

There was a strong sense of collective responsibility among the participants for the education and wellbeing of all students in their region. In their interview, participant E stated teachers wanted to "get it right for our kids", which was a sentiment echoed throughout other interview discussions. Teachers referred to learners not just in their school, but their siblings, the learners they were yet to teach, the learners who had moved on to older classrooms. The collective responsibility for all learners was Kāhui Ako J's domain, or purpose for collaboration; they had a vision for improvement, as well as shared knowledge about, and sense of responsibility for, the region and the learners that lived there.

The next element, community, was evident in Kāhui Ako J through their celebration of establishing a collaborative culture. Eight of the nine participants talked about a supportive culture, characterised by a dual sense of belonging and responsibility. Teachers and leaders were supported to learn collaboratively, to seek professional support from colleagues, and to see themselves as someone who had expertise, or capital, to contribute to the Kāhui Ako. Participant C, from the secondary school sector, believed that many members in the Kāhui Ako "genuinely cared for each other". Similarly, Participant K believed the relationships that had been developed were based on "mutual good will to achieve the objective of the Kāhui Ako, which are focused on supporting learners" (Williams, 2023, p. 44). Most participants acknowledged the time and effort it took to develop the collaborative culture, but that it was worth the time. Participant H said it was like a 'J curve', with a slow start that led to strong success.

The final element, practice, was evident in Kāhui Ako J in two ways: actions and artefacts. Actions were things Kāhui Ako members did that promoted or supported collaboration, while artefacts were things Kāhui Ako members created together as a result of collaboration. These actions and artefacts are what the research participants really hung their hats on, sharing them as evidence of how well collaboration in Kāhui Ako J was working.

Examples of actions included effective organisation, or as participant E summarised, "the mechanics of collaboration – some actual planning things". For Kāhui Ako J, this includes shared documents and calendars being used to support strong communication avenues. However, actions also referred to how people consistently interacted with each other. For instance, Participant M described planned meetings as "really respectful, open, and time friendly", as well as "beautifully respectful, wonderfully managed."

Examples of artefacts describe more tangible aspects of practice. Publications, the website, and specific documents such as transition support were

examples of artefacts that were mentioned often. Events also came into the ‘artefact’ category, as many events happened as a result of collaboration. Practice sharing days were particularly important, where many people across Kāhui Ako J were able to share their expertise of passion with a wide audience in a supportive learning environment.

Collaboration across borders was complex, but worth the effort

While the first theme explored the interviews with Communities of Practice in mind, the second key theme focused on the ‘across sector’ element of the research.

Research participants talked at length about importance of across sector collaboration for achieving Kāhui Ako J goals. Participant L, for example, was very passionate about this opportunity: “Across sector collaboration, why would you not? [...] Why would people not want to do that? I don’t get it!” Three more participants made very similar comments to Participant L, explaining the collaboration across sectors was a ‘given’ in Kāhui Ako J. Common themes for discussion for all participants was that teachers “shared families” across services and classrooms, that “if cross-sector collaboration is happening really well, then we are doing the best by children and their families” (Participant W). Furthermore, seven of the eight participants talked explicitly about the desire to ‘bridge’ or ‘narrow’ the gap between sectors to support ongoing success and wellbeing of learners and their families.

Learning about other sectors was another important step toward collaboration across sectors. Many participants shared how spending time with teachers from other sectors helped them learn about differences in curriculum and pedagogy. While learning about work across sectors certainly developed through genuine collaborative work, a certain level of understanding needed to be achieved before that collaborative work could begin. Participants who talked about actively engaging with across sector collaborative efforts felt they had a good understanding of the work that went on in other settings, as well as the specific barriers teachers may face when trying to engage with Kāhui Ako J opportunities.

Even though cross-sector collaboration was a ‘given’ in Kāhui Ako J, participants freely discussed many challenges that had to be addressed before collaboration could occur. Within sector siloing and competition were significant barriers discussed by all participants. Acknowledging historical competition between education settings, and even individual teachers, was an important step in understanding why collaboration can be such a difficult professional undertaking for teachers. Participant S and Participant E, for example, talked about being discouraged from sharing resources and knowledge with other schools, “because they might do it better and then our students will go there” (Participant S). Competition in ECE settings also had a significant effect on collaboration, and it was not historical. Participant T stated that the Kāhui Ako work highlighted within-sector differences and competition; “What I get from Kāhui Ako comes back to noticing there’s a big divide between the [local public] kindergartens and the rest of us.”

