



Teaching Today, a podcast from The Education Council

Episode 4: A case study on culturally responsive teaching

Presenter: Francesca Hilbron

Guest: Ally Gibbons, Rotorua Girls' High School principal

Francesca Hilbron: In this episode of Teaching Today we visit Rotorua Girls' High School as a case study on culturally responsive teaching.

How do you even begin to close the gap in educational achievement between young Māori and Pākehā? By being deliberate, by being relentless but also being connected.

Voiceover: Faced with a changing school dynamic and a falling roll, Rotorua Girls' High School started a transformation programme to redefine its direction, vision and graduate profile.... It wasn't that great to be Māori in the school...what we've given for our Māori students is a sense of belonging.... Yeah, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else, any other school.... It's our moral purpose, you can't have students in your school that aren't achieving their true potential, you must address issues of equity in excellence.

Francesca Hilbron: In its 2014 report, the Education Review Office proposed that the school look at success as Māori, from the perspective of local iwi, Te Arawa, and respond to the aspirations of learners, whānau, iwi and also the community. The school's principal had been in her job for less than six months, but she had already embarked on a path of discovery that would see significant change in educational achievement in a school that is 78% Māori. That principal is Ally Gibbons, herself a former student at Rotorua Girls' and at the time Ally started high school over 85% of Māori across New Zealand left school without qualifications.

As a young student Ally's only option to learn te reo at school was to drop to the lower academic stream. Her grandfather's advice, however, probably set her on the path she is on today.

Ally Gibbons: I went back to my grandfather, who was a wonderful mentor for me and just inspirational, and told him I wanted to move, I don't want to be in that class, there's only two of us and he said you stay where you are because one day you may sit in a chair like your headmistress... So, I came in with a real mission, I guess. And I must also say that when I came here it wasn't great to be Māori in the school and I wanted our girls to know that they are great, you know, all students need to know that they are great.

Francesca Hilbron: Walking around the school grounds with principal Ally Gibbons we see murals of Te Ao Kapurangi, a Te Arawa ancestress who has become the inspiration for a holistic approach to raising Māori achievement. This journey has involved recognising the students' language and culture in the classroom. At its



heart sits Te Ao Kapurangi, as an inspiration for the young female students.

Ally Gibbons: So there's a piece of writing there that says Ano ke te whare whawhao a Te Ao Kapurangi.

Francesca Hilbron: That Whakataukī relates to the story of Te Ao Kapurangi who was captured in Rotorua and married off to the Nga Puhi leader up north. When iwi conflict brought her back to Mokoia Island in Lake Rotorua, Te Ao Kapurangi begged her husband to save her people. Her husband said he would spare only as many as could pass between her legs. She outfoxed him by standing astride the whare and calling her people inside.

Ally Gibbons: The story is a powerful story for our girls and we wanted our girls to know if you come on this journey with us you will leave here as confident, connected lifelong learners.

Francesca Hilbron: In Ally's first year at the school the leadership team talked to students, parents, whānau, community, and working with the Board of Trustees to re-vision the school. They worked with Kia Eke Panuku and Poutama Pounamu to develop and embed a culturally responsive and relational pedagogical strategy.

They introduced compulsory Year 9 te reo Māori lessons. New school values based on an acronym from Te Ao Kapurangi's names were put into effect. The desired effect was to create identity and worth and it was one of the reasons the school was chosen to win a Prime Minister's Excellence award.

Voiceover: By strategising with iwi organisations adopting inquiry learning and streamlining its many practices and policies Rotorua Girls' High is successfully re-engaging whānau and Māori learners. And the winner of the Awatea Award Excellence in Governing is Rotorua Girls' High School. We go back filled with pride and feeling very humble and grateful and just superbly proud of our graduates from Rotorua Girls' High School.

Ally Gibbons: What we've given for our Māori students is a sense of belonging and a sense of success and also because for them they now have equity in excellence is embedded in how we do things in our school, we open up a whole range of pathways for them to aspire.

Francesca Hilbron: Year 11 student Bree is an empowered young woman at Rotorua Girls High School. We asked her about setting her sights on becoming a doctor and how staff supports that dream.

