

# ARTS IN THE TIME OF COVID

PROFESSOR PETER O'CONNOR



**HER FACE HAS** haunted me again these past weeks. I was teaching in a school devastated by the earthquake that killed 370 people in Mexico City in September 2017. The crowded classroom with over fifty children and dozens of local artists, musicians and theatre makers seemed to be overflowing with singing and dancing. Six weeks after the earthquake less than half of the children had returned to this school in one of the most quake affected parts of the city, their parents too scared to let them out of their sight. As we worked, I noticed a growing group of families gathered outside the classroom.



I opened the door to find out why they were there and they flooded in. They had come to school that day because they had heard the artists were coming and they wanted to participate with their children. One mother came forward and demanded that all the children of the school should have had the opportunity to participate in our arts making. She wanted to know why the school had excluded some children, including her own daughter from working with me and the other artists.

It was about money and time and bureaucracy but I literally didn't have the words to explain this then. So, instead, I welcomed her, the other mothers, grandparents and their children into the already crowded room. Parents had brought their children to school that day so they could begin learning and re-engaging with the world again. It was the arts that had drawn them back to the school.

When I close my eyes I can still feel her fear of the present and for the future. As schools moved to Level 3 of the lockdown I saw, on television, the same fear written across the face of a mother in Auckland as she dropped her daughter to school. She seemed to ask of me, 'How might the world be safe again for my little one? What does school have to offer?' I knew what the answer would be if she asked about the arts.

I know well the damage earthquakes and natural disasters cause, the fear and despair they generate. I have worked in multiple disaster zones for over a decade. My first experience was in China after the Szechuan earthquake in 2008. In some villages, every child died in the poorly constructed schools when the earth opened up underneath them. I've worked since in earthquake zones in Christchurch and in Mexico City, and most recently in Australia as it seemed the very earth was burning and blackening the sky. Natural disasters take lives, destroy homes and smash economies. In the days and years that follow, the primary focus in disaster zones is on repairing and then rebuilding the physical damage caused. The fiscal case for this focus on economic recovery is imperative. Yet, my experience of working in multiple disaster zones is that the biggest damage caused is usually unseen, it lies in the spirit and soul of the people.

COVID-19 is a different kind of disaster than those that rip buildings apart. Yet its cost in the dismantling of lives across the globe is immeasurable. Like all natural disasters, COVID's damage will linger long beyond its initial impact, its damage lurking in the inner fabric of people's lives.

My years of research on post disaster response and the experience of the last ten years has taught me that schools become the healing grounds for children, the place where teachers help them connect again with each other, with learning and the future. I've learnt too how the extraordinary power of the arts can bring life back to damaged communities and the schools in them – in a way nothing else can.

I had found myself in Mexico City working with artists in classrooms with children, because I had done the same in Christchurch after and during the years of earthquakes that had stolen futures there, literally upending peoples' lives. I remember the confused looks on the faces of Christchurch teachers, unsure



as to what they should do when their children returned. I can still picture the cold indifference of the national Ministry of Education at the time, who offered them little support other than to tell them to ensure they established the old routines and to make sure missed literacy and numeracy lessons were followed up on. I remember the faces of the children I played with in classrooms on the first day they returned to school after the February 21 earthquake. I can still imagine the dislocated looks of young ones whose worlds had been literally tipped upside down. I remember too their total and complete absorption in the drama work I did with them that day. They became lost in learning, finding themselves in the arts, playing inside the story of a little girl whose dream cloth had been torn. I remember their joy in fixing the torn dream cloths by painting their dreams and then making thread strong enough to heal the tear before finally restoring its beauty with a teaspoon of light. Disaster makes us all victims, we feel as if we are unable to control and manage the darkness that envelops us. The moment in our drama on the morning where the little girl looked into our pretend cloud bowl and offered her teaspoon of light to meld together hope and love, reminded me that arts give us a moment where we make again, we are producers of the world, not consumers. Actors not spectators.

John Dewey understood the importance of these acts of making. He understood that democracy was shaped and made by our hands. Participatory citizenship, acting on and for others, is what this drama was all about as school reopened that day. After disasters the arts give us a sense that at least in those moments we might have the chance to change our lives. We might make something beautiful, stitch new dream cloths together as an act of defiance against the world that has acted against us.

