Nevertheless, we persisted: supporting taiohi voice, agency and leadership on climate change in Porirua

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ABSTRACT

Climate change presents an immediate threat for children living today, and a long-term burden for those living now and in the future. In Aotearoa New Zealand, tamariki Māori (Māori children), Pacific children, and children born into poverty are among those most exposed to climate risk. Taiohi (young people) have a right not just to be treated as a vulnerable group in need of protection from its impacts, but as active agents in crafting solutions. Yet, with the exception of the recently released Health National Adaptation Plan, our national climate policies have to date lacked any reference to children's rights, participation or leadership. Teaching critical literacy and cultural responsiveness, key to understanding issues of identity, values and perspectives, and the drivers of climate change, is simultaneously being rolled back. In the face of these challenges, this article offers a story of hope. Drawing on a case study of a Tiriti (Treaty) based citizen's climate assembly in Porirua city – the first of its kind in Aotearoa – we document our experience as a group of educators who came together, with little lead time and limited resources, to support and empower young people's voice and agency in the Porirua Assembly process. Drawing on early findings from the lead author's doctoral research, we recount the challenges we encountered, actions we took, and the critical role of relationality, creative practice, and culturally congruent ways of working in empowering taiohi voice, agency and leadership. We conclude by considering what may be learnt from our experience to help inform future practice.

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is, fundamentally, a child rights concern. Our children will live longer than anyone with the long-term consequences of climate change; many are already experiencing its impacts (UNICEF, 2025). Climate change affects poor, Indigenous, migrant, disabled, and displaced children most harshly, entrenching existing inequities (Clark, 2021; IPCC, 2023a; Mitchell et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2021).

Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by Aotearoa New Zealand in 1993, children have a right to be informed about and actively involved in crafting solutions to issues that affect them (OHCHR, 1989). Yet in many nations, including ours, children's rights and climate change are still addressed in isolation (Grahn-Farley, 2022). Currently in Aotearoa, there is no mention in any of our national climate policies of children's rights, climate education, or (until very recently) how children might play a role in addressing climate change.

In the face of these constraints, we offer a story of hope. Drawing on a case study of a Tiriti (Treaty) based citizen's climate assembly in Porirua city – the first of its kind in Aotearoa, and the focus of the lead author's doctoral research – we document how we worked together as a group of educators to support young people's involvement in the Porirua Assembly on Climate. From this process, a youth-led group – Future Unity – emerged.

The article is comprised of three parts. The first section broadly discusses the impacts of climate change on child rights, setting out a rationale for children's involvement in climate decision making. We discuss how children are excluded from climate policy decision making, including in Aotearoa New Zealand; the limited scope that currently exists for climate change education, and the efforts that are made nonetheless to ensure tamariki (children) and rangatahi (young people) have opportunities for nature connection. We also discuss current retrograde steps being taken to undermine the teaching of critical literacy and cultural responsiveness in schools. In the second section, we document the process of working as educators to facilitate taiohi involvement in the Porirua Assembly: the challenges encountered, actions undertaken, and the importance of relationality, creative practice and culturally congruent ways of working in empowering taiohi voice, agency and leadership. Finally, we reflect on what may be learnt from our experience.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND CHILD RIGHTS

Impacts of climate change on children

Our children will live longer than anyone else with the impacts of climate breakdown (Baird et al., 2025; Clark, 2021; Kotzé & Knappe, 2023). In 2023, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported that children aged ten or under in 2020 "are projected to experience a nearly four-fold increase in extreme events under 1.5°C of global warming by 2100, and a five-fold increase under 3°C warming" (IPCC, 2023b).

Climate change affects the full range of rights that children hold – from the right to play, to the right to housing, shelter, health and to enjoy their cultural

identity (Arts, 2019; Gibbons, 2014). Physiologically, children are more vulnerable than adults to the health effects of extreme weather, reduced access to water and food, and exposure to communicable diseases (Clark et al., 2020; Pegram & Colon, 2020; UNICEF, 2024). In 2022, around 559 million children worldwide were exposed to high frequency heatwaves (UNICEF, 2022). In the six years to 2023, 43.1 million children experienced displacement due to weather-related events, many likely exacerbated by climate change (UNICEF, 2023). In Aotearoa New Zealand, tamariki Māori, Pacific children, and children born into poverty are among those most exposed to climate risk (McMeeking et al., 2022; Ora Taiao et al, 2022).

Children's rights to voice, agency, and cultural identity

Children emerge into the world entitled to be actively involved in advancing their rights and interests – "differently equal", perhaps, as Ruth Lister (2008) has cogently argued, but still equal. The concept of climate justice – the proposition that those most affected by the impacts of climate change have a right to be involved in crafting solutions – aligns well with this rights-based perspective (Eckersley & Gagnon, 2014; Grosse & Mark, 2020).

