



Teacher Inquiries into the Education Journeys of Rangatahi in Alternative Education

Hana Turner-Adams¹ · Judy Bruce² · Eileen Piggot-Irvine³ · Adrian Schoone²

Received: 3 February 2025 / Accepted: 29 May 2025 / Published online: 6 June 2025
© The Author(s) 2025

Abstract

This action research (AR) project explored critical moments from the education experiences of disenfranchised rangatahi (young people) in Alternative Education (AE). The rangatahi hoped their stories would help teachers, principals, Boards of Trustees, and the Ministry of Education understand their experiences and hear their recommendations for helping vulnerable rangatahi in the future. AE teachers utilised storytelling and arts-based methods that enabled rangatahi to tell their stories. The relational and collaborative nature of AR was crucial to amplify the voices of the rangatahi and their AE teachers. This article shares insights from AE teachers' inquiries and the AR process. The stories were thematically analysed to understand common schooling experiences. Experiences of microaggressions and microaffirmations, social and cultural spaces, transition and transience, exclusion and alienation, identities and relationships, and pedagogical approaches all impacted rangatahi identity and learning. Recommendations for how teachers and school leaders might adapt their practices to support disenfranchised rangatahi are considered.

Keywords Alternative education · Action research · Teacher inquiry · Rangatahi stories · Teacher voice · Student voice

They don't really see what.
School was like.
for me.

✉ Hana Turner-Adams
h.turner@auckland.ac.nz

¹ University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

² Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

³ Royal Roads University, Victoria, Canada

They only see what the.
 Teachers see.
 What the teachers *want*.
 Them to see.
 You're only telling your own story.
 What school was like for you.
 That's easy coming from me.
 They need to know from.
 The experience of what.
 We see.
 Not what *they* see.
 What we see.

(Rangatahi from the Phase 1 focus group)

Alternative Education (AE) settings in New Zealand cater to rangatahi (young people) who are disenfranchised from the mainstream schooling system. For many, AE is their last formal education opportunity. Annually, around 2000 rangatahi, aged 13 to 16, attend AE; only 25% return to school immediately after leaving AE, and only 14% continue with further education, training, or employment (Education Review Office [ERO], 2023). The AE population is 68% Māori and 17% Pasifika (ERO, 2023), which reflects that New Zealand schools stand down, suspend, exclude or expel more Māori than any other ethnic group (Education Counts, 2021; Cliffe-Tautari, 2024).

Rangatahi often enter AE with significant gaps in their learning and scarce information about their past schooling experiences and achievements. AE teachers and rangatahi are required to make a fresh start, leaving past successes and challenges unaddressed. In some instances, the lack of historical records has led to rangatahi, whānau and teacher puzzlement and powerlessness regarding how rangatahi ended up in AE (Schoone, 2016; Smith, 2009). Missing records have also delayed or prevented rangatahi from receiving additional education support (ERO, 2011). Furthermore, rangatahi who are disenfranchised from school rarely have an opportunity to share their schooling experiences with those in authority (Thomson, 2007). In a focus group in preparation for this research, the five rangatahi participants were adamant about wanting their stories to be known to teachers, principals, Boards of Trustees, and the Ministry of Education. On having the opportunity to tell his story, one rangatahi stated that it would make him feel “cared for”.

This article illuminates critical moments from the education experiences of rangatahi in AE (Schoone et al., 2024). Critical moments are events that have had “important consequences for their [rangatahi] lives and identities” (Thomson et al., 2002, p. 339). In this study, rangatahi shared critical moments as they reflected on their schooling experiences. The broader methodological research remit was to understand how teachers in AE could work with rangatahi to tell their stories and what this could mean for their practice.

Methodology

AR was adopted as the overarching methodology, as it is a widely accepted inquiry learning approach, combining both research and practice, with popularity in the education sector (Adelman, 1993; Carr & Kemmis, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Piggot-Irvine et al., 2021). The potential for personal, team, organisational, and community improvement/transformation is reported by the latter authors. For this project, we conformed to the view that:

AR is a collaborative, transformative approach with a joint focus on rigorous data collection, knowledge generation, reflection and distinctive action/change elements that pursue practical solutions.... Put another way, we defined AR as having core elements of systemic research in a collaborative inquiry process that is associated with evidence-based decision-making both before and after change. (Piggot-Irvine et al., 2021, p.14)

In this article, we share the action research (AR) process employed by researchers and AE teachers to highlight how teachers might inquire with rangatahi. The AR approach aligned with best practice for professional development in the AE sector, namely the highly collaborative approach in which there is “privileging of internal ‘within sector’ knowledge” (Bruce, 2020; Plows, 2017, p. 72). The relational, collaborative, and interactive underpinning of AR was crucial in giving voice to rangatahi and AE teachers. Two AE managing schools in Auckland were invited to participate in this research. In total, 10 teachers and 20 rangatahi in AE contributed directly to the AR alongside four academic researchers. In this article, the term “teacher” is used as a catch-all phrase to include qualified teachers and tutors. Of the 10 teachers who participated, four were qualified teachers, and the remaining six were tutors. Present and past AE Consortium managers contributed in an advisory capacity. The research team’s collaborative approach aligned well with the AE sector and AR.

Five AR phases were employed, and each phase was used to inquire into the three research questions relating to methodological understanding, substantive insights, and implications for practice (See Fig. 1). AR is, overall, an inquiry approach with deliberate reflective elements. The team followed Gibbs’ (1988) cyclic approach, attending to description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action to aid teachers’ reflection in and on action. During each research phase, teachers reflected *in action* through online blogging and reflective conversations with academic coaches; they reflected *on action* through formalised presentations to the research group at the end of each cycle.