I can still see the frightened faces of the refugee and migrant children I worked with in Christchurch in March last year, after a tragedy that still deeply scars our nation. Only two weeks after the terror attack, I was working with children in Hagley again. With 5 and 6 years olds, we imagined super powers that we might need. One boy suggested an invisible cloak and we used our imaginations to make ourselves invisible, unnoticed and safe in a dangerous world. I remember our laughter as we developed other superhuman characteristics and wore cloaks of kindness. One young boy using the full strength of this power told his father he was 'quite good looking'. As we sat and thought about the drama we might make together, one child suggested we do a version of Alice in Wonderland. She told us, this story would be about a place where you are promised everything will be fine, but you don't know the rules and you are made to feel like you'll never fit in. I asked, 'that would be a great place to have our drama set but what might happen there.' With a knowing smile, the young girl added, 'Don't forget, there is a Queen who wants to cut your head off.'

The arts always allow us to use fiction, the making of other worlds so we might better understand our own world. The arts are perhaps so powerful in education because they are not about preparing for the future. They resist the nonsense of a futures focused curriculum. Instead they are about the urgent and demanding task of helping children make sense of the world now. The metaphor of Alice in Wonderland and our work over

the coming weeks as we tried to make the Queen see that her visitors to Wonderland deserved to be treated well was exactly the metaphor we needed to address the deep questions they had about the world after the mosque attack where death might fall on you suddenly and without warning. As we worked towards a fairer and more just Wonderland we practiced a form of active citizenship, of being able to influence and change the world in which we live. Perhaps the greatest strength in the arts in education is that rather than preparing children for the future we are working with them so that they can re-imagine it differently and see themselves as agents in the change we desperately need.

In Christchurch, after the terror attack, I understood too how the arts create a bridge to the past. Albert Wendt knows that the dead are woven into our flesh 'like the music of bone flutes'. And it is the arts that weave their stories, their faces, their lives into who we are as people, and as a nation. It is the arts that allow us to bring them in some form back to life again, for us to

speaking to them, to be with them again. They come to us in the moments when tears spring uncontrollably to our eyes as the high-pitched call of the kaikaranga sends a shiver down our spine. They come to us when we hear again the songs we once sung together. They walk across our stages, sit inside our novels, dance in our poetry, hang in frames on our walls. They come to us when we need them to help us survive the present. As we speak through the arts to the dead, we also disinter ghosts. The arts have a way of finding those ghosts we bury deep within our collective consciousness, or they reveal the stories of those deliberately forgotten and obscured from our formal histories. The arts carry the potential to challenge and subvert stories that

have colonised ways of national knowing. In the New Zealand context, the ghosts of colonisation are regularly wakened by artists who – rather than affirm a singular identity as New Zealanders – challenge and question who we are and who we might become.

Teaching the arts gives children access to this bridge, so that they might use it throughout their lives when they need to reconnect with what has been lost. Children need to also learn how others have used different cultural forms to more deeply understand our past and how we arrived at the present. That knowledge gives them a creative and critical capacity to read the arts, to name their world.

The arts after disaster bind us together, they become the bridge where we might find the pattern, shape, the image of our deepest hurts, both individually and communally. The night after the terror attack I attended a concert in the Auckland Town Hall with 1,000 others. It was a celebration of Māori Waiata. After the whakatau and karakia we sang *Whakaaria Mai*. We started tentatively, listening carefully to each other. We found ways to weave our own voice, our own story into the wider song. I felt the tears burning my cheeks, recognising how this act of communal music released our pent up hurt and anger in a way that only music can. As I remember that night, I find a different anger rising. An anger for the generations of primary children in New Zealand who now no longer have music in their classrooms, for the empty rehearsal rooms in my own faculty at the University of Auckland, where cobwebs decorate the musical instruments. I feel a silent rage at teacher education courses where the hours



of training in music has been reduced to almost zero.

The great joy of the arts helping to connect beyond our own bubbles is even more important when we have lived in bubbles for weeks before returning to school. The bubble of a desperate mother in Mexico City, or a bubble in Lockdown 3 here in New Zealand. The arts help us to notice each other again, how to move through space, reconnect bodily with each other. The arts remind us that digital learning can never replace the full embodied joy of using all our senses and our whole bodies to learn, rather than just with our fingers.

