

We are Waikino

Waikino School (contributing year 1-6), a growing rural school in the township of Waikino (near the Coromandel Peninsula), has been on a journey, along with the community as a whole, to learn about and celebrate their region: its past, its connection to the water, its birds, its land, its environment, and its people. The journey has been hands-on wherever possible, and many members of the community have been inspired to help everyone re-connect to the Waikino story.

Led by principal Colin Pilkinton-Brodie and Board of Trustees chair Alastair Sorley, the purpose behind this reconnection – beyond its inherent value – was that a new school vision and set of values could be articulated based on a stronger knowledge of their environment and history.

The process began in 2008 and 2009, with the Waikino Water Journey workshops.

THE WAIKINO WATER JOURNEY STORY

The journey started when local New Zealand potter, artist, poet, musician and environmental advocate Mike O'Donnell – Koro Mike to the children – was invited to work with the school as 'artist in residence' for 10 weeks in 2008–2009. Koro Mike began by initiating the 'Water Journey workshops'.

These workshops focused on real-world experiences: Mike didn't teach the children about their environment in the classroom, he taught them by taking them to it – to the Waitawheta River to touch the water, across the river to touch the kauri trees. Mike wanted the children to learn the importance of both of these resources to the wellbeing of the community. The children listened to the birds and learnt the names, characteristics and histories of each of them.

Students gained a broad and deep understanding of the school identity in relation to the local community through creating visual metaphors and waiata, hearing the stories and folklore associated with the region, and learning about the Māori way of understanding the environment.

Mike then taught the children practical clay-working techniques, and the children each produced pictorial tiles that represent Waikino's story. These tiles now adorn the entrance to the school, and there is a sense of achievement, pride and ownership among past and current students, the community, staff and board of trustees members each time they walk through the entranceway.

LAST SONG OF THE KŌKAKO

In 2014, as part of the school's strategic goals, principal Colin Pilkinton-Brodie invited Koro Mike back to introduce current students to the Water Journey series of workshops. This time however, the school community hit on the idea of encapsulating and celebrating their learning by crafting a school production, called *Last Song of the Kōkako*. The kōkako is an endangered, protected bird that now sadly no longer exists in the Coromandel area.

Colin says, "The greatest tragedy of losing this majestic song bird for our people is that recordings made during the late 80s and early 90s

have shown that [the Coromandel] kōkako had its own unique voice and dialect, which sadly will never be heard again."

Work began with classroom learning on integrated units dealing with a series of historical and contemporary learning contexts: I AM Waikino; Ngā Kaitiakitanga – we are the guardians of this land; and Nga Manu, the story of the native birds of New Zealand, with a special focus on Waikino's lost kōkako. This learning aligned with several curriculum goals: Waikino is a Silver Enviroschool – an award given to schools which meet sustainability criteria determined by the Enviroschools non-profit organisation; the children understand the importance of looking after our environment and everyone who shares it with us.

Board chair Alastair Sorley acknowledges that the school was supported on its cultural learning journey by an amazing group of people, who were able to bring the Waikino story to life – from local and international artists, to members of the school and wider community working with them. Alastair says, "It's challenging sometimes working with primary aged children, but there is also unexpected learning and the adults too are richer for the experience!"

Renowned Māori instrumentalist Jerome Kavanagh assisted the school with the soundtrack to the school production. "We were lucky to have Jerome Kavanagh here," says Alastair. "He's a world class taonga pūoro [traditional Māori instrumental] artist; straight from Carnegie Hall to Waikino! The children didn't just learn the

WAIKINO SCHOOL VISION AND VALUES

The process that led to the school's new vision and values is also embedded in student learning and linked to the New Zealand curriculum.

Alastair explains: "You have to lead by example – Waikino has an Enviroschool ethos; a lot of people from the area live on the land or next to the river so there is a real recognition of the flora and fauna. You have to practice: 'walk the talk', step into vulnerability and learn to love the process.