During Phase 1 (the preparation and reconnaissance phase), the researchers explored the tentative research questions, provided professional development to assist teachers with setting up their inquiries, and sought the perspectives of rangatahi on the AR intent and design. Importantly, Phase 1 was about bringing the research group together through a shared vision. During Phase 2 (teacher inquiries with rangatahi), 15 rangatahi shared their stories, and these were collected by the teachers. Table 1 provides an overview of rangatahi demographics. While the majority of students in AE nationally are Māori, our study sample was predominantly Pacific students. This

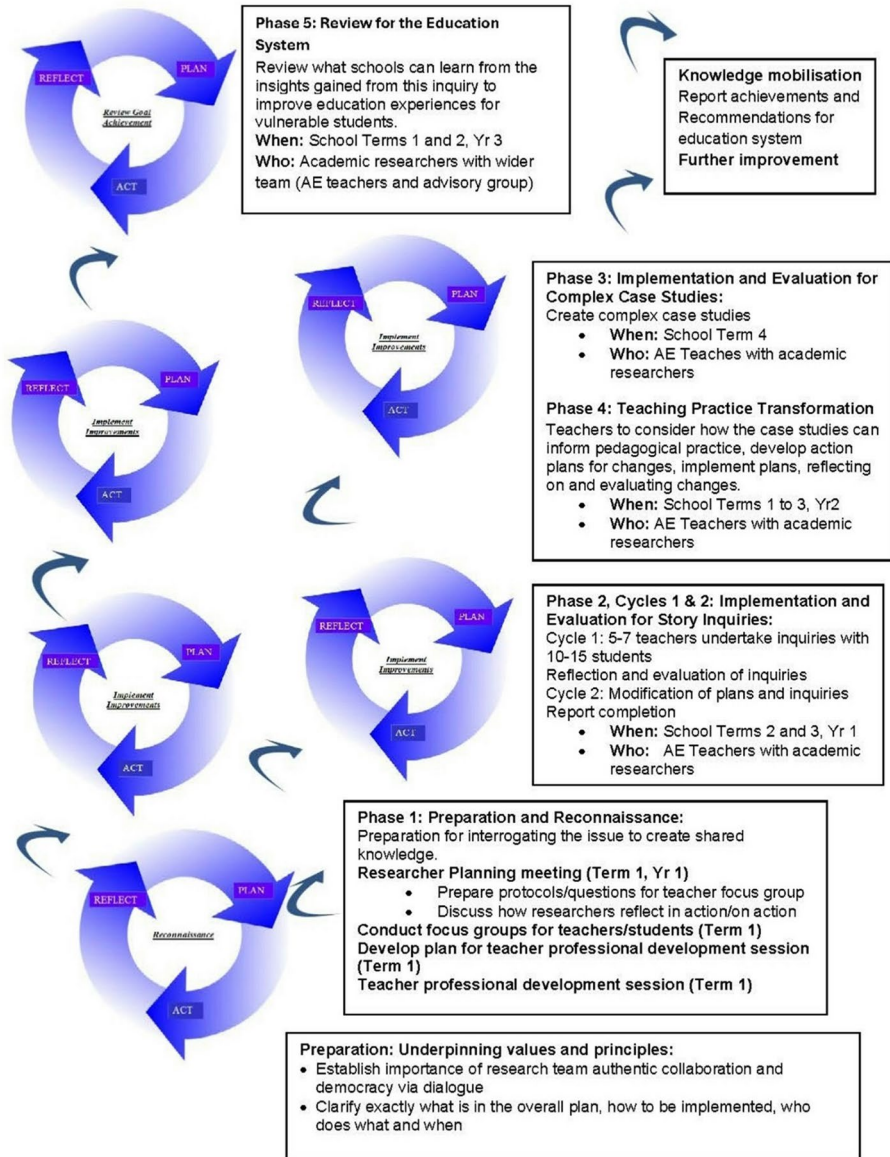


Fig. 1 Action research overview for this project (Piggot-Irvine, 2015)

was not intended to be a representative sample; rather, it reflects those rangatahi who volunteered to participate and felt comfortable sharing their stories with the teachers conducting the inquiries.

Working with rangatahi, teachers implemented their inquiries over two cycles. The researchers coached teachers during the implementation, and at two points, teachers presented their inquiry findings to the whole group. The inquiry methods chosen by each teacher are described in the findings.

Table 1 Cumulative participant details

Age	14, 15(9), 16 (3), 18*, 19** *One past AE rangatahi participated **One rangatahi who was considered on the pathway to AE participated.
Ethnicity	Samoan (6), Samoan/Niuean (2), Pākehā (1), Tongan (2), Māori/Pākehā (1), Māori/Cook Island (2), Cook Island/Samoan (1)
Gender	Male (13) Female (2)

During Phase 3 (the development of complex case studies), the stories were collated, case studies were developed for each story, and thematic analysis was undertaken to understand common experiences. Attention was given to how the stories were to be re-presented. Phases 4 and 5 were concerned with implications for practice within AE and mainstream settings. During Phase 4 (the teaching practice transformation phase), a new teacher inquiry phase was instigated. Using the collected stories from Phase 2 (teacher inquiries with rangatahi), teachers planned pedagogical improvements for rangatahi in AE settings. Finally, Phase 5 focused on recommendations for the education system, including for schools and teachers.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was gained from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEK). From the outset, we sought to safeguard rangatahi from feeling they were expected to divulge any trauma experienced through the education system. The Participant Information Sheet read, “This is not a ‘tell-all’. Just share what you are comfortable with sharing”. In support of this approach, we adopted the whakataukī (Māori proverb), “Ahakoa he iti, he pounamu” (Although it is small, it is precious).