These principles of child rights and climate justice are reinforced by relevant international treaties, notably the UNCRC (OHCHR, 1989), as well as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007a) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007b). While rights can never be read in isolation, Article 12 of the UNCRC establishes a child's right to be consulted on matters that concern them and to have their views heard and given due weight (Tobin, 2011). In Aotearoa New Zealand, tikanga (traditional customs and practice) and Te Tiriti o Waitangi[1] hold important implications for the application of children's rights, particularly in relation to tamariki Māori, underpinning their rights to enjoy their cultural identity and maintain connections to whānau (family), whenua (land) and whakapapa (connection to ancestors past, present and future) (Charters et al., 2022).

The exclusion of children from climate decision-making

Since the establishment of the UNCRC in 1989, much has been written about children's participation in public decision-making (Percy-Smith et al., 2023; Thomas, 2007; Tisdall, 2013) – including, more recently, in climate change policymaking (Bersaglio et al., 2015; O'Connell & Botchwey, 2023; Thew et al., 2021; Treichel, 2020). Yet it seems that, globally and nationally, children remain excluded from involvement in climate decision-making. Internationally, critics argue that the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change has so far failed to effectively include them (Grosse & Mark, 2020; van Dijk, 2021). A 2025 survey of ten highly populated countries suggested that the inclusion of children in national climate policies remains both "limited and superficial"; children, if mentioned, are categorised as a vulnerable group in need of protection rather than active

[1] Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) is New Zealand's founding document, agreed in 1840 between representatives of the British Crown and some (but not all) rangatira Māori, or chiefly Māori leaders (Orange, 2023).

agents of change (Li, 2025, p. 5). To address this, UNCRC General Comment 26 urged countries to involve children in climate adaptation planning (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023). The 2024 UN Pact for the Future called for meaningful youth participation at all levels (United Nations, 2024). Jonathan Todres, a professor of child rights law, has called for a "mainstreaming of children and children's rights in both public and private sector dialogues and action on climate change" (2023, p. 3).

Despite having ratified the UNCRC over thirty years ago, and despite many waves of climate protest in recent years, increasingly led by young people (Hayward, 2020; A. Thomas et al., 2019), Aotearoa New Zealand has yet to address children's rights in its climate policies. In 2021, in its submission to the sixth periodic review of New Zealand's commitment to the UNCRC, the government noted that it "does not have any climate change policies or programmes that are specifically aimed at addressing the special vulnerabilities and needs and views of children" (Ministry of Social Development, 2021, p. 38). In its concluding observations, the Committee on the Rights of the Child urged New Zealand to "facilitate the access of children and young people, in particular Maori (sic) and Pasifika children and children living in low-income settings, to meaningful participation in climate change planning and decision-making" (2023, p. 10).

New Zealand's first Nationally Determined Contribution to the Paris Agreement does not mention children (New Zealand Government, 2021), and while its first Emissions Reduction Plan promised to "equip all children and young people for the transition" (New Zealand Government, 2022a, p. 62) and its first National Adaptation Plan promised to "(s)trengthen teaching and learning related to climate change" (New Zealand Government, 2022b, p. 148), the government's second Emissions Reduction Plan removed any substantive mention of children (New Zealand Government, 2024). Promisingly, however, in late 2024, the Ministry of Health released the Health National Adaptation Plan. While it does not specifically reference child rights, for the first time, mention has been made of building youth leadership on climate and learning from young people's insights to inform policy and decision-making (Ministry of Health, 2024). What this means in practice is still unfolding, and it will be interesting to see this work progress.

Climate change education, critical literacy and cultural responsiveness

There are many factors that inhibit children's participation: their social, racial, and ethnic backgrounds; social identity; cumulative disadvantage; institutional opportunities for engagement, and varying social, legal, political and economic barriers (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Parker et al., 2022). In addition, young people express their political agency in multiple and different ways, both within and outside of formal political processes (O'Brien et al., 2018).

A key factor to addressing these barriers is education, both in terms of climate change specifically, and in terms of building broader skills in critical literacy and cultural responsiveness. With regard to climate education, significant work has been undertaken by kaiako (teachers), school leaders and community organisations in the past few decades to ensure that children maintain a connection to Te Taiao (the environment) and play an active role in its restoration. While climate change has not been part of the compulsory

curriculum, kaiako in learning centres, kura and schools have chosen to work with community organisations with the resources available to progress this vital work.[2] Often, this is because they believe that education should be centered in contexts that are relevant, and that it should encourage critical thinking and action on issues such as climate change. Kaupapa Māori and Pacific educational philosophies are derived from the centrality of relationships, values and whakapapa (histories). These are explained in Tapasā and the principles of Ka Hikitia, and implicitly consider Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa (the Pacific) and Te Taiao indivisibly from language, culture and identity (Bishop, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2024; Rimoni et al, 2022; Tapasā, 2025).