Bree: That's just what I want to do and what I'll stick to and all the teachers help me and support me and they say that my goal is really good and to keep going at it and they'll help me whenever I need it.

I feel like I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. This was the best choice for me, our school has a really good culture, and everyone looks after everyone. The teachers and Mrs Gibbons is just so lovely, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else, at any other school.

Francesca Hilbron: Showing each student that they matter and are fully supported individually is important to Ally and her staff. Ally says really knowing each learner, their language, their strengths and what they bring to learning was how the school could get each student to where they aspire to be. We asked Ally how data



played a role in this approach.

Ally Gibbons: We run a database where teachers go on whenever they want to or need to see how their students or tracking, not only in their subjects but across the tracking. Up there that's just our junior tracking, we have a whole other set of tracking, we have schoolwide tracking that follows our NCEA students. So, it's really important, it's not just data for the sake of outcomes – the student is really important. She's here now so how can we help her get to where she needs to be.

So, what we do with our students coming through our senior levels, we identify those that want to go to university because not everyone wants to go to university, they all have different pathways, some of them are student sin year 12 go up to Toi Ohomai which is our polytechnic and they do trades. Some of our students are gateway, but we need to know what their pathway is, so if is a university pathway we are tracking with them.

What else supports their learning is their dean follows them right through that journey, they know the families well, they know the girls who need support. So that tracking is crucial and knowing their goals and where they want to go to and monitoring all the time if they are going to achieve those goals. With our teachers, that was a whole lot of upskilling, that we needed. Not only what culturally responsive and relational pedagogy looks liked, because it's key in our school and our students, but you've got to have strong relationships with your students. If you don't have those relationships you're talking to the wall.

Francesca Hilbron: Teacher student relationships are not the only focus. There has been a push for whānau involvement, too.

Ally Gibbons: Whānau are brought in early when they start school and they meet with – in our juniors they have two whānau teachers, Kahui Ako we call them, who meet them so there's about 12 in each group, so they get to know their students well. They talk about goals that the students have put down and want to aspire to achieve and then whānau confirm those or say how they can help their daughter, granddaughter or niece and how they can contribute to be successful because we all have to work together.

Some students have really good support and some students don't and so we have to be their support. So, in terms of when we talk about whānau we are their whānau, we are all whānau in this school, this is our Rotorua Girls' High School whānau, but those conversations are really important.

Francesca Hilbron: Ally says a shift in teacher practice at the beginning was crucial – open minds and new ways of thinking were needed.

Ally Gibbons: You've got to have shared accountability – yes, we have got an issue, we're not blaming anybody, but we've got to change because it's not working. So, at the beginning of the year I interview all staff, they all come in to see me and they come in a 5 3 1. The five is for 5 things that have worked well year before, and they come in with their data and evidence and their inquiry. Three is 3 things they need to change, and one is one thing they need to stop.

In one of my first rounds of the interviews in 2014 one of the teachers came in and said I just don't get them, they hate this book that I give them to read and I've been doing it for 10 years and they hate it, so I said why would you keep doing the same novel if it's not working for the students and she says because they need to read



it because I liked it when I was at school. So, there was that sort of thing. Students felt this, this is from student voice of that time: teachers are unfair they don't treat us equally, I like it when they can say my name properly, they don't even know me. That's what we had to use with our staff to open their mindset of what a crucial role we played in this school and how important cultural responsiveness and emotive pedagogy was.

Student voice is really, really important because they tell it as it is. They tell you if you're boring or you're late or you're not cueing them in and you've got to take cognisance of them because they are at the heart of what we do, they are our *raison d'être* for being here, so that's what we had to talk to the staff about and I think some staff were a bit shy or nervous about hearing what students were actually thinking but it gave a platform to build on. Okay, so if this is what has been said and you're acknowledging too that is this an area of growth how do we help you and support you to make that shift. We aren't going to make fun of anybody or anything like that. It's meaningful collaboration, so it's collaboration with our students, collaboration with teachers, *iwi*, expert partners that come in, everything is about it but at the centre of it is our girls.

Francesca Hilbron: To help teachers lift their *te reo* and *tikanga* the school has a clear strategic plan, and Ally says there are regular *tikanga* lessons run by students for staff as part of professional development.