The ECE sector was a strong feature in discussions about barriers to collaboration that teachers face. Participating teachers from all sectors acknowledged the specific challenges for ECE teachers when wanting to participate in Kāhui Ako initiative, including funding challenges, limitations for leadership opportunities, and the significant differences of curriculum and

pedagogy for ECE and compulsory sectors. However, teachers with primary and ECE backgrounds specifically also recognised their role in the Kāhui Ako as a chance to advocate for the ECE sector. The participating ECE teachers knew that Kāhui Ako J wanted to support ECE involvement in the Kāhui Ako work. Participant W, an ECE teacher, explained that “collaboration falls apart a little bit when something is more focused on primary and secondary”. Their focus was “putting ECE back into this space”, helping her ECE colleagues navigate the compulsory school sector contexts and vice versa. Similarly, Participant K, also an ECE teacher, talked about the need for ECE teachers to be direct with Kāhui Ako leadership and tell them what they wanted from Kāhui Ako involvement. Leadership in Kāhui Ako was at the centre of success.

The third key finding was the effect leadership had on collaboration. Teachers highlighted positional roles as central success factors for collaboration and often talked about people, by name, as essential to the work that was taking place. The Across Sector Lead, Within School Lead, and Lead Principal roles were generally well understood. While the definition of each role was not completely clear to all the participants, individuals who held those roles were known as points of contact for collaborative work. Participant M, for example, knew who facilitated within school teacher meetings but was not aware that the person facilitating was an Across Sector Lead.

The significant impact of positional school and ECE leadership on collaboration was also identified. Principals in particular were discussed by many participants as both a supporting and inhibiting factor. Participant L, a principal herself, stated that “principals are the biggest enhancers and the biggest roadblocks”. They believed principals did not want to be a ‘roadblock’, but it meant that more work needed to be done to ensure principals “saw themselves” in the collaborative process and could see the benefit of participation for their school. Similarly, Participant C alluded to patience, because schools and centres go through periods of time when Kāhui Ako work might not always be the top priority for leadership. Their belief that the principals in Kāhui Ako J had “genuine care for each other” was a sign that principals could seek support from each other, but also could step back from Kāhui Ako work to focus on ‘things at home’ because there would always be a spot for them at the Kāhui Ako table.

Leadership sustainability was a common topic for discussion for participants who held various leadership positions, ensuring leadership was a shared practice that build individual expertise as well as the profession. This was important, because participants who *were not* positional leaders in Kāhui Ako J or their education setting saw the Kāhui Ako initiative as a chance to “explore big, cool ideas” (Participant H) that would otherwise be unavailable to them. This was seen as leaderful practice; ‘big, cool ideas’ were examples of Kāhui Ako J members showing initiative, being critically reflective, and taking opportunities to share learning with others, outside their usual classrooms.

The importance of leaderful practice was discussed in other ways. Open communication and strong relational trust were consistent themes, highlighted as essential for anyone who wanted to engage in collaborative relationships. For many participants, leaderful practice was a willingness to address “problems of practice” (Participant C) in a collaborative way. The importance of seeking different perspectives, especially across sectors, to solve shared problems was a recurring theme. Participant C wanted to “to know about you and your world, and how that works in your school” when it came to collaborative problem solving.

Participant K shared similar thoughts, explaining, “we all have a range of views”, but also, “we all mutually have that commitment to work together to achieve [positive outcomes for learners].” It was believed the commitment to learning about the work in other sectors would help ‘bridge’ the borders between them. This same approach to learning about work in different contexts was applied to groups outside of the English medium education system, such as iwi, health, local government, and business sectors. Kāhui Ako J members were actively learning about, and collaborating with, people from the wider community that had vested interest in learner’s educational success. Participant C, Participant H, and Participant L in particular spoke at length about the work with wider community they are actively involved in.

In their own ways, every participant has used the Kāhui Ako as an avenue to channel their leaderful practice. All participants made a point of celebrating the Kāhui Ako initiative as something that’s given them the freedom to explore new opportunities and across sector relationships. Notably, every participant also explicitly stated that the Kāhui Ako initiative was a key supporting factor of successful collaboration in its own right.