In terms of critical literacy and cultural responsiveness, steps had been made to reform the curriculum. From 2019 the Labour-led government undertook a phased curriculum refresh, Te Mātaiaho, beginning with the development of a compulsory Aotearoa/NZ Histories curriculum for all ākonga (students) from years 1 to 13 (Ministry of Education, 2023). The term "learning that cannot be left to chance" guides the key understandings, knowledge areas and skills that all children should experience in state and integrated schools. This was followed by the refresh of the Social Sciences Curriculum, completed in 2023, which also identified "learning that cannot be left to chance". Aotearoa/NZ Histories is located within that document. The relevant knowledge areas to climate change includes *understand Māori history as our foundational history of Aotearoa* and *the place of colonisation in our histories*. There is clear planning guidance for kaiako to teach students at all ages, at their appropriate progress level, and within their known local contexts about:

> Te tūrangawaewae me te taiao | Place and environment
> This context focuses on the place of Aotearoa New Zealand in Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa and the world. It explores the economic, cultural, recreational, spiritual, and aesthetic significance of places for people, and how communities seek to enhance liveability and wellbeing within the resources they have available. It considers the interrelationships between human activity and the natural world and the consequences of competing ideas about the control, use, protection, and regeneration of natural resources (Ministry of Education, 2023).

As Therese Ford (Ngāi Takoto, Ngāti Kahu, Ngāpuhi) and Bruce Jepsen (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Raukawa, Tainui) have stated, Te Mātaiaho was developed with a commitment to an ethic of restoration, embodying "a significant step towards a truly bicultural and Treaty-honouring curriculum" (Ford & Jepsen, 2025, p. 22). However, since late 2023, the National-led government has redefined education priorities, mandating changes in the teaching of literacy to introduce a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach focused on phonics only in the first three years of schooling, and rewording the content of Te Mātaiaho to take out Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) as a valid form of knowledge.

Consequently, there has been a shift away from teaching critical literacy, cultural responsiveness and recognising the value of multiple perspectives in information to meet the diverse needs of learners. As Ford and Jepsen (2025)

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[2] See the New Zealand Association of Environmental Education website for a rich source of climate and environmental teaching resources: https://www.nzaee.org.nz/resources

comment, the invisibilisation of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Mātauranga Māori in Te Mātaiaho stands in stark contrast to the original document. Along with the lack of investment in climate education, these changes create enormous barriers for young people seeking to understand the links between colonisation and climate change and how they can play a meaningful role in restoring the mauri (life force) of the land and its people.

OUR PORIRUA STORY

Wairere: we all just jumped in, into a kaupapa.

In the face of these constraints, we turn to discuss an opportunity that arose to do some deep and transformative work with tamariki and rangatahi, kaiako and school leaders in Porirua.[3]

The Porirua Assembly on Climate

While its Indigenous history dates back much further, and colonisation began in the early 19th century, Porirua expanded into an urban centre from the 1950s, when it was established as an industrial centre, attracting an influx of Māori workers and migrant workers from the Pacific.[4] As a result, Porirua's population today is young, significantly Māori and Pacific, and characterised by high levels of economic deprivation in some areas, particularly the East (Bakshi, 2024; Exeter et al., 2018; Gordon, 2020; Stats NZ, 2024).

In the first half of 2025, a citizen's assembly on climate change was held in Porirua. Held across four Saturdays in February and March and a half day in May. It was hosted in partnership between Te Rūnanga o Toa Rangatira, the local tribal authority, and The People Speak/Te Reo o Ngā Tāngata (TPS), a community organisation focused on Tiriti-based deliberative democracy.

The Porirua Assembly on Climate was the first Tiriti-based citizen's assembly to be held in Aotearoa. The culmination of over four years' work, its objective was to develop community-led local solutions to climate change using the standard three-part citizen's assembly process: education, deliberation and recommendation-building.[5]

Following in the footsteps of Matike Mai (Mutu & Jackson, 2016), organisers adopted a two-house model: a mana whenua (tribal) group, and a whole-of-community group. Each group met separately across the four Saturdays, merging into one relational group to develop a final set of joint recommendations. A process of random sortition was used to select 50 participants for the community group, while the mana whenua group was

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[3] This section, and the next one, draws on findings from doctoral research undertaken by the lead author exploring how rangatahi involvement in the Porirua Assembly on Climate might advance their rights in climate. Between February and July 2025, six focus groups were undertaken with children involved in the Porirua Assembly and the associated rangatahi wānanga, as well as 11 semi-structured interviews with adults who had supported their involvement. PhD thesis forthcoming.

[4] https://teara.govt.nz/en/video/25746/porirua

[5] To find out more about the Porirua Assembly, see https://www.ngatitoa.iwi.nz/poriruaassembly as well as Emily Beausoleil's account of its early development: https://cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S0008423924000635/type/journal_article

organised more relationally. Organisers' aim was to bring together a representative group of people from across Porirua to address the Assembly question:

> *"Learning to live with Porirua's changing world together. How do we connect and respond as our climate changes?"*