Findings and Discussion

Through rangatahi voice, we share their substantive insights regarding what works and does not work for them in mainstream schooling settings. The findings and discussion of this research are grouped into methodological understanding, substantive insights, and implications for practice, and these areas relate directly to the research questions:

1. How can teachers inquire about critical moments from the past experiences of rangatahi in the formal education system?
2. How can this knowledge inform teachers’ planning and pedagogy?
3. What can schools learn from the insights gained from this inquiry to improve education experiences for vulnerable rangatahi?

The researchers and teachers worked together in each research phase to analyse data. In the first subsection, we share findings from the data collection methods used by teachers as they inquired with rangatahi. Findings from the inquiries are based on emergent themes, which are shared in the substantive insights section. Finally, draw-

ing on data from phases 4 and 5, we present findings relating to the implications of practice for AE teachers and mainstream schools. Findings are discussed by considering relevant literature in this section.

Methodological Understanding

Through an analysis of recorded interviews with teachers, teacher blogs, and written teacher reflections, we found the following AE teacher approaches were enablers of authentic teacher inquiry with rangatahi: valuing AR as a learning process, taking a critical stance, and finding points of entry for inquiring with rangatahi.

All AE teachers valued AR as a learning process. One teacher shared, “I feel confident and hungry to research! I feel as though this can make a huge impact on education”. The professional development evaluation responses and subsequent inquiry planning are a testament to the strides they made in learning. Further, several teachers became international authors by reporting their findings (Fair et al., 2023). Teachers commented on becoming aware of “authenticity, agency, ethics, [and] focus on process as opposed to just outcomes”, “infusing art to activate storytelling”, and “working within an understanding of culture.” One teacher participant was relieved to find “AR is somewhat guided and supported which puts my mind at ease”. The presence of structured guidance in the AR process provided reassurance and contributed to teachers’ developing confidence in undertaking practitioner research.

In forming their AR approach, the teachers drew from their cultural identities, personal interests and borrowed examples from popular culture (such as inspirational movies). A radical openness to listen to rangatahi and critically analyse their school contexts was implicit in the AE teachers’ inquiries. The critical inquiry stance of the teachers aligns with and is widely reported in AR (Coghlan #x0026; Brydon-Miller, 2014). For example, one teacher observed, “It’s got a lot to do with colonisation... [We have] a system that was built for Māori not to succeed”. The social justice values central to AE teachers’ outlooks permeated their inquiries, driven by a motivation to ‘fix’ the system rather than ‘fix’ the rangatahi.

During Phase 2 (teacher inquiries with rangatahi), the teachers embraced co-constructed, complicated inquiries and engaged in multiple, layered actions. The inquiries became complex due to learning challenges in AE settings (e.g. the transitory nature of the student population), preferred pedagogies (e.g. relational and hands-on approaches), ethical matters (with care not to single out rangatahi, providing ways to present stories confidentially, and respecting the sovereignty of knowledge), and cultural considerations. In the Phase 1 (Reconnaissance and preparation) student focus group, we asked rangatahi about their preferred methods of inquiry. One rangatahi stated, “I would just talk with someone that I can trust”. Therefore, trust guided the method selection by teachers.

The teachers used four different arts-based and conversational inquiry methods: photo-elicitation/photo voice, journaling, Talanoa and go-along interviewing (see Fair et al., 2023, for a comprehensive outline). The photo-elicitation technique is a favoured mode of expression for young people (Croghan et al., 2008) and involves interviews about images representing the rangatahi’s educational journey. Journal

writing was a non-invasive way for rangatahi to express their thoughts and ideas without restriction. A teacher using this method explained, “I wanted to provide the students with an opportunity to openly and honestly share about, and release, their educational journeys while also self-reflecting on their journey and growing as individuals...”. Talanoa, a Pacific practice of two-way conversation (Fa’avae et al., 2016), was another favoured method. One of the talanoa participants shared that he “...really liked that we talked about my story rather than writing it down because it felt like a conversation... This talanoa has given me open ears so that my voice has an opportunity to be heard”.

The ‘go along’ interview approach (Carpiano, 2009) blended photos, place-based reflection, and a commentary about the memorable schooling moments. One teacher explained that “instead of doing a formal interview, we had a ‘catch-up’, shared food, and checked out places related to his upbringing and education around the neighbourhood where he lived”. Visiting the school from which the rangatahi was excluded allowed him to reflect on specific highlights and lowlights of his educational journey.

The multiple methods used amplified rangatahi voice, as they were interactive, compassionate and enabled responsiveness. These methods also facilitated a shift in power dynamics between the researchers and rangatahi, supporting a more equitable, participatory and agentic approach that allowed participants to share their experiences and perspectives on their own terms (Nelson & Christensen, 2009). As insider teacher-researchers within the AE context, the teachers’ existing relationships with rangatahi enabled them to co-construct and obtain approval for the data collection methods. Their familiarity with their learners also allowed flexibility in choosing times that suited the rangatahi. Additionally, the selected methods served as a bridge between the teachers, the rangatahi, and their experiences, facilitating rich and meaningful conversations (Fair et al., 2023).