FIVE SUPPORTING FACTORS OF COLLABORATION

The guiding question for this research was *what are the supporting factors of across sector collaboration in one Kāhui Ako?* The findings of this research focus on what the participants most frequently identified as being effective for Kāhui Ako J, and the parallels between their experiences and aspects of social learning theory. The research has therefore highlighted five key factors that support effective across sector collaboration in Kāhui Ako J. These are organised under two broad themes, *understanding the border*, and *embracing the border*.

Understanding the border

Understanding of the border can be supported using the elements of a CoP. As described earlier in this piece, the elements are *domain*, or a shared competence and reason for collaborating; *community*, or a sense of belonging to and responsibility for the group; and *practice*, or a shared repertoire of tools and expertise (Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayer, 2015). The following three factors can support Kāhui Ako members to understand the borders that exist between education sectors, or indeed, around their Kāhui Ako learning community as a whole.

Factor One: A clearly communicated purpose for collaboration

A clearly communicated purpose for collaboration reflects the domain element of a CoP (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023). For this element to be effective, the vision for improvement in a Kāhui Ako needs to be inclusive and meaningful for all community members, regardless of their education sector. Using this element, the border is understood as a space of potential change and transformation, which is then supported by other necessary elements of a CoP.

Factor Two: A collaborative culture built on relational trust

A collaborative culture built on relational trust draws directly on the *community* element of a CoP. To understand the border through the community element is

to see the border as a place of connection (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2021). Crucially, it means that members respect the work of their colleagues across sectors and seek to understand work happening beyond their own familiar border. Teachers from the three sectors are seen as equals who participate in different kinds of work, rather than somehow ‘less than’ or ‘lacking’.

Factor Three: Recognition of diverse expertise

The third supporting factor is recognition of diverse teacher expertise, which draws directly on the *practice* element of CoP. Understanding the border through a practice lens means Kāhui Ako members see the border as a sort of resource bank that can be drawn from or contributed to. The practice element also explicitly celebrates the capital, or expertise, held by members within the community (Wenger et al., 2023). The focus for members in this case might not be the Kāhui Ako itself, but the opportunities to learn that the Kāhui Ako provides.

Embracing the border

Through the lenses of domain, community, and practice, members of a Kāhui Ako can understand the purpose for across sector collaboration, contribute to a diverse collaborative community, and engage in borders by sharing practices. The next two factors take these diverse ways of understanding the borders and apply them to concepts of leadership. Members of a Kāhui Ako can *embrace the border* through leadership and a learning-focused perspective.

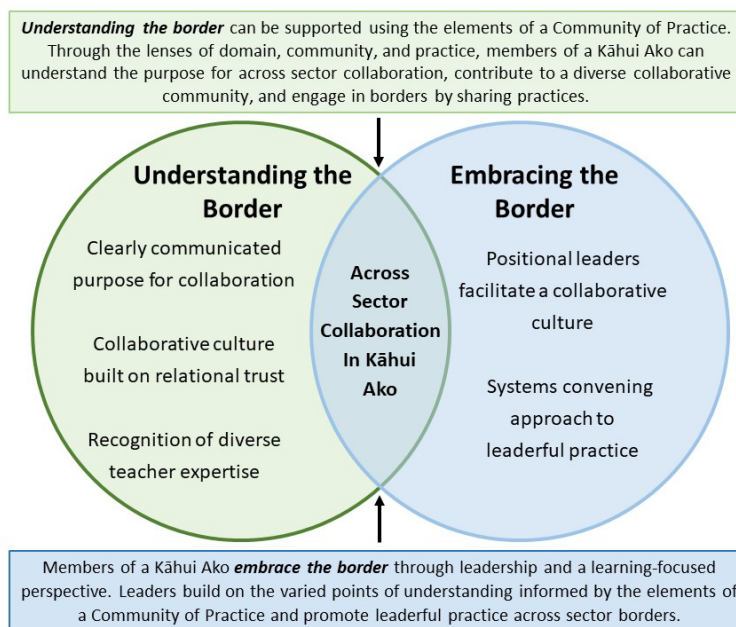


Figure 1: *Five supporting factors of across sector collaboration.*

Factor Four: Positional leaders facilitate a collaborative culture

Without a doubt, positional leadership is, and will continue to be, a cornerstone factor of collaboration in Kāhui Ako. If they are to be a *supporting* factor of collaboration, positional leaders need to facilitate a collaborative culture (NANP, 2022). To do this, Kāhui Ako leadership can draw on the three supporting factors of *understanding the border*. Leaders must ensure that the Kāhui Ako vision for improvement is inclusive and communicated clearly. Leaders need to model a commitment to the development of relational trust and protect the time it takes to establish genuine collaborative relationships. They also need to ensure there are diverse opportunities to engage in across sector collaboration through sharing practices at the borders.