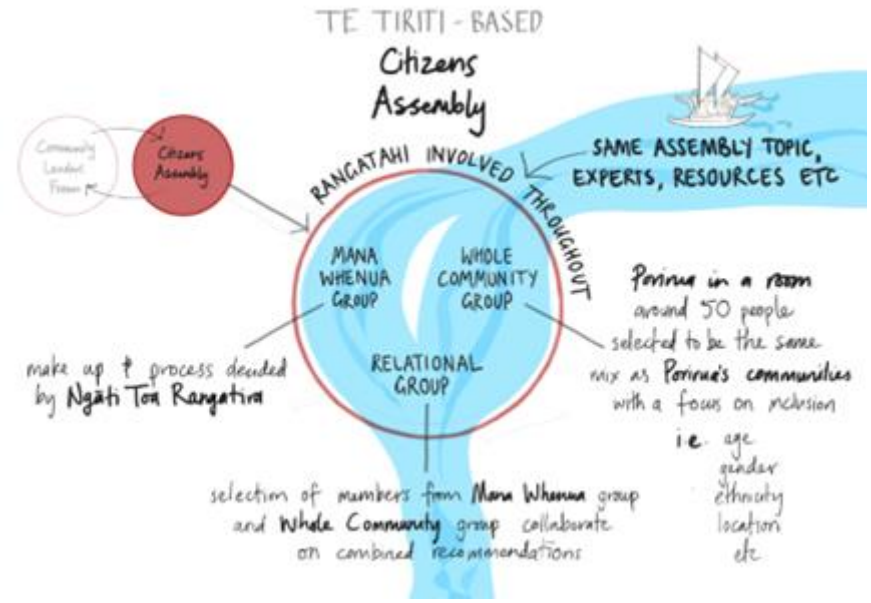

Figure 1. Slide depicting structure of Porirua Citizens Assembly

As well as being the first Tiriti-based citizen's climate assembly, the Porirua Assembly was the first citizen's assembly in Aotearoa to involve people under 18. Organisers had always intended that the Assembly would be "rangatahi-centered"; one practical step to support that, in recognition of the relatively young demographic of Porirua[6], was to lower the minimum age for participation in the Assembly from the standard age of 18, to 15.

An early development in the shaping of the Assembly process was the establishment of the Porirua Community Leaders Forum (PCLF). Formed in late 2021, the PCLF functioned as a governance forum for the Assembly's development. At a PCLF meeting in May 2024, a small group of educators came together to envision how rangatahi – including those younger than 15 – might be supported to engage with the Assembly process.

Our group consisted initially of Michele, a senior educator with three decades' experience working as a principal, primarily in Eastern Porirua; Amanda, an Enviroschools community facilitator with 15 years' experience working across schools in Porirua; Wairere (Ngāti Wairere, Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāpuhi), the local Papa Taiao EarthCare community facilitator,

[6] In the 2018 census, the median age of all people in Porirua was 35.1, and the median age of Māori, who made up 22.3% of the Porirua population, was 24.2. Pacific people made up 26.3% of the population of Porirua City (Statistics NZ, 2024).

who holds strong links into secondary schools and into the local Māori arts community; and Conor, a doctoral research student. We were later joined by Orini (Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Awa, Ngāpuhi, Samoa), a third-year teacher trainee from Tairāwhiti.

Notably, Te Rūnanga o Ngāti Toa had already held a rangatahi wānanga (gathering) on climate change in 2023. This event had been for mainly older rangatahi, and specifically for mana whenua, and had produced a beautifully illustrated vision for Porirua. Our group identified the need for a similar process to amplify tamariki and rangatahi voice from the wider community.

The challenge

With only a few months until the start of the Assembly in February 2025, we began organising across schools. While organisers had lowered the age of eligibility for the Assembly, little else had yet been put in place. A date in early September 2024 was initially set for the assembly, adding urgency to our mission. In this context, pre-existing relationships among the taiohi organising team became critical:

> Amanda: I felt like relationally it was based on previous working relationships, so there was already some trust and some willingness and sense of yeah, we can work together. … it was through that trust that we got going.

The winter of 2024 was difficult. In-kind support for kaimahi (worker) time was granted from Enviroschools and Papa Taiao EarthCare. Michele rapidly devised a taiohi workstream plan to feed into Assembly planning. However, initial meetings with kaiako and principals drew a lukewarm response. Under-resourced and under pressure, and with planning for the next school year already underway, many schools baulked at the short notice, or simply did not identify children's involvement in the Assembly as a priority. Assembly organisers had lacked capacity to involve rangatahi in the initial planning. Furthermore, for many students in Porirua, as one principal noted, their immediate priorities do not include climate change – despite the fact that many families hold connections to the Pacific and to papa kāinga (communal Māori land). As Nadine Hura (2025) has further commented, the jargon of climate change can be inaccessible, alienating, and disconnected from Indigenous people's lived experience. Organisers experienced difficulties finding one key contact to work with in each school. Winter illness and teacher burnout added to the challenge. At one meeting in the July term break, only one kaiako turned up.

Nevertheless, we persisted

Despite this challenging scenario, our group persisted. Members of the group had built enduring relationships with schools and kaiako, particularly in the East; these turned out to be key to making progress.