A cyclical analysis of rangatahi stories from each teacher’s inquiries led to the development of individual case studies and analysis of themes as critical moments. There were four layers of analysis, which we describe as ‘Encounters’. In Encounters 1 and 2, the teachers and researchers read through each transcript multiple times to identify themes. In Encounter 3, I-poems were written from transcripts (see Schoone et al., 2022b). Figure 2 provides an example of an I-poem. Woodcock (2016) explains that the I-poem enables a “systematic way for researchers to listen to an informant’s first-person voice... and hear how informants speak to themselves in relationship to themselves and others” (p. 4). Encounter 4 resulted in the creation of storylines for each rangatahi with a corresponding I-poem. In Encounter 5, a graphic designer was employed to re-present seven stories in cartoon form to re-see the stories from a fresh perspective, to provide an aesthetically engaging resource for a wider audience and as a further distancing mechanism to mediate the experiences of rangatahi (See Fig. 3).

The cyclical data analysis process provided in-depth opportunities for the team to make sense of the participants’ critical schooling moments. These critical moments are shared in the following findings section as substantive insights.

I used to be in a rugby team

They, just because we were brown
They pissed us off

You punched him in the face?

I got stood down for that

Other dude threw the first
They knew the deeds
They let them slide
They kept us in

No regrets. Just backing up for my cause.

Fig. 2 I-Poem, Rangatahi from Talanoa

Substantive Insights

Rangatahi stories collected by teachers were thematically analysed to understand common schooling experiences and experiences within AE. Microaggressions and microaffirmations, social and cultural spaces, transition and transience, exclusion and alienation, identities and relationships, and pedagogical approaches all impacted rangatahi identity and learning. Through the analysis process, the team discovered that there was often no single defining or critical moment that led rangatahi to become disenfranchised from mainstream schooling. Instead, “the cumulative effect of negative school experiences” (Sutherland, 2016, p. 115) could lead to alienation. Reimer and Longmuir (2021) described these cumulative experiences as microaggressions: “... the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults... that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons” (Sue, 2018, p. 22).

For many rangatahi in our study, the path to AE was paved with microaggressions. Students shared incidents of exclusion and prejudice. For example: “I felt left out [by the teachers]” (James), and “I feel like... [I was] pre-judged... not all teachers were like that though, but I just feel most were” (Ardie). While a single incident may seem insignificant, the combined effect of multiple occurrences can be deeply harmful. Microaggressions shape and reshape identities, often culminating in a “crisis... in the ordinary” (Berlant, 2011, p. 10).

Some rangatahi also felt pre-judged negatively because of their ethnic group or skin colour: “...being brown, sometimes you’ve already got a record because of past students... The teachers would be like, ‘Oh yeah, okay, got a Polynesian student here. I might have to keep an extra eye on them’” (Ardie). Another said that she and other Pasifika students were unsupported or ignored by their teachers: “I did ask for help a lot, but they won’t actually help you... I don’t want to say it was because we were



Fig. 3 Graphic representation of a Rangatahi story

PI [Pacific Island] or anything, but they would go to all the other kids and then come to us” (Atawhai).

For other rangatahi in our study, who already felt like they did not fit in, their ethnicity was another way they were different: “Me and my sister were the only Samo-

ans there... All the white kids would look at us when we walked past” (Loimata). Ardie and his friends were told by their deputy principal that they could not walk to and from school together, presumably because it was intimidating for community members. Ardie explained, “Another deputy principal, he’s brown, he said to us, ‘Look boys, I’m just gonna put it to you straight. It’s definitely because you are brown’”. The shaping and reshaping of identities appeared to be something that was ‘done to’ rangatahi.

The counterbalance to microaggressions is microaffirmations. Reimer and Longmuir (2021) cite microaffirmations as the small things that provide positive experiences and a humanising effect on students. In our study, rangatahi referred to small actions or teacher comments that had positive impacts. For example, one student said, “Every time [the teacher] knew I was stuck on something, [they] like actually came and saw us” (Mafa). Another said that one of his teachers always told him, “... you can do it, or you can be better. I know you can be better... little comments like that just really, just showed how much she believed in me, and it was really cool” (Ardie). While micro-affirmations were evident in the rangatahi stories, they were not as prevalent in descriptions of schooling. They were, however, apparent in their experiences in AE.

Across the stories, AE was overwhelmingly positive, despite some first impressions that it was for “bad kids” (Mafa) or “hood rats” (Junior). Rangatahi soon valued the learning spaces of AE “rather than being trapped in a classroom all day” (Kane). Central to the success of AE were the teachers and tutors “who always encourage us” (Jayden) and provided effective pedagogy: “I think tutors explain it more...” (Mafa), contextualising learning to rangatahi interests and cultural backgrounds (e.g. a study on the Polynesian Panthers). The tutors motivated rangatahi to attend: “I’ve got the tutors here; they help me a lot. I wanna come every day” (Kobe). However, one student felt that AE “makes you feel more different than the other kids your age (Benjamin)”, and he wished AE was more like school to aid his return to mainstream education.