Ally Gibbons: So, we have *karakia*, we have our own school song, we have our own school *haka*, our students also come in and run *te reo* lessons. All of our staff are taught how to say their *pepeha*, and what that means for them. Through *Ngati Whakaue*, they run a *Te Rangihakahaka* professional development programme, so our staff, two years ago, went for the night and had a *noho marae* together and learnt all about the history of Rotorua and how we got our street names, and all sorts of information, about important, powerful people of *Te Awara*. This year at the beginning of the year, another *Ngati Whakaue Te Rangihakahaka* initiative, we all got on a bus and we did around Lake Rotorua. You've got to just have the willingness to learn, you've also got students in your school who can help you and we encourage that. We say to the teachers, this is our focus today or for the week, and to use your students.

Just to compare it, we just had *Pasifika Week* last week and so the students came in and taught the whole school the *sasa* and they explained from each island how they do things, they had a *kava* ceremony on the stage for us. So, there's a real embracing of different cultures but we had to get *Māori* achievement right first. It put people into uncomfortable positions, too.

Francesca Hilbron: This journey to lift *Māori* achievement has been hasn't been easy and Ally certainly faced her fair share of critics.

Ally Gibbons: I think some of them thought I was paddling the *waka* the wrong way and that because I was *Māori* I was driving it purely for my own benefit.

Francesca Hilbron: Ally says for some teachers the hardest thing was accepting they had to do things differently for *Māori* learners- that what they had been doing just wasn't working. And that meant hard work. What follows is feedback from a teacher after Ally's first year as principal. This is the teacher's feedback but not their voice.

Voiceover: This is discrimination, I don't even see colour when I walk into the classroom. The girls are all the same. Is this even ethical? Some of them are just lazy, they have all sorts of excuses, they just can't be bothered. If they showed me some respect, I'd be able to show them some respect.

Francesca Hilbron: But once that achievement data started to show rising academic performance and shrinking



disparities between Māori and Pākehā learners, the teachers came fully aboard Ally's waka. The school's culturally responsive curriculum has been recognised by ERO as positively influencing educational outcomes for all learners as – the proof is in the pudding - the school's NCEA achievements are now well above national averages.

Ally Gibbons: What our data shows was that in our 2014 results, NCEA results, was there was significant disparity between Māori and Pākehā. So, at Level 1 there was a 20% difference, Level 2 10%, Level 3 15% and at University Entrance, 38%. We've closed the gap. At the end of 2014 it was the biggest jump that we had had in our results, but the disparity was still there, but we had closed the gap. In fact, we had gotten a group of our graduates come in and say thank you to the staff about what their learning journey had been and the staff were crying when they listened. They were saying thank you, thank you for knowing me as a learner, thank you for what you do. Our staff are hugely generous with the time they give our girls.

It's our moral purpose, you can't have students in your school that aren't achieving their potential, you must address issues of equity in excellence, and you do it so students can achieve any goals that they have got. You have to put your stake in the ground and you've got to drive it relentless. You win friends and lose friends, but you are in this job to make a difference and you are in this job to raise student achievement. No excuses. Yes, difficult but driven.

Ally is leaving Rotorua Girls High School at the end of the year to spend more time with her whānau and mokopuna and to learn te reo Māori at university level. She says the work at the school is not yet done and is ready to be taken to the next level.

Ally Gibbons: They need someone who can take it to a new level. We have embedder all these things into the school, don't lose sight of that but now look at next level. There's always challenges out there and sometimes it takes some staff longer to come on board, because there's lots of changes, there have been lots of changes since I've been here and sometimes I have pushed too hard and have had to come back and had a look at it. But I still drive it. It's absolutely a living journey and that's what is exciting about it, it's not going to stop and it's on a momentum and it has to keep going along and it's an exciting journey and wonderfully rewarding.

Francesca Hilbron: She says she would love to share ideas and resources to other teachers or schools any looking to improve their cultural responsiveness and relational pedagogy.

We also at the Council encourage all our listeners to continue this discussion in your centres and schools, with your colleagues and also more widely on social media. Visit the Education Council website for information and copies of *Tātaiako: Cultural Competencies for Teachers of Māori Learners* which explains the competencies teachers should display to make sure Māori learners achieve educationally as Māori.