> Amanda: we identified between us where were our relationships, identifying our key kaiako contacts across the schools, and how we

> were going to reach out and bring people into this and connect them in and get them to help us.
>
> Michele: We got traction through a combination of persistence … Amanda had lots of contacts, and I had still quite a few contacts from my time in the area as a principal.

These trust-based relationships in a sense formed the social capital on which something could be built. As one principal commented:

> Beth: I mean, that's why I'm okay with those guys going out with you. … I trust you guys. I've worked with you guys, you're educators.
>
> The second thing was your work … to try and actively engage the schools in talking about the issue, and then pulling together a group of young people to try and offer an input into the assembly, became a more and more important element of this assembly, and was from my point of view, a very welcome element.

The team drew on their experience as environmental educators and curriculum experts to inform their organising work, building connections with tamariki and rangatahi by taking them into natural spaces at the urban fringes of Porirua, and working with them in schools on nature-based projects. Pedagogically, they turned to the social studies curriculum, workshopping the key concepts of "connect" and "respond" contained in the Assembly question. In this way they began to socialise the idea of the Assembly both with kaiako and with young people.

Figure 2. Workshopping "respond and "connect" with students at Puna Taiao, Porirua[7]

In several cases, the teachers and schools which responded were from the East, where the philosophy of Voice, Action and Identity (VAI) had been developed

[7] All photographs reproduced with taiohi permission. Apart from the authors, all names used in this article are pseudonyms.

some years ago across the Kāhui Ako (Community of Learning). These three words reflect the intentions of the Eastern Porirua Kāhui Ako Graduate Profile. VAI is based on a critical pedagogy that sees learning and teaching as a reciprocal process (ako) and a dialogue between teacher and learner --an approach where the students' actions aren't limited to "receiving, filing and storing the deposits" (Freire, 2005, p. 72). What was on offer appeared to connect with these teachers' aspirations for their students:

> Ngaire: I love the VAI … I'm trying to keep that as the thread, that talking about things and taking action is about who they are. … they understand that expressing themselves and talking to others about things is what they want to do, because it shows who they are. … they know just who they are in the world. Then you feel like you have some power.

On other occasions, teachers held a designated role to bring tamariki or rangatahi together across age groups to focus on environmental issues.

> Michele: X School were involved in some restoration work. They had the group of kids that were part of it, that already existed in the school as an environmental group, and so we could make the link to the work that they'd already done. … So there were sort of all these links, which were different, but they helped.

Ultimately the combination of approaches seemed to take hold:

> Michele: I guess with teaching, it's a bit like you take all these different tacks, whether they're up at Puna Taiao doing connect and respond, or you've been into schools and engaged, or Amanda's been in there and done the groundwork over the years. And that's teaching, right? It's kind of not one thing, but a layering of different approaches, which in combination, you hope will have an effect.

Taiohi engagement began to build. As Term 4 progressed, it became clear that a wānanga was needed to bring taiohi together from across schools to clinch their preparation.

A wānanga, an assembly … and the emergence of Future Unity

By the end of term 4, 2024, a mid-February date for the taiohi wānanga had been confirmed, timed to take place the day before the first Assembly Saturday, which had been rescheduled to commence in February 2025. Funding applications for wānanga costs proved unsuccessful, but TPS underwrote the costs of the event, and a film night raised $3000, supplemented by donations. Prior to and immediately after the 2024/2025 summer holidays, the team assiduously chased registration and consent forms for each of the tamariki and rangatahi who attended – 45 in total from 9 schools. Several teachers attended too.

In terms of the purpose and outcome of the day, considerable debate took place among the team. Ultimately it was agreed that the aim was not specifically

to educate taiohi about climate change – or even, as had first been envisaged, to prepare them to present to the Assembly. Instead, and in line with the philosophy of the group itself – as much as one had ever been explicitly articulated – the aim was to draw out from taiohi what they already knew, and how they felt. The goals of the wānanga were thus finalised as follows:

- Rangatahi walk within our community with a sense of belonging.
- A rangatahi collective is formed that takes action towards a thriving Porirua.
- Rangatahi voices are elevated through diverse experiences that prioritize a Māori way of being.

A distinctive aspect of the wānanga was its focus on creative practice, led by local artists. Rather than teaching "climate 101" – such as the basics of greenhouse gas, and the intricacies of climate policy – the focus was on expression: through storytelling, waiata (song) making, spoken word poetry, and visual art.

> Wairere: For me, what is important is ensuring what the kaupapa is, and that the kaupapa is ensuring that young people thrive … the whole idea of climate change in itself is, like, very pākehā. What we needed for the wānanga was to ensure that the experiences of rangatahi were an embodied one. And so we called on experts in facilitating visual arts, waiata and poetry. And those are the ones that pulled all the threads together.