AE was considered a safe place for many rangatahi. Our participants shared that they felt respected, welcomed, supported and accepted, which helped them to make positive changes. Mike stated that he was “getting more mature and changing, like changing how I deal with things” in AE. Mafa stated, “I actually feel more welcomed [in AE]”, while Atawhai felt like she could “open up here”. Time and time again, rangatahi spoke of AE having a supportive environment. For example, “We all respect each other and treat each other like family” (James). There is little doubt that the layers of microaffirmations in AE positively impacted the needs of rangatahi.

Similarly, social and cultural experiences in mainstream schooling contributed powerfully to rangatahi development and accounted for many positive critical moments in their stories. School environments are not merely ‘containers or backdrops’ where learning occurs; they are “social spaces that ‘produce’ and ‘reproduce’ models of social interactions and practices” (Baroutsis et al., 2017, para. 13).

Cultural identity also appeared critical to AE rangatahi well-being, school belonging, and engagement. Most rangatahi in our study were Pacific (87%) or Māori (13%), which aligns with the high numbers of rangatahi from these ethnic groups who are excluded from mainstream secondary schools each year and referred to AE (ERO,

2023). Existing research has found that a positive ethnic identity for Māori may be a protective factor when rangatahi face negative or changing schooling experiences (Cliffe-Tautari, 2020; Webber, 2012; Webber & Macfarlane, 2020).

Some rangatahi in our study spoke positively about their cultural and ethnic identity. For example, one rangatahi stated: “I’m a proud, New Zealand-born Samoan... It’s always played a big part in my life, especially in everyday choices that I have to make” (Ardie). Another pointed to cultural events as the highlight of his schooling and the rare times he associated with fun and belonging: “We had the culture day... Everybody would come in the dress of that culture. I think those were really cool... The students did a market day. My group made Polynesian treats...I got my mum to make some...” (Mafa).

Having a friend group increased school enjoyment for some rangatahi and acted as a protective factor. Of the 15 stories, a third of rangatahi, all male, talked about being with ‘the boys’. They wanted to be together in class and liked hanging out during breaks.

The following factors were viewed by rangatahi as impeding social relationships: being a new immigrant, having a ‘teacher aide’, volatile friendships, and absence from school for long periods. Absence from school impacted student belonging and learning. Transitions and transience also created significant challenges for rangatahi.

Students’ transitions between educational institutions involve complex social maneuvering. Many rangatahi in AE experience multiple school transitions (ERO, 2023). For example, one student attended four primary schools, and another attended three secondary schools. Specific transition challenges rangatahi faced included missing the first few weeks of the school year, while others discussed difficulties adjusting to the secondary school environment. As Ardie noted: “You step into a space where there’s 1,000 students...all of a sudden, it’s all new people, teachers, classmates, peers, and you feel like... you have to start all over again...”. While rangatahi reported positive experiences in AE, entering AE was also fraught with difficulties. For example, Loimata did not know why she was excluded; Mafa did not know he had been removed from the school roll; and Avontales missed the exclusion meeting because his parent was at a hospital appointment.

Transitions and transience were also experienced within mainstream school contexts, where many rangatahi shared experiences of in-school alienation. The manipulation of the social space occurs in some schools through internal suspensions, withdrawal/isolation rooms, ‘thinking’ spaces, and time out in senior staff members’ offices. Loimata described feeling lonely throughout her schooling; in primary school, she was often excluded from class and “had to be in the office 24/7” to do a “think sheet”.

Withdrawal or isolation rooms were regularly featured in students’ stories. Avontales recalled the withdrawal room in his secondary school “was just like jail. Just like prison... when you look outside the window, you see everyone having fun”. Other rangatahi reported being sent to withdrawal rooms for up to 10 days, sometimes for minor issues. For example, Jaydan was sent for placing his hands under the table; presumably, the teacher thought he was hiding contraband. Withdrawal rooms socially isolate students and disconnect them from learning in their usual classes. Although these rooms were used to improve behaviour, Tala felt it “just made me

angrier and angrier”. For these students, exclusion from education occurred well before their schools formally excluded them. Exclusion and inclusion, microaggressions and microaffirmations, and social and cultural spaces all interplayed to shape and reshape rangatahi identities.

Rangatahi sometimes took agentic action when schools did not meet their needs. Sometimes, they acted to avoid further punishment or exclusion. For example, Carlos explained that the school “were going to kick me out”. His mum wanted to prevent that on his record, “so she just took me out”. Other students avoided school due to negative relationships with teachers. For example, Mafa did not attend school every Monday and Tuesday to avoid “mean” teachers, while James truanted because the dean was constantly “picking on him”. Loimata was labelled a “troublemaker” and began missing school to avoid being blamed for incidents that happened. Finally, Atawhai shared that at secondary school, “I knew I wasn’t going to get any help, so I just didn’t bother showing up”. Central to all these anecdotes is the role of the social milieu and the importance of relationships that either enabled or discouraged school engagement.

Across the 15 stories, the pedagogical challenges rangatahi faced centred upon teachers providing insufficient scaffolding with learning tasks, particularly when rangatahi were absent and trying to catch up. Rangatahi did not feel confident asking for help or were embarrassed to show their lack of knowledge. In addition, two New Zealand-born Pacific rangatahi commented on the negative impact of being put in ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) or receiving unchallenging work. For example, “I was in this class for extra support, but I already knew what I was doing” (Avontales).

