



**CORE**  
**EDUCATION**  
Tātai Aho Rau

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**WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT COMMUNITY FROM OUR STUDENTS?**

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Dr Vince Ham eFellows' Research Paper

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Dr Vince Ham eFellow 2016

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## Background on my project

This year I have had the privilege of being a recipient of the [Dr Vince Ham eFellowship](#) which was awarded to me through [CORE Education](#). This gave me the opportunity to explore student well-being through the concept of community, and more importantly, what the concept of community means through the eyes of our students.

I work in a small, low decile school. Within our small town our school is seen as the “school over the river” and our community is often perceived less favourably by the rest of the town. It is a perception that our students and community are aware of.

The impetus for this inquiry was the result of discussions I had had with students in 2015. I had a group of students who were frequently disengaged in our classroom environment. Struggling to understand why this was happening, I arranged to have what I hoped would be an open and frank discussion with the small group of students concerned.

The students’ responses were honest and alarming. They told me that they were so far below the National Standards that they had given up. They saw no point in trying because no matter how hard they tried they did not believe they were ever going to reach the National Standards. Peter Bock puts it well when he says, “...at risk are the most visible people who struggle with belonging”<sup>1</sup>. I could see these students felt as though they did not belong.

This made me question what I was doing as an educator. It inspired me to change the way I viewed and delivered The New Zealand Curriculum. Had anybody taken the time to ask these students what they wanted or what their needs were? Had we considered that we were part of the problem? What were we doing to make school a community that all students felt they wanted to belong to?

It was attempting to address these questions that became the focus of my action research under the CORE Education eFellowship. I felt there was a serious need to reflect on how we delivered the curriculum.

## How I went about my inquiry

The eFellowship programme involves undertaking cycles of action research<sup>2</sup>. The first cycle of my inquiry - the focus of this article - aimed to learn from the students about their understanding of “community”. I wanted to understand better the kinds of environments that these students respected and valued, the idea being that if I knew what kind of environments the students wanted to be in, then we could try to create them in our learning space.

I explained the purpose of the inquiry to our students and asked which of them would like to participate in it. I had 37 students volunteer, and once I had secured permissions from the students’ parents and our ethics was approved we began our data gathering. I used an iPad to record student interviews. Students were given options on how they wished to be interviewed, audio or video, with the majority wishing to have their interview recorded using audio files. I also used Google Form questionnaires and “Padlet”<sup>3</sup> to gather further data.

## Simultaneous shifts to my teaching

At the same time, I was finding out what community meant to my students, I was also changing the way I viewed the curriculum as a result of seeing that what we were doing was not working. It was my belief that I could and should engage all our students and make learning something that they all wanted to actively participate in.

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<sup>1</sup> Bock, P. (2009). *Community: The structure of Belonging*. Oakland, California: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Cardno, C. (2003) *Action research: a developmental approach*. Wellington: NZCER Press.

<sup>3</sup> A Padlet is a digital canvas that helps collaborate and create projects see <https://padlet.com>

Even before class started for 2016, I had decided to design learning experiences that were more personalised and interest-based, to shift the heavy focus on learning outcomes to Key Competencies<sup>4</sup>, critical thinking and problem solving skills. This way, I aimed to engage our marginalised students who had traditionally been disengaged from their learning and who were most frequently on our “at risk” data. I could see that by allowing students to have some choice in what they learned they would have more “buy-in”. I started by acknowledging that all the students in our group were good at something, that there were things that they could all teach us adults.

Although this attention to a more project-based approach<sup>5</sup> to curriculum was not part of my eFellowship inquiry, it certainly supported it. I realised early on that the point of investigating and listening to student voice would be lost if the attitudes I carried towards some of my students focused only on National Standards, their disengagement and negative behaviour.

## What I found out from talking to our students about community

When I analysed the students’ responses from the data I had collected, three overarching themes surfaced - “respect”, “trust” and “helping each other”. These were the behaviours most important to them in their community and within school.

### Trust

For these students, an environment where there was trust was valued because it gave them more freedom and confidence to stand up for what they valued and be who they were. I came across comments from students such as:

*“A community is a place that people can be themselves because in a community everyone trusts each other.”*

*“A community is a safe place because people support each other and trust each other when something is bad.”*

One comment that really had a telling effect was when a student said

*“A community is a place you can trust people by sharing ideas. You could make the classroom more trustworthy so it can feel a good place to be in.”*

Comments such as these were too important to ignore and really made it clear to me that we had an obligation to significantly change the environment that these students were coming to everyday. Building trust was clearly on top for many of our students.