No one foresaw, however, that from the wānanga, a youth-led group would be born. The third stanza of the waiata co-created by taiohi birthed their collective identity – Future Unity:

> THIRD VERSE: FUTURE UNITY
>
> FIGHTING AGAINST POLLUTION
>
> FIGHTING 4 OUR FUTURE
>
> WHAT WE HAD BEFORE
>
> GIVING HEARTS DON'T TAKE ADVANTAGE
>
> LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR
>
> AWHI MAI AWHI ATU
>
> DROP THE MIC, PICK IT UP (X 4)
>
> WHO ARE WE
>
> FUTURE UNITY (X 4)
>
> LESSHGO!!
>
> MIC DROP

Figure 3. The wātaka/agenda for the Wānanga - and the birth of Future Unity

Future Unity took their energy, confidence and collective identity into Day Two of the Assembly. About 20 tamariki and rangatahi returned to sing, read out their poems and deliver speeches.

Figure 4. Future Unity presents to the Porirua Assembly on Climate

A banner identifying taiohi concerns and a design synthesising the values derived from those concerns was also presented to the Assembly.

Figure 5. Banner and values derived from rangatahi wānanga

Subsequently, rangatahi were dispersed across tables with adults for small group discussions. While, based on adult and rangatahi participant feedback, the table sessions generated mixed results, the recommendations ultimately reflected a focus on rangatahi that would not have been there without that engagement.

Figure 6. Summary of recommendations – Porirua Assembly

On invitation from the Assembly organisers, three older rangatahi from Future Unity elected to stay on for the remaining Assembly days, joining the three who had been selected through sortition. That rangatahi group later elected to present the draft recommendations to community leaders.

A future publication will discuss the taiohi experience of the Wānanga and Assembly in more depth, and include many more of their voices. Focus groups with tamariki and rangatahi indicate that, for the young people, however, the experience of identity formation, of emerging as a collective, became *the* defining experience of the Assembly process. With support from adult allies, a taiohi-led group emerged, building personal efficacy –

> Solana (16): as much as it does, like, stress me out to put myself out there and be in like, adult spaces, or whatever you want to call it, at the end of it, I felt good doing it. And so I think it's definitely taught me, like, okay, I can do it one time, I can do it again. You know, like, once we'd done the wānanga, I'm like, Okay, if I can handle that. If I keep putting myself in these situations, I can make a difference, or put my voice out there, or things like that. So just was like, you know, confidence in myself.
> - and collective identity.

> Beth: they're doing the Wānanga and doing it in a way that those kids are celebrated, where they feel comfortable, where they develop their own little culture. They develop their own identity. They'll probably think about who they actually are and where they're from.

EDUCATOR AND TAIOHI REFLECTIONS

At the time of writing, the path forward for the Assembly and for Future Unity is still unfolding. Both Greater Wellington Regional Council and Porirua City Council made formal commitments to respond to the Assembly recommendations within three months of the recommendations being presented. With local elections looming, assessing the policy impact from the Assembly process is a longer term project.

Importantly, teachers identified early on in the Assembly process that to effectively embed the learning from the Assembly process, ongoing community connection and work within and across schools is vital.

> Ngaire: for these children I want there to be a continuation. We did this, and so that means that we do this, and we talk about this, and this is what I feel really strongly about. What it means for them is that they can keep on talking about it and have Enviroschools come back into the school and do something else. It just will keep it alive. ... I want them to be able to articulate it and have the support with ideas and language of how they can talk to other people about it.

Alongside this, adult allies will need to continue to support Future Unity - while ensuring they don't take over or get in the way.

Resourcing for youth-led initiatives is scarce, and Porirua is not a rich council catchment, or community. Across the country, systemic barriers to educational success are growing; as this article was being drafted, an announcement was made about the defunding and disestablishment of Kāhui Ako. However, our Porirua story stands as a testament to the determination of educators. The Porirua Assembly, hosted in partnership between mana whenua and the wider community, catalysed an opportunity for children in Porirua whose voices are rarely heard. With support from adult allies, they seized that opportunity and ran.

> Orini (20): I guess they just want to stay because they can see how, like, learning can be fun, in a sense, like all of the creatives that we got to do, like waiata, poetry and art. It was powerful. I can't even describe because it was that powerful. Because that's kind of like a place where not many rangatahi go. But from this wānanga they actually got to get into it, like, and feel like they all had a voice.

Since the Assembly, Future Unity has spoken at two national conferences and appeared on multiple podcasts and webinars. They have developed their own strategic plan, based on guiding values of whānau, whenua and whakapapa, and focused on nature connection and climate action. Members of Future Unity have

naturally and organically reconnected with their mana whenua peers through school settings and Papa Taiao Earthcare gatherings.

> Maddy (15): I hope we can, like, carry it on for people and that. Get people to, like, come to these and then they can lead the next one, or go to the next one. To make a difference for young people, once we move beyond that, then when we're trying to make an impact, so that the people after us don't have to go through what we're going through now. We're trying to help them, further serve them, when, for example, our kids go to school they're not having, they're having what we created or helped develop.

While time and resources may have precluded rangatahi involvement in Assembly co-design, a group now exists that demands inclusion.