Many rangatahi had experienced grief, loss and trauma, including in-school bullying and alienation. Five rangatahi came from physically violent homes (Avontales, Jonathan, Junior, Mike, Kobe), one was subjected to physical abuse at school (Kane), four experienced ongoing bullying at school (Junior, Kane, Mike, Kobe), two had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or early life trauma (Kane, Loimata), one experienced gang influence (Loimata), two had health issues (Atawhai, Carlos), two had a parent in prison (Benjamin, Mike), one experienced ongoing grief from losing a loved one (Kobe), and two navigated sexuality and identity journeys (Atawhai, Mafa). Some of these issues, such as parental incarceration and violent homes, are adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; Felitti et al., 1998). Exposure to ACEs has been linked to poor school attendance, learning difficulties, and lower academic achievement (Bellis et al., 2019). Although ACEs were not directly examined in this study, they may help explain aspects of our participants’ school experiences.

Five rangatahi noted they had anger issues (Tala, Mike, Junior, James, Jonathan), with Junior stating that when one of his teachers left, “I felt no one could put me back in line”. Moreover, it appeared that rangatahi did not receive social-emotional support for processing and healing from trauma beyond school and other developmental needs. When Jaydan sought support from his school counsellor, he was told to “get lost”. Similarly, Carlos felt that his teachers did not care about the feelings and well-being of rangatahi; they “just wanted to teach and get the job done”.

Notwithstanding these pedagogical barriers, rangatahi shared examples of effective practices. Firstly, rangatahi thrived with relational practices that supported their

engagement and enjoyed being taught by funny and “chilled” teachers who created collaborative opportunities. Secondly, rangatahi identified practices that supported their developmental needs, including the assistance of a teacher aide to support emotional regulation, deans who intervened to ensure they were in supportive classes, and schools providing food. Finally, rangatahi shared examples of supportive pedagogy, such as linking learning to culture and active and engaging activities. These findings have significant implications for mainstream teaching practice and are consistent with existing literature on culturally responsive pedagogical practices (Bishop, 2019). The following section further considers these ideas and the aforementioned themes. Firstly, however, we turn our attention to Phase 4, the teaching practice transformation (see Fig. 1), and its implications for AE teachers’ practices.

Recommendations and Implications for Practice

Rangatahi were courageous in sharing their stories, and the emergent themes provided signposts for adapting teaching and school-wide practices. In this section, we explore implications for AE teaching practice and share recommendations for mainstream teachers and school leaders (Phase 5). Following Phase 3 (the development of complex case studies), a further inquiry was undertaken by six AE teachers to explore how the stories impacted their teaching approaches. Two teachers were original recruits from the beginning of the project, and four teachers were later recruited. By Phase 4 (the teaching practice transformation phase), the original two teachers were conversant with AR processes and immersed in the stories collected in the previous phase. For the new recruits, this was a chance to ascertain how teachers were impacted by engaging with rangatahi stories. As ‘connoisseurs’ of the AE context, they brought professional experience in the sector, which gave them a refined “understanding of a domain that the meanings the individual is able to secure are both complex and subtle” (Barone & Eisner, 2006, p. 289).

Based on rangatahi stories, six teachers implemented practice-based changes within the AE context. Four were pedagogical changes, and two related to strengthening AE capability through professional development and transition processes. Among the pedagogical shifts, one teacher explored the explicit teaching of emotional regulation in the classroom. She found that it was most effective to focus on ‘just in time’ teachable moments that occurred on the spot.

Another teacher created space for rangatahi to connect with their culture by engaging in face-to-face talanoa [conversations] with rangatahi based on the theme of ‘Ko wai au?’ [Who am I?]. She found that rangatahi desired to learn more about their culture and language but struggled with where to go next. The data from her inquiry is now the basis for planning cultural programmes in the AE centre, using expertise from the community. The third teacher was impacted by how the stories allowed space for rangatahi to talk about their schooling experiences. Her inquiry focused on questioning skills to allow for extended conversations in the classroom. Finally, one teacher sought to understand the barriers to learning in AE settings, asking rangatahi, “*Why* was learning one of the very last things you wanted to do in AE?”. His inquiry focused on noticing the everyday behaviours and needs of individuals.

With a focus on building AE capability, two teachers focused on programme-wide changes. The stories were used as a professional development resource by one teacher to induct new staff so they could understand the lived experiences of rangatahi before entering AE. The basis of his inquiry was, “Knowing what we know, what can we do in our practice to support the students?” A staff meeting discussing one of the stories raised awareness of the need for trauma-informed professional development. Strengthening the transition processes into AE became the focus of another teacher inquiry, who consulted with those responsible for transition into AE and sought rangatahi voice. He found that “The *first* moments we have with a student are crucial”.

Overall, throughout this inquiry phase, the stories collected by the AE teachers became prismatic in that they cast light in various directions for inquiry, suitable to each of the teachers’ contexts. Phase 4 (the teaching practice transformation phase) provided a snapshot of what is possible with narratives. In Phase 5, we turned our attention to the broader school context.

Data analysis from rangatahi stories elicited themes that shed light on how teachers and school leaders could better meet the developmental and learning needs of rangatahi. Furthermore, rangatahi experiences in AE provided signposts for how mainstream teachers might shift their teaching practices. Drawing on the findings from this study, we conclude that successful places of learning develop a culture of affirmation, create spaces that foster belonging and connectedness, and embed culturally responsive pedagogies.

Developing a culture of affirmation means accepting each student for who they are and where they are in their education journey. It includes continuous, prosocial interactions with rangatahi and providing space to express their cultural and ethnic identities. School-wide practices that offer opportunities for rangatahi to engage in positive cultural identity work appear critical to well-being, connectedness and engagement in learning (Webber, 2012).