And perhaps most importantly the waiata connected us together in the room and then it felt, we were somehow connected to the people of Christchurch. In the soaring chorus,



as we grew louder and more confident, our singing became a bridge to possibility. Our song was a cry of faith and hope. In its communally created beauty, an act of defiance against the ugliness of terror. This is the possibility inherent in arts making. It gives us, as individuals and communities, the strength to imagine afresh, to see the world again as a place where hope might dwell. It gives us the possibility of connecting to others across time and space and beyond life itself. Through the arts as a nation we will remember, mourn, come together, rebuild who we are after COVID-19. The arts will be the way we claim back the spirit of who and what we might be as a nation. In the same way that we sang that night, through many different art forms, we will find ways to deeply listen to each other and to find new ways to breathe in harmony.

Knowing about the power and potential of the arts, our proud history of educators such as Gordon Tovey and Elwyn Richardson, you would imagine the arts to be sacrosanct in New Zealand schools. The truth and the heart of the matter is that they have all but disappeared. The near death of the arts in New Zealand schools is not just some unintended collateral damage in the never ending pursuit of better PISA rankings in literacy and numeracy. The callous disregard for their potential is the result of years of deliberate neglect, of successive governments' policy that has marginalised and trivialised their role within schools. Elliot Eisner reminds us that there are multiple curriculums. He suggests the arts are part of the nul curriculum. One of the things that are deliberately not taught, like New Zealand History. The risk we ran before COVID-19 was that an impoverished curriculum would continue to fail to realise the dreams of young people. Ministerial reference groups continued to rehash the same tired ideas, tinkering with examination systems, focusing on assessment and ensuring no one with an arts

education background would be part of any decision-making or consultative process.

Neil Gaiman says there is no word to describe the micro-moment between drawing in breath and breathing out. This is the space we have been in now for weeks while living in Lockdown. In that moment between collective breaths many teachers have taken stock of what they do in schools. We can bounce back to what we had, or we can take a risk, we can leap, skip, and dance forward. I led a team at the University of Auckland to develop Te Rito Toi, an arts-based resource to help teachers use the arts when classrooms reopened.

Within a week, over 70,000 page views confirmed for me that there is a genuine and real hunger for change, for restoring the

arts back into schools and using them to imagine a different kind of schooling. Te Rito Toi is the first resource in the arts developed for New Zealand schools (recommended but not endorsed) by the Ministry of Education in over a decade. In 2002, I was working as the National Facilitator for Drama overseeing the implementation of the Arts curriculum, I remember the discussion on the last resource developed for drama. We had to decide whether to put it on VHS or this new thing called DVD. We chose VHS because we were not sure how long DVDs would last. No wonder teachers are ready for support and grabbed at the resources we developed.

As part of Te Rito Toi a group of writers produced a suite of lessons using nga toi called Ha Ora. Co-writer Rawiri Hindle, who was 15 years ago the National Facilitator for the Nga Toi curriculum, thinks it is the only resource ever developed to support that curriculum. That we have abandoned the Arts Curriculum is one thing, but Nga Toi is the only National indigenous arts curriculum document in the world. That we have neglected and let that languish is a national disgrace.

I remain haunted by that mother in Mexico, who so desperately wanted her child to experience the wonder and joy of making art in a classroom. She knew that was her right. Just like that day I stood in front of her, I still can't find the words to say why we have let the arts die in New Zealand schools. We have lost much as a result of COVID-19. Perhaps we might imagine schools rich with the joy of the arts, the colour and vibrancy of making and rebuilding our democracy. There will be no guidance about this from the Ministry nor the various Ministers of Education for whom this is totally alien to their narrow view of schooling.

A more whole, arts-rich curriculum will come from teachers and principals who understand and value the possibilities this rare moment between breaths has given us.



# MOOT 2020 SUMMARY

LIZ HAWES EDITOR

THIS ISSUE OF *NZ Principal* is dedicated to the historic global pandemic and the education sector's response to it. The NZPF Moot 2020, is therefore a brief summary, but a full report will be published in the Term three issue of *NZ Principal*.

In his opening speech, President Perry Rush emphasized the importance of a return to practice-based leadership and training and a revival of Arts in schools which also address wellbeing issues. He also called time on Government's inaction to address mental health and violent behaviour issues for our most challenged students and floated some solutions to address these.