Alongside this, a parallel educational workstream is taking shape. Next steps include the establishment of a cross-Porirua educational network to replace the disestablished Kāhui Ako, focused on providing opportunities for rangatahi to deliberate on the Assembly recommendations and plan further cross-school activities.

What were some of the factors that led to such a powerful moment for taiohi and educators in Porirua? Certainly, the teaching experience and make-up of the educator team was crucial. Despite the lack of resources and time, educators drew on enduring relationships – with schools, teachers, children, each other, and across the Porirua community to carve out space for taiohi involvement. Leadership, capacity and determination were key – on the part of educators both within and outside schools.

> Amanda: All we can really do is do what we can, where we are with what we have, which is kind of partly about that work with the willing. Recognising that it was a matter of actually this is a very unideal scenario. So we did what we could with what we could bring and manage between us, which was letting go of the ideal world scenario and going with a real life actuality.

The use of creative practice and culturally congruent approaches in this process were critical. Our approach centred Te Ao Māori, weaving in story, waiata, art and spoken word in ways that reinforced taiohi collective identity and belonging, upholding their right to enjoy their culture, language and identity, and exercise voice, agency and leadership in climate change.

Many teachers in the East understand that quality education for their students relies on working with the experience and knowledge the student brings to the learning conversation – and supporting them to evaluate and question Western knowledge and behaviours. While current political expectations support the notion that Western knowledge is what counts, future-focused education requires learners to recognise it is not just Western knowledge that counts when looking for solutions. In that sense, our focus on culturally congruent, creative methods that reinforce cultural identity and encourage critical thinking resonated deeply with their aspirations for their students.

> Wairere: I believe we succeeded because heaps of them got what they needed in learning. Activating their learning and their previous knowing all at once. I think that, like, feeds their soul, or I hope it feeds their soul. I think that fed the majority. I still think there were gaps for some kids, but if we got the majority, then, to me, that's a win, because we were doing something almost impossible.

Finally, the creation of a safe, culturally affirming space for young people to come together separately to the adult Assembly was critical to the formation of their collective identity. Future Unity are reclaiming a way of understanding and engaging with the world that is key to effective climate action – one that centres Indigenous, taiohi-led climate justice. Central to their vision is ensuring that Te Reo Māori (the Māori language), tikanga (customs, values and practice), and Māori perspectives are authentically woven throughout their work and way of being in the world; that they are empowered as co-designers and decision-makers; that their expertise and lived experience is valued and prioritised.

CONCLUSION

Children have a right not just to be treated as a vulnerable group in need of protection from the impacts of climate change, but as active agents in crafting solutions. Our climate policy landscape has until now been woefully bereft when it comes to addressing children's rights, particularly those who are Māori, poor, or Pacific. The recently released Health National Adaptation Plan (Ministry of Health, 2024) offers a glimmer of hope in this regard.

There is a long leap to make between the work undertaken with tamariki and rangatahi in the Porirua process and addressing the absence of a child rights focus in our national climate policy. In terms of policy outcomes, it is too early to say whether, and to what extent, either taiohi voices or the wider Assembly may have influenced local and regional policy outcomes.

What our experience of this process does point to is what can be done to create a space for tamariki and rangatahi to develop collective voice, agency and identity; to develop as leaders and take ongoing action. Our work has created a space also for teachers and schools to exercise critical pedagogy – based on the belief that teaching should challenge ākonga to interrogate structures of power and patterns of inequity that shape the status quo (Freire, 2005). This is a refreshing contrast to current education policy changes seeking to roll back critical literacy and cultural responsiveness.

There may currently be no specific mention of child rights in our national climate policies – but that shouldn't, and never has, stopped educators from finding ways to take local action. This has always been a strength of the New Zealand education system: teachers being creative and innovative in a local context and learning from the children they work with. Sometimes, too, we need to look to local action to gain an understanding of what may inform emerging national policy. It is one thing to mention children being "impacted" by climate change; it is another to try to conceptualise what a process that authentically involves children in devising climate solutions might look like.

In this article, we have tried to tell a story of hope that perhaps for many educators is a familiar one: work with the willing to do what you can, where you

are, with what you have. Find opportunities that present themselves - despite what sometimes feels like overwhelming constraints and scarcity. Educators, both within schools and in the wider community, are ideally situated to support tamariki and rangatahi to lead on issues that concern them: we have the skills and experience, and most importantly, the relationships. Through local efforts like these, and through wider collective action, educators can help ensure that taiohi voice, agency – and leadership - in climate is supported from the ground up, in ways that enable them to be recognised as experts in their own experience.