Spaces that foster belonging and connectedness are cultural, social and physical. Rangatahi in this study were very attuned to the ways that spaces served to alienate or enhance well-being. Approaches that strengthen community and social capital (e.g. social learning, fostering cultural connections) and targeted programmes to eradicate bullying will support vulnerable rangatahi. Moreover, well-resourced programmes to support rangatahi transitions throughout their education will increase the likelihood of success through continuous engagement. We found that the use of withdrawal and time-out spaces had detrimental impacts on learning, well-being and identity. Employing suitably qualified personnel who work in the intersection of social and educational spaces is a promising opportunity (Bruce & Martin, 2023; Schoone et al., 2022a; Schoone et al., 2020b).

Embedding school-wide, culturally responsive pedagogies will increase rangatahi engagement and meet their developmental and learning needs. Rangatahi had much to say about effective pedagogies and could clearly identify effective teaching practices. We highly recommend that all schools adopt intensive professional learning for staff that includes trauma-informed approaches, culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies, emotional regulation, and therapeutic support for rangatahi who have experienced trauma within and/or outside of school.

Conclusion

There is a lot more than just a bad kid who doesn't care about school. I think there is more to that. Teachers don't understand that... if they got to know me before I got expelled, they would have realised I was just like... a good kid in a bad situation. And I feel that they didn't take that into consideration. I know it was my actions, but I feel like it shouldn't have been enough to, you know, end my whole future. (Benjamin)

Benjamin sought to be heard and understood by teachers and school leaders and recognised that this did not happen. This research provided an opportunity for rangatahi to be heard. Hearing rangatahi entails noticing what is unsaid; physical gestures, lateness and school avoidance, wearing a non-regulation jacket, playing manhunt, and non-participation in class are all forms of communication. These are examples of emergent listening (Davies, 2014), a practice that draws us to consider rangatahi in the context of their whole lives. AE teachers and tutors are conversant with this language, but it needs to be an essential, everyday pedagogical posture for all professionals in education; listening in new ways forms the essence of an inquiring professional. Listening to rangatahi is foundational to developing a culture of affirmation, creating spaces that foster belonging and connectedness, and embedding culturally responsive pedagogies.

As Bourke and Loveridge (2018) assert, "...to take student voice seriously, the system (policy and practice) that children learn in must radically change *through* listening and acting on their views, and position student voice as political and educational imperatives" (p. 1). In this research, we have sought to summarise what we learned from their voices.

The AE teachers involved in this research began with a long list of possible topics. Charged with a provocation of: "What would we *most* want to know now?" one AE co-ordinator remarked: "We want to know the stories. The stories of our young people". The methodological question of *how* these stories could be told became a major focus that entailed developing AE teachers as action researchers. Amplifying rangatahi voices has been critical in learning *how* to listen and has given us clues about the potential of pedagogical transformation these stories inspire. Through the results of the teachers' inquiries, we have been gifted with models of inquiry and the education stories of 15 rangatahi. It is now our individual and collective responsibility in education to engage with this taonga, listen to the voices of rangatahi, and take action towards schooling transformation.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions
This study was funded by the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative under Grant number 9204.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Adelman, C. (1993). Kurt Lewin and the origins of action research. *Educational Action Research*, 1(1), 7–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965079930010102>
- Barone, T., & Eisner, E. (2006). Arts-based educational research. In J. Green, G. Camilli, P. Elmore, A. Skukauskaite, & E. Grace (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (pp. 95–109). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Baroutsis, A., Comber, B., & Woods, A. (2017). Social geography, space, and place in education. In G. W. Noblit (Ed.), *Oxford research encyclopedia of education* (pp. 1–16). Oxford University Press.
- Bellis, M. A., Hughes, K., Ford, K., Rodriguez, G. R., Sethi, D., & Passmore, J. (2019). Life course health consequences and associated annual costs of adverse childhood experiences across Europe and North America: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet Public Health*, 4(10), e517–e528.
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.
- Bishop, R. (2019). *Teaching to the North-East: Relationship-based learning in practice*. NZCER.
- Bourke, R., & Loveridge, J. (2018). Using student voice to challenge Understandings of educational research, policy and practice. In R. Bourke, & J. Loveridge (Eds.), *Radical collegiality through student voice* (pp. 1–16). Springer.
- Bruce, J. (2020). *Alternative education workforce development in Aotearoa new zealand: Lessons learned from related sectors*. Wayne Francis Charitable Trust and Vodafone New Zealand Foundations.
- Bruce, J., & Martin, M. (2023). *Combined activity centre/alternative education pilot, research project: Phase three report*. Ministry of Education.
- Carpiano, R. (2009). Come take a walk with me: The ‘go-along’ interview as a novel method for studying the implications of place for health and well-being. *Health & Place*, 15(1), 263–272. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2008.05.003>
- Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (2005). Staying critical. *Educational Action Research*, 13(3), 347–358. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790500200296>
- Cliffe-Tautari, T. (2020). Using Pūrākau as a pedagogical strategy to explore Māori cultural identities. *SET: Research Information for Teachers*, 1, 12–18. <https://doi.org/10.18296/set.0156>
- Cliffe-Tautari, T. (2024). Encountering the face of Tū-mata-uenga: The educational experiences of Rangatahi Māori apprehended for offending. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 59, 141–151. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-024-00309-7>
- Coghlan, D., & Brydon-Miller, M. (2014). *Encyclopedia of action research* (pp. 225–231). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446294406.n97>
- Croghan, R., Griffin, C., Hunter, J., & Phoenix, A. (2008). Young people’s constructions of self: Notes on the use and analysis of the photo-elicitation methods. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11(4), 345–356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570701605707>
- Davies, B. (2014). *Listening to children: Being and becoming* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315770390>
- Education Counts (2021). *Stand-downs, Suspensions, Exclusions and Expulsions from School*. Ministry of Education. <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/stand-downs,-suspensions,-exclusions-and-expulsions>
- Education Review Office (2011). *Alternative Education: Schools and Providers*. <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/secondary-schools-and-alternative-education-april-2011>
- Education Review Office (2023). *An Alternative Education? Support for Our Most Disengaged Young People*. <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/an-alternative-education-support-for-our-most-disengaged-young-people>