The Minister, Hon Chris Hipkins said pillars of his Government's education manifesto include child centred, inclusive, quality public education and teaching that is relevant to our future. He agreed the emphasis on wellbeing is critical. In terms of the 2020 Budget, he made no promises for education given the escalating COVID-19 crisis but reported that any education allocation would be prioritised for the early childhood sector.

The regional presidents concluded their day's debate identifying five priority areas for the NZPF 2020 manifesto including wellbeing and equity, leadership, learning support, Māori education and curriculum.



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# KIA HIWA RĀ

## COVID-19 and new challenges for principals

Martin Thrupp [thrupp@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:thrupp@waikato.ac.nz)



WELL, MY LAST column was called ‘Overtaken by events’ and didn’t we get more than we bargained on! However I believe the main theme of that article about principals being well placed to lead in their communities is as true for the pandemic as for the climate crisis.

At the time of writing (just after Easter) it is not clear to what extent the COVID-19 outbreak will remain a continuing medical concern or just how much economic and social mayhem it is going to create either. The situation has been moving so fast that plenty of commentators have already had to eat their words.

What seems clear enough however is that there will be new challenges for principals. Some are obvious but there may also be unexpected consequences that will bring complexities as well.

Something likely to be obvious is that the communities served by our schools have been changed by the pandemic. Anxiety, depression, health problems, abuse and deprivation will all be intensified.

Never mind if the country has been saved from multiple deaths, if there are environmental gains, and examples of wonderful community spirit. For many people life will have changed for the worse and they will be feeling it.

I expect we might see a new social fault-line open up across all socio-economic groups between the ‘merely’ COVID-impacted and the COVID-hammered. The latter will include parents who lose jobs, businesses, homes and relationships. They may also relocate in the search for new opportunities, increasing student transience across our schools in the process.

Ironically, parents who are used to insecurity and powerlessness might often deal better with aspects of the situation than those who are used to being ‘winners’ in our society. But there will be the COVID-hammered amongst the poor too and they will have fewer resources to fall back on. The mythology of the pandemic as ‘a great leveller’ and that ‘we are all this together’ is being called out in many countries.

I wonder how you will deal with all this as a principal. I’m sure you will be listening carefully whenever you get the chance and that you will realise that some previous generalisations about your school community are no longer helpful. You might need to make that point forcefully to the education agencies at times! Putting the struggles of people in the context of both their usual life experiences and their recent life events will take an extraordinary amount of understanding and empathy I think.

Another issue is that a shift to more online teaching or some hybrid model seems likely, and this could bring changes in teaching practices that last beyond the pandemic. But have you considered the ‘disaster capitalism’ aspect of this development?

Businesses in many countries will be trying to make money selling resources for online teaching or PLD, and questionable

international philanthropic or charitable groups will be seeking to increase their influence in the same way. These interests will often be bad news for public education and quality teaching and learning, and not just because the online resources offered lack our Aotearoa New Zealand context.

Here’s an example. Auckland-based ‘The Education Hub’ offers summaries of New Zealand educational research but at the time of writing is also offering a free ‘schools webinar’ with a presenter from the Ambition Institute in England. The Ambition Institute is headed up by Hilary Spencer, a former aide to Conservative politician Michael Gove, England’s Secretary of State for Education from 2010-14.

Gove was – let me put this politely! – a divisive and capricious character in that role. Many members of the Ambition Institute board are also close to the Conservative government and its various horrible education policies such as expanding and reinforcing the academies programme.

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In short, I wouldn't touch the Ambition Institute with a bargepole and it's concerning that The Education Hub is acting as a conduit between such destructive influences and New Zealand educators, probably often without the latter realising it.

So my message to principals is to be really careful about who you are getting involved with, educationally speaking, at such a time when there will be many new offers to solve problems for you and your staff. Even if they are free offers!

It's a theme I'll come back to repeatedly in my columns – that some private actors in education are better than others and that principals need to do due diligence and be extremely discerning. This background research takes precious time but if we can share our information it will help a lot.

A third area of new complexity will be around the teaching workforce. It seems clear enough that teachers (and principals) will not be immune to some of the pressures already mentioned. Some who were planning to leave teaching will carry on because their retirement plans are no longer secure. Others will quit if online teaching becomes a major part of school offerings, or will be amongst those needing to relocate because of their family circumstances.