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All kupu (words) except proper nouns sourced from Te Aka Māori Dictionary https://maoridictionary.co.nz/

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GLOSSARY

Ako	to learn, study, instruct, teach, advise
Ākonga	student, pupil, learner
Kāhui Ako	Community of Learning, a group of schools and kura that collaborate to improve student learning and well-being by sharing expertise and setting shared goals
Kaiako	teacher, instructor
Kaimahi	worker, employee
Kaupapa	topic, policy, matter for discussion
Kaupapa Māori	Māori approach, Māori topic, Māori customary practice, Māori institution, Māori agenda
Kura	school, education
Mana Whenua	territorial rights, power from the land, group with authority over land or territory, power associated with possession and occupation of tribal land
Mātauranga Māori	Māori knowledge - the body of knowledge originating from Māori ancestors, including the Māori world view and perspectives, Māori creativity and cultural practices
Mauri	life principle, life force, vital essence, special nature, a material symbol of a life principle, source of emotions - the essential quality and vitality of a being or entity.
Pākehā	New Zealander of European descent
Papa kāinga	original home, home base, village, communal Māori land
Papa Taiao Earthcare	An ecological restoration training organisation grounded in Mātauranga Māori
Rangatahi	younger generation, youth
Rangatahi wānanga	youth gathering
Taiohi	youth, adolescent, young person, juvenile
Tamariki	children - normally used only in the plural
Te Mātaiaho	The New Zealand Curriculum
Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa	The Pacific (the great ocean of Kiwa)
Te Reo Māori	The Māori language
Te Taiao	world, Earth, natural world, environment, nature, country
Tikanga	correct procedure, custom, habit, lore, method, manner, rule, way, code, meaning, plan, practice, convention, protocol - the customary system of values

	and practices that have developed over time and are deeply embedded in the social context
Te Tiriti o Waitangi	Treaty of Waitangi
Tuakana	elder brother (of a male), elder sister (of a female), cousin (of the same gender from a more senior branch of the family), prefect
Tūrangawaewae	place where one has the right to stand
Waiata	song, chant, psalm
Wānanga	seminar, conference, forum, educational seminar
Wātaka	timetable, calendar
Whakapapa	genealogy, genealogical table, lineage, descent
Whanau	extended family, family group
Whenua	land - often used in the plural

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WAIRERE PENE
Waikato, Ngāti Wairere, Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāpuhi
Papa Taiao EarthCare

Wairere Pene has courageously dared to do things differently. As a creative contributor to all kaupapa, she dances between weaving possibilities grounded in her whakapapa. She works intuitively across practices including ako, wānanga, pure & tohi (ritual and ceremony), toi (art), and spatial design. Ideas are composed in metaphor, symbolism and the use of modern and traditional materials and methods. The role she takes as kaiako is where experiential learning and the concept of ako flourishes and cultivates the inherent skills of taiohi to action change within their communities, with a focus on 'Ko wai koe' – who am I – or identity. Wairere is in her fifth year as an environmental educator for Papa Taiao EarthCare, working predominantly with secondary aged students and the wider community.
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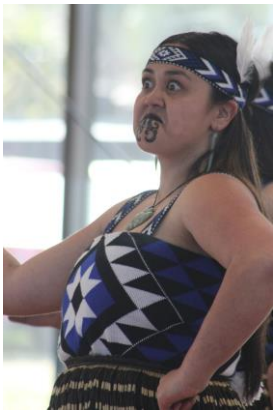
Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Awa, Ngāpuhi, Samoa



Orini Rokx-Taratu was raised in Tokomaru Bay in Te Tairāwhiti, and now lives in Porirua after her whānau relocated due to the increasing impacts of climate change in her region. A raukura of her hapori, kōhanga reo, puna reo, and kura kaupapa Māori, Orini has recently completed her final year of a Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) with Te Rito Maioha. Deeply passionate about Te Taiao, she draws inspiration from her experiences of witnessing the effects of environmental degradation on her home community. Orini believes that the health of our people is reflected in the health of our whenua, and she is now a tuakana of Future Unity, a rangatahi-led climate action rōpū in Porirua.

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AMANDA DOBSON
Enviroschools | Te Upoko o te Ika a Māui

Amanda Dobson is Tangata tiriti / 3rd generation Pākehā, born and raised in Te Whanganui a Tara/Wellington. She has been based in Porirua, in the rohe of Ngāti Toa Rangatira, for the second half of her life. Mother of three, grandmother of two tamariki-mokopuna with dual heritage whakapapa of both partners to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. With an educator background of many years in the early childhood and primary sectors, predominantly contributing in bilingual and Kaupapa Māori settings, environmental education has become the core focus of her mahi. For the last 15 years she has been in the role of Enviroschools Community Facilitator in the Te Upoko o Te Ika a Māui regional team, working in Porirua and Kapiti since 2015.

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MICHELE WHITING
Independent consultant

Michele Whiting (MNZM) has had a lengthy career as a teacher and principal in schools in Porirua and Wellington, Brixton, London and Auckland. She has also worked for the Education Review Office. Her Master's thesis focused on cultural diversity and evaluation in schools. Michele led the re-establishment of a collaborative network of schools in Porirua East from 2009 before retiring in 2019. Since that time, Michele has continued to work as a consultant in educational leadership and curriculum development,

particularly in the refreshed Social Sciences Curriculum and Aotearoa Histories. Enabling whānau to invest in, and engage with their children's digital learning through the work of Te Mana o Kupe Trust has been a key focus for Michele in the last 12 years.

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