- Fa'avae, D., Jones, A., & Manu'atu, L. (2016). Talanoa'i'a e Talanoa — Talking about talanoa: Some dilemmas of a novice researcher. *AlterNative*, 12(2), 138–150.
- Fair, L., Gray, L., Fogarty, D., Meleisea, T., Bruce, J., Piggot-Irvine, E., Schoone, A., & Turner-Adams, H. (2023). Multiple, creative, methods for 'giving voice' in alternative education. *Action Research, Action Learning (ALARA) Ltd.* (ALARA) Monograph Series, No. 8. <https://www.alarassociation.org/publications/alara-monograph-series/monographs>
- Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., Koss, M. P., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), 245–258. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797\(98\)00017-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8)
- Gibbs, G. (1988). Learning by doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods. *Further Education Unit*. Oxford Polytechnic.
- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (1988). *The action research planner* (3rd ed.). Deakin University.
- Nelson, E., & Christensen, K. (2009). Photovoice in the middle: How our students experience learning at school and beyond. *Teachers' Work*, 6(1), 35–46. <https://doi.org/10.24135/teacherswork.v6i1.505>
- Piggot-Irvine, E. (2015). Reflecting on evidence: Leaders use action research to improve their teacher performance reviews. *Canadian Journal of Action Research*, 16(3), 3–25.
- Piggot-Irvine, E., Ferkins, L., Rowe, W., & Sankaran, S. (2021). *The evaluative study of action research: Rigorous findings on process and impact from around the world*. Routledge Taylor and Francis.
- Plows, V. (2017). Reworking or reaffirming practice? Perceptions of professional learning in alternative and flexible education settings. *Teaching Education*, 28(1), 72–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2016.1251416>
- Reimer, K., & Longmuir, F. (2021). Humanizing students as a micro-resistance practice in Australian alternative education settings. In J. K. Corkett, C. L. Cho, & A. Steele (Eds.), *Global perspectives on microaggressions in schools* (pp. 63–77). Taylor & Francis Group.
- Schoone, A. (2016). *The tutor: Transformational educators for 21st-century learners*. Dunmore.
- Schoone, A. (2020a). *Constellations of alternative education tutors: A poetic inquiry*. Springer.
- Schoone, A. (2020b). Imagining social pedagogy in/for new Zealand. *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, 9(1), 2. <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ijsp.2020.v9.x.002>
- Schoone, A., Bruce, J., Piggot-Irvine, E., & Turner-Adams, H. (2022a). How alternative education teachers embarked on getting to the heart of young people's schooling stories. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2022.2119289>
- Schoone, A., Bruce, J., Piggot-Irvine, E., & Turner-Adams, H. (2022b). Variations of I: Setting the poetic tone for student-voiced action research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 29, 8–9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800422113513>
- Schoone, A., Bruce, J., Piggot-Irvine, E., & Turner-Adams, H. (2024). *Critical moments from the education journeys of rangatahi in alternative education settings: Teacher inquiries for transformation*. Teaching and Learning Research Initiative Report. <http://www.tlri.org.nz>
- Smith, A. (2009). New Zealand families' experience of having a teenager excluded from school. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 27, 89–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643940902897665>
- Sue, D. (2018). Microaggressions, marginality, and oppression. In M. Adams, W. Blumenfeld, C. Castenada, H. Hackman, M. Peters, & X. Zuniga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice* (4th ed., pp. 22–26). Routledge.
- Sutherland, A. (2016). The relationship between the compulsory school experience and youth offending. In P. Towl, & S. Hemphill (Eds.), *Locked out: Understanding and tackling school exclusion in Australia and Aotearoa new Zealand* (pp. 114–134). NZCER.
- Thomson, P. (2007). Working the in/visible geographies of school exclusion. In K. Gulson, & C. Symes (Eds.), *Spatial theories of education: Policy and geography matters* (pp. 111–120). Routledge.
- Thomson, R., Bell, R., Holland, J., Henderson, S., McGrellis, S., & Sharp, S. (2002). Critical moments: Choice, chance and opportunity in young people's narratives of transition. *Sociology*, 36(2), 335–334. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038502036002006>
- Webber, M. (2012). Identity matters: Racial-ethnic identity and Māori students. *Set: Research Information for Teachers*, 2, 20–27. <https://doi.org/10.18296/set.0370>
- Webber, M., & Macfarlane, A. (2020). Mana tangata: The five optimal cultural conditions for Māori student success. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 59(1), 26–49. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jaie.2020.a798554>
- Woodcock, C. (2016). The listening guide: A how-to approach on ways to promote educational democracy. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 15(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406916677594>

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.