Overall I expect teaching to become a more sought-after occupation because it will be relatively secure in the uncertain years ahead. But let's face it, job security is not the greatest motivator for being a good teacher. It may be that our teacher education selection processes will have to put more emphasis on a demonstrated aptitude for working with children and young people. Principals might also need to become more wary of teachers' motives.

Finally, responding to government policy is another area of new complexity I will mention because policy directed at the COVID-19 situation is likely to open up many unintended consequences. A crisis can be used by policymakers to exercise managerial powers that would have seemed heavy-handed in usual times. For instance principals might find themselves being asked to push interventions at unreceptive COVID-hammered parents.

The strong personality-based leadership being modelled by our PM – a great communicator anointed by a fearful public – can only go so far. It may become fashionable as others try to emulate her style but it will all be doomed to fail unless we are being led in the right direction.

As always, just because the Government is saying 'jump', principals don't have to ask 'How high?' It is pointless being first cab off the rank with government initiatives that are problematic. And where a response is insisted upon, token or substantially modified practices might be the very best ones. Principals need to seek ways forward that are sensitive to local conditions, including, and especially now, the circumstances of particular families.

I've raised a lot of problems in this column but a major disruption like the pandemic is bound to open up new opportunities to do good and worthwhile things as well. I'm sure you'll be looking out for those. All the best with the days ahead!

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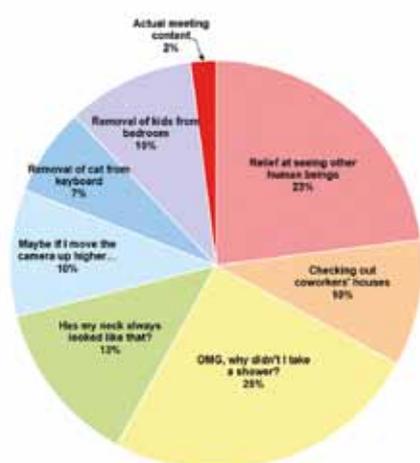
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# COVID-19: A BUMP IN THE ROAD OR A NEW HIGHWAY FORWARD?

HELEN KINSEY-WIGHTMAN

2020 WAS ALREADY going to be a unique year for me. After unexpectedly spending much of 2019 in an Acting Principal role, I applied for a TeachNZ Study Award to spend a year studying Te Reo Māori. After only 2 short weeks on campus, COVID-19 took hold and 6 hours of daily immersion has become a 2 hour daily Zoom Hui – which soon became known as a Zui!

Diagram of Zoom Meeting Attention Span



My pre-Zui prep begins with 45 minutes of burpees and star jumps in my 9 year old's Zoom Whakapakari tinana/exercise class. Whilst flinging myself around the lounge in a desperate bid for approval from his teacher, I cannot help but notice that way too many of my son's peers seem to have ridiculously fit Fire Officer/gym instructor/Iron Māori participants for parents. In the 15 minutes before my own class starts I create an exciting schedule to ensure he has enough meaningful learning activities to keep him fully engaged for 2 hours (mostly so that he doesn't spend the lesson correcting my classmates' Māori pronunciation and laughing at their Lockdown hairstyles when my mic is on . . . )

Whilst I cannot report that my kaiako has successfully gained 100 per cent of my attention and I may have spent more time than strictly necessary wondering whether a blue lampshade would work better in my fellow student's lounge or becoming distracted by the cobweb in the corner of my own, I am happy to report that I have so far managed to avoid the worst kinds of Zoom oversharing using 2 key strategies, namely, (i) having a strict policy of not taking my device to the bathroom with me and (ii) ensuring I am always fully dressed during meetings even in areas of my body which will never make it on to camera. Hence you have not seen me featured in the international media, trouserless during a meeting, with a feather duster in hand.

So, having shifted into gear for remote learning, we now await

the announcement of a timeline for the move to Level 2 and a return to a new normal in the shadow that COVID-19 has created and I am well aware of the hard work going on in schools across the country to prepare to shift gears again.

One of the issues that we as educational leaders must now tackle has been discussed a great deal in my Friday evening Messenger drinks with teacher friends, via social media teacher groups, in online professional learning and in the articles within this edition: When students return, will school look exactly the same or will this experience change students, teachers and leaders and thus education itself? In the much more eloquent words of Professor Peter O'Connor:

'In that moment between collective breaths many teachers have taken stock of what they do in schools. We can bounce back to what we had, or we can take a risk, we can leap, skip, and dance forward.'