### Respect

The clarity and simplicity with which our students were able to articulate their perceptions of community was intriguing as I was getting insights into the way our students saw their environment that I did not expect. One student commented that,

*“A community is like a fence because they are joined together and they can share common interests or feel free to be themselves. “*

This comment showed me a depth of thinking from an eleven-year-old student that I hadn’t imagined I would get.

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<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Education retrieved from, <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Key-competencies>

<sup>5</sup> Tally, T.N. (2015). The challenges of implementing project based learning in the 21st century classroom. Master of Education. Alberta: University of Victoria.

Another student told me

*“A community is a place for everyone to be themselves and enjoy where they live and be proud of where they’re from.”*

These insights were starting to provide me with a picture of the kind of environment that we would need to create in order for our students to feel that school and our classroom represented a positive community that they would want to be a part of.

## Caring for each other

The value of caring for each other was something that, as adults, I think we sometimes overlook. Through the interviews with the students the notion of “caring” came through very often and seemed to be a central value for them. This highlighted for me the fact that students and teachers look at the world with different lenses.

One student expressed it very succinctly when he said,

*“A community is a group of people working together to help each other to achieve something.”*

Another student was perhaps reflecting the changes we had already started to make independently of this inquiry by introducing a more project- based approach to the curriculum. He said,

*“Kowhai (our class name) is a community because we help each other and no one gets left behind.”*

Hearing this made me realise that we were on the right track in terms of the approach we were taking with our programme design.

## What is changing as a result of listening to the students

One of the changes we have put in place in 2017 was to create ‘Cogen groups’<sup>6</sup>. Cogen groups are dialogue groups where conversations between students and teacher aim to co-create/generate plans for action and improvement with the learning space. Each group is made of four students who represent the diverse personalities within our class. The teacher coaches the students to identify areas within the classroom that can be improved and what actions can be put in place to make changes occur. The group meets each week and the teacher slowly backs away so that the group can take more control of the discussions. After about four weeks, one of the Cogen group members is asked to take on a role of responsibility within the class and select a different student to take his/her place within the Cogen group. This will ensure that all students are given an opportunity to have a voice in the running and design of the learning space. This is still in its early phase but is proving popular with the students involved.

At a request from our students, we have created “Clubs” where the students have chosen activities they would like to pursue during class time. Each Tuesday morning, we have students cooking, coding, poi making and dancing, playing lawn bowls and creating art. These were the choices of our students. We also have members of the wider community participating and helping where and when needed.

We (students and teachers together) have created a leadership group, this group is made up of students who want to take on a leadership role within the learning group. Their role is to act as upstanders/mentors within the learning space and wider school community and to model the values of community that they defined the previous year. These students are also working within the New Entrant class during timetabled sessions, modelling learning behaviours and helping new entrant students with their oral language and writing activities.

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<sup>6</sup> Emdin C., (2016). *For white folks who teach in the hood-- and the rest of y'all too: reality pedagogy and urban education*, Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press.

## What I have learnt

Firstly, I have learnt to trust my instincts. My instincts told me there was a serious problem with our students' perception of school and learning. My instincts told me that if we changed the way we reached out to these students then we may be able to reconnect them back into learning. I believe that with the help of my colleagues and our students we were able to make considerable progress towards achieving that this year.

I have also learnt that it is one thing to listen to student voice but quite another to take what they tell us and apply it to everyday classroom practice. Doing the latter also depended on me reflecting and changing my own attitudes and practices. The biggest revelation was how much I had assumed I knew about the students I taught. I have always considered myself as having "my finger on the pulse", knowing what motivated and got students excited about learning. However, this past year made me see that my assumptions were not always helpful and that I needed to shift my attitudes and expectations of students and learning because when given the opportunity, our students were capable of much more than I gave them credit for.

And so, with the support of our teaching staff I spent much of our time focusing on the Key Competencies (Managing Self and Relating to Others), for example talking to our students about taking ownership of their learning environment and what that would look like. The students were given the opportunity as a group to share their ideas of what their learning environment should look like, and the teaching staff helped facilitate this. We helped our students to develop "team building" activities to start each day, which quickly became a student led task with students finding and implementing their own team building activities.

## Final word

As Smyth & McInerney (2012) put it "What sense does it make to redesign curriculum pedagogies and school structures without first finding out from students about what works best"<sup>7</sup>. I have discovered that when we do this, wonderful things will happen. Thankfully I have started this journey and am in admiration at the surprises our students share with me when they are given the opportunity to be heard. I hope that many of you can see the benefits that I have seen when we give our students an authentic voice in an authentic environment and a chance for them to create a community that works for them.

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<sup>7</sup> Smyth, J. & McInerney, P. (2012). *From Silent Witness to Active Agents*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.