Factor Five: Systems convening approach to leaderful practice

The fifth and final supporting factor for across sector collaboration is a systems convening approach to leaderful practice. With a system convening approach, Kāhui Ako members are able to engage with teachers from other sectors at the border, drawing on and highlighting the capital, or expertise, inherent in themselves and other community members.

As their focus is achieving change for *all* members, Systems conveners also tend to take an equitable approach to engagement (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2021), ensuring steps are taken to ‘reach’ members who may not enjoy the same ease of access to collaborate, such as teachers from ECE or rural schools. The inclusive approach also applies to stakeholders outside the ‘external border’ around the whole Kāhui Ako community who can contribute to achieving the vision for improvement. In the case of Kāhui Ako J, this meant stepping out of the education sector to engage with iwi, as well as health, cultural, and business sectors.

Perhaps the most valuable attribute of systems convening leadership is that borders between ‘systems’, for example, between education sectors, are seen as learning opportunities (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2021). The borders are not a place to try and achieve ‘sameness’, but a place to celebrate *diverse* teacher knowledge and improve practice through sharing of ideas and expertise. Whether they are positional leaders or not, recognising a systems convening approach to leaderful practice helps Kāhui Ako members embrace the border to learn through collaboration.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Using the two concepts of a CoP and systems convening leadership, this research highlights how Kāhui Ako can establish and sustain collaborative norms that improve educational outcomes for their learners. Social learning theory was brought to life through the work of participants. It is hoped that the findings of this research can be used as an evaluative tool for other collaborative education communities, including but not limited to Kāhui Ako.

Systems convening, as described by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2021), provides a compelling map for leadership that is inherently across sector; at the same time, the guidance and professional development for education leaders to step out of their sometimes-insular communities and lead across sectors is quite limited. Even the most expert, passionate teachers and education

leaders are not guaranteed to have the skills and knowledge required to cross sector borders, highlight the capital inherent in community members, and facilitate across sector collaboration. This research proposes that systems convening should be explored as a legitimate leadership approach in education. With focused research on systems convening leadership, the full complexity of the concept could be explored and evaluated for effective use in education.

Similarly, the researcher proposes there is significant value in learning about the elements of a CoP and applying the concepts as evaluative tools in Kāhui Ako communities. More research is needed to highlight effective across sector collaborative practices, and perhaps sharing the results of such evaluations of social learning could be the answer. Leaders who can communicate a clear vision, build collaborative cultures on a basis of belonging and responsibility, and facilitate the sharing of teacher capital or expertise across community borders are in a strong position to support effective across sector collaboration in their Kāhui Ako and wider learning communities.

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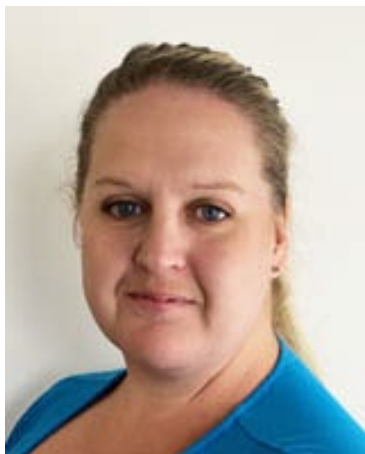
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Based in Whanganui, Tiffany is a lecturer with Te Rito Maioha for their Bachelor of Teaching (ECE) undergraduate programme. Having completed a Bachelor of Education (Teaching) (early years 0-8) in 2009, Tiffany currently works with Te Rito Maioha as well as educators at the Whanganui Learning centre to continue her interest in cross-sector education. Previous professional experience includes teacher and head teacher roles in various early education settings, as well as an Across Sector Lead role for her local Kāhui Ako/ Community of Learning. This article highlights the work of Tiffany's Master's thesis, completed at Te Rito Maioha. While privileging the

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