"It's the same at school and Colin has cemented this by bringing us back to who we are; by asking 'who is our whānau' and 'who are we as a community, what is our "common unity" and by whose authority do we stand?' This process has coalesced into 'We ARE Waikino'."

We ARE Waikino is more than the school; it's the entire community. So when it came to setting a new vision for the school, the community was invited to workshops and to a school consultation evening. Participants reflected on and discussed their understanding of the existing school vision. They then re-examined it in the light of today's community – in a local, national and global context. Everyone was also given a copy of the school logo and asked to say what it meant to them.

Waikino School's vision is: To develop lifelong learners who strive for excellence and make a positive difference.

The community then decided that the children would lead the community in reviewing, rewriting and presenting their school values through the process of inquiry-based learning.

Colin explains: "Our children have a good grasp of values, and what they see as being really important in their lives. Our job is to help them express these, to give them a voice and guide them to shape these ideas into working realities for life. It's a mutual journey, the balance of teaching and learning and helping our children discover what works for them, what is important and how to work with everything and everyone.

At the end of 2014, the year 6 leaders were able to represent the student voice, share the journey and present the new, revisited values to the Board of Trustees and school community which have been adopted and are now in practice."

The values are based on the characteristics of New Zealand's native birds – the seed carriers - which play an important role in our forests. Characters were created based on the way those birds are and the stories written about them in Māori legends. These also became the characters in the school production. They decided that each bird carries a value and each value is a seed to water for life. Values are attitudes we nurture in our lives.

music, they were taught the science of music; for example, the microphone and how sound travels; levels, waves and so on.

“We always prefer to engage with our own community, with our artists, with Koro Mike and Jerome, among others, who give far more than money.”

Local businesses supported the production through sponsorship, making it possible to create and produce a unique DVD/CD album with visually stunning cover and disc designs. Students’ drawings adorn the cover and inside are photos of some of the people and the process that made the production possible.

A significant contributor in this regard was Matt Sephton, who recorded all but one song of the soundtrack album on location. Alastair and Matt mixed, remixed and arranged and produced the album and also created the beats. At the live production, Matt looked after the audio mixing, while Alastair played the music and bird calls.

Waikino School were also fortunate to have Daimon Schwalger (aka The Nomad, renowned producer and DJ) master the music album. With seven albums and music industry awards to his name, The Nomad was the perfect person to put the finishing polish of audio quality on such a special recording.



A Waikino School student in kereru costume.
Artist: Melissa Pilkinton

FROM WAIKINO SCHOOL TO SUNDAISE FESTIVAL

In March this year, the children and Koro Mike performed *Last Song of the Kōkako* for about 1,000 people at Sundaise Festival. The children had no scripts and had to ‘become’ the bird that they were enacting. Koro Mike would ask them questions as they performed, such as ‘who are you?’; ‘what do you sound like?’; ‘where do you

live?’; and ‘why are you that colour?’ The children responded to Mike’s questions spontaneously.

Alastair believes this improvisation helped the children learn to think on their feet and to grow in confidence. Rather than worry about forgetting their lines, they focused on learning about the bird they were becoming, and could respond appropriately to any question. “The kids nailed it; they were fantastic, spontaneous and heartfelt,” says Alastair.

Colin adds that during the performance one of the teacher aides ‘flew’ into the performance with two of the school’s autistic children. “For these children, music is their forté and they also performed beautifully,” says Colin. “Despite disability, their unique strengths, gifts and talents have been encouraged and developed, allowing them to rise to their own challenges, to succeed and to shine; they were fantastic.”

The children also ran a workshop at Sundaise Festival teaching adults and children how to make putangitangi flutes out of clay, making for a learning opportunity that enriched the children’s social and academic abilities.

Waikino’s journey of discovery looks as though it’s contributed to some excellent results at the school too: In 2015, the school had a National Standards achievement rate of 80 per cent, across all subjects. [Ea](#)

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