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Early indications are that schools are prepared to treat this experience as an impetus for change and creativity. In a statement on the Albany Senior High school website their principal notes:

‘Depending on the modelling you look at and how well we all abide by the lockdown rules we could be looking at further weeks of lockdown and will most likely face a future of further regional lockdowns as the COVID-19 waves roll through. Whilst on one level this is kind of terrifying, I also believe this gives us “a once in a pandemic” chance to prepare for a “new normal” in all areas of how we love, live and work but as I am a secondary school leader, I am going to focus on how we could (and possibly should) reimagine secondary schooling, so as to ensure it has a hope of rolling with the punches and coming out of this fight fit for purpose.’

Julie Henderson, Principal of Eastern Hutt School indicates that this discussion has already begun :

‘On the upside, the lockdown provides an opportunity for student agency and student led learning to thrive and this is a huge positive, especially with our senior children. The children are driving their learning. Student agency gives students voice and choice in how they are learning at home. . . . Our teachers are already reflecting and discussing what they can take from this into the classroom when students return.’

Kiri Gill, Principal of St Matthews Trinity Schools, Wairarapa and President of the Wairarapa Secondary Schools Principals’

Association picks up the theme of student agency:

‘Potentially this crisis has encouraged, through whānau involvement, our taitamariki to become better independent learners.’

One of the challenges that is easier to ignore when students are dressed uniformly at school is the inherent disadvantage that some students face on a daily basis. The fact that not all students have the physical and emotional access to resources for learning has been very obvious in recent weeks as schools have challenged themselves to provide remote learning.

In a live streamed PLD session entitled Colouring in your Virtual White Spaces attended by more than two thousand educators, Ann Milne tackled both the issue of inequity and the opportunity inherent in our current situation. Always challenging – she talked about the pandemic of the Pakeha perspective that infects our schooling system and challenged educators to take this opportunity to audit both the physical and online educational spaces to ask ourselves whether Māori perspectives are present and valued. She offered an audit tool to assist us in doing so which can be found on her website.

In today’s Zui, we reflected on this whakatauki and learned that the Māori word for leader comes from the words ‘ranga’ to weave and ‘tira’ group. As we listen to the kōrero of those around us, I hope that we consider how to take what we have all learned to weave our learning communities together more strongly and effectively moving forward.

He aha te kai o te rangatira? He kōrero, he kōrero, he kōrero.  
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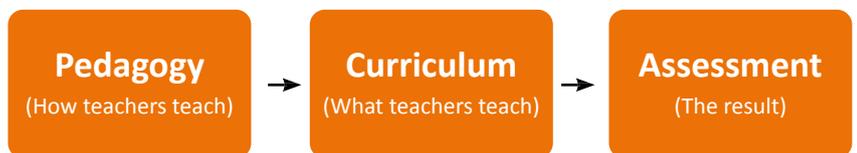
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The unfortunate truth is that Pedagogy is the most important and significant factor influencing student learning over which teachers have influence (it accounts for around 30% of variation in student achievement - students' ability is the biggest at around 50%), but improving pedagogy can be challenging and until now it has been an arduous and time consuming process as schools don't have systems that capture the school's expertise in these areas.



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# The importance of the Digital Technologies and Hangarau Matihiko curriculum has never been **clearer**

**Creative solutions enabled by digital technology are critical to our new everyday lives.** Now is the time to take your technology knowledge to the next level. Use our kete of supports and your DT & HM content to enrich learning.

## Support is here

- Online courses to build teacher and student skills, tailored to your needs. Innovative, fun and available in both English and Māori mediums.  
Raranga Matihiko/Weaving Digital Futures – [rarangamatihiko.com](http://rarangamatihiko.com)  
Kia Takatū ā-Matihiko /National Digital Readiness – [kiatakatu.ac.nz](http://kiatakatu.ac.nz)
- The Digital Technologies Implementation support tool helps you manage the change at your school. The tool, and the full kete of support, information and resources is available on Technology Online – [technology.tki.org.nz](http://technology.tki.org.nz)
- Find information and curriculum support resources for understanding and implementing Hangarau Matihiko as part of Te Marautanga o Aotearoa